

**UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE MINAS GERAIS**

**FACULDADE DE LETRAS**

Cícero Carvalho Catão

**“THE OTHERING OF WOMEN” IN KAREN TEI YAMASHITA’S *CIRCLE***

***K CYCLES* AND JENNY ZHANG’S *SOUR HEART*:**

**hybridity issues and gender representation**

Belo Horizonte

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***Sour Heart:***

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**ATA DA DEFESA DE DISSERTAÇÃO DE CÍCERO CARVALHO CATÃO**

Número de registro: 2020655130. Às 14 horas do dia 29 (vinte e nove) do mês de agosto de 2022, reuniu-se na Faculdade de Letras da UFMG a Banca Examinadora de Dissertação, indicada *ad referendum* do Colegiado do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras: Estudos Literários da UFMG em 11/08/2022, para julgar, em exame final, o trabalho final intitulado *The Othering of Women in Karen Tei Yamashita's Circle K Cycles and Jenny Zhang's Sour Heart: Hybridity Issues and Gender Representation*, requisito final para obtenção do Grau de MESTRE em Letras: Estudos Literários, área de concentração Literaturas de Língua Inglesa/Mestrado. Abrindo a sessão, a Orientadora e Presidente da Banca Examinadora, Profa. Dra. Gláucia Renate Gonçalves, após dar a conhecer aos presentes o teor das Normas Regulamentares do Trabalho Final, passou a palavra ao candidato para apresentação de seu trabalho. Seguiu-se a arguição pelos examinadores, com a respectiva defesa do candidato. Logo após, a Banca Examinadora se reuniu, sem a presença do candidato e do público, para julgamento e expedição do resultado final. Foram atribuídas as seguintes indicações:

Profa. Dra. Gláucia Renate Gonçalves - FALE/UFMG - indicou a aprovação do candidato.

Prof. Dr. José de Paiva dos Santos - FALE/UFMG - indicou a aprovação do candidato.

Profa. Dra. Priscila Campolina de Sá Campello - PUC/MG - indicou a aprovação do candidato.

Pelas indicações, o candidato foi considerado APROVADO.

O resultado final foi comunicado publicamente ao candidato pela Presidente da Banca. Nada mais havendo a tratar, a Presidente lavrou a presente ATA, que será assinada por todos os membros participantes da Banca Examinadora. Belo Horizonte, 29 de agosto de 2022.

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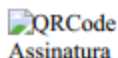
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To literature, which offered solace whenever I sought it; and, more importantly, ignited change whenever I needed it.

“Stop Asian hate!”

## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this Master's Thesis is to analyze Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles* and Zhang's *Sour Heart* and examine the literary representations of hybridity and diasporic characters, particularly women, in their stories, as well as the way those representations influence the sense of identity/belongingness of such characters, by emphasizing or refuting stereotypes concerning Asian American women and Asian American narratives. Theoretical perspectives on the concept of hybridity are presented as well as theoretical framework regarding diasporic subjects and gender, specifically Susan Stanford Friedman's concept of "the othering of women", followed by an analysis on how gender and hybridity are portrayed in *Circle K Cycles* and *Sour Heart*. I conclude with a comment on the importance of literature in shedding light on the issues of Asian American diasporic women.

**Key-words:** Asian Americans, hybridity, stereotypes, gender representation, othering of women.

## RESUMO

O objetivo desta dissertação é analisar *Circle K Cycles* de Karen Tei Yamashita e *Sour Heart* de Jenny Zhang e examinar as representações literárias de hibridez e personagens diaspóricos, em particular mulheres diaspóricas, e a maneira como tais representações influenciam a identidade e o pertencimento de tais personagens, enfatizando ou refutando estereótipos relacionados a mulheres asiático-americanas e suas narrativas. Conceitos teóricos de hibridez são apresentados bem como teorias sobre sujeitos diaspóricos e gênero, mais especificamente o termo de Susan Stanford Friedman: “the othering of women”. Uma análise sobre a maneira em que gênero e hibridez são explorados em *Circle K Cycles* e *Sour Heart* é apresentada em seguida. Na conclusão, encontra-se um comentário sobre a importância da literatura em iluminar assuntos como mulheres diaspóricas asiático-americanas.

**Palavras-chave:** asiático-americanas, hibridez, estereótipos, representação de gênero, “othering of women”.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	9
2. Hybridity, gender, and its discontents.....	23
2.1. The different facets of hybridity .....	25
2.2. The gender issue – “the othering of women” .....	34
3. Karen Tei Yamashita’s <i>Circle K Cycles</i> .....	42
3.1. Reinforcing stereotypes (?).....	46
3.2. Moving beyond stereotypes .....	50
3.3. “Samba Matsuri” .....	58
4. Jenny Zhang’s <i>Sour Heart</i> .....	66
4.1. Jenny, Annie and Stacey.....	69
4.2. “The Empty the Empty the Empty” .....	76
4.3. “My Days and Nights of Terror” .....	82
4.4. “We Love You Crispina” / “You Fell into the River and I Saved You!”.....	89
5. Conclusion.....	100
6. Works Cited.....	104

## 1. Introduction

How does one define oneself? Such question is never even asked by most, while some struggle their whole lives to even begin to grasp it. However, for others, this question is even more of a nuisance because when they are looked at, they are automatically and inadvertently defined based on what they look like. Ethnicity matters when defining oneself. In terms of defining and placing others in the world, ethnicity might be tricky. In a globalized world, ethnicity can misplace others. And, sometimes, it might place them nowhere. Gender matters when defining oneself. In terms of defining and placing others in society, gender might be cruel. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, gender can misplace others. And, sometimes, it might put them in danger.

As I write this Master's Thesis, the headlines of the most famous newspapers and magazines will tell you just how dangerous it can be to be defined based on looks. "Hate Crimes Against Asian Americans Are on the Rise," *Time Magazine* reported on February 18, 2021. A month later, on March 18, *The New York Times* wrote "Asian-Americans Are Being Attacked". Jump to January 31, 2022, and the numbers are staggeringly high, as *NBC News* points out: "Anti-Asian hate crimes increased 339 percent nationwide last year, report says". Later, on February 15, *Spectrum News NY1*, with the contribution of *The Associated Press*, mentions such increase and introduces a report from the *Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism* at California State University more focused on major cities which states that "hate crimes against Asian Americans jumped 342% from 2020 to 2021". Even the "2020 FBI Hate Crimes Statistics", which presents a discrepancy in terms of numbers due to different definitions "of 'hate crimes' between federal and state laws", shows a 77% increase in Anti-Asian hate crimes since 2019. Some of the articles also note that these numbers might actually *not* be accurate due to the reluctance, on the part of many

victims, to report such crimes – the language barrier playing a key role, along with the distrust of the police force. Consequently, the actual numbers are likely to be higher. There is no need to speculate on why these crimes have been increasing since 2020<sup>1</sup> – the mere fact that the worldwide pandemics we have been living in started in Wuhan, China, a city most had never heard of before, has put a target on every and any Asian-looking person everywhere in the world, except, perhaps, in the places *some*<sup>2</sup> people assume Asians belong (and should go back) to. On closer inspection, however, we can find some facts in these pieces of news that will get us speculating about something else.

“Six of the eight people killed in the shootings at Atlanta-area spas on Tuesday were women of Asian descent”, *The New York Times* observes on March 17, 2021; “After a Chinese grandmother was attacked by a white man in broad daylight in San Francisco last week, she fought back . . . Xiao Zhen Xie, 75, was punched while walking down Market Street on March 17”, published *The New York Times* on March 26, 2021; “Man Charged With Hate Crimes After 7 Asian Women Are Attacked in 2 Hours”, reported *The New York Times* on March 2, 2022; “A 64-year-old grandmother assaulted and robbed. A 52-year-old woman shot in the head with a flare gun. Researchers say hate crimes targeting Asian Americans have soared”, states Rachel Martin, host of *NPR News*<sup>3</sup>, on June 14, 2022. Michelle Alyssa Go, Christina Yuna Lee, and GuiYing Ma are, as of January 2022, women who have become statistics in the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes.

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<sup>1</sup> On March 27, 2020, *ABC News* reported: “FBI warns of potential surge in hate crimes against Asian Americans amid coronavirus”.

<sup>2</sup> “Trump’s encouragement of white supremacy and his strident anti-China rhetoric proved a toxic combination for Asian Americans”, Jin Kai reported for *The Diplomat* on June 08, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> NPR News is “an independent, nonprofit media organization that was founded on a mission to create a more informed public”, states the “About” section of this media outlet focused on online radio news.

A report released by Stop AAPI Hate<sup>4</sup>, coincidentally on the same day of the shootings in the Atlanta-area spas – in which six of the eight victims were women of Asian descent –, concluded that 68% of the “3,795 incidents received by the reporting center from March 19, 2020 to February 28, 2021” were against women, while 29% were against men.

On March 17, 2021, The Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA) released on its website a response to the shootings titled “AAJA Guidance on Atlanta Shootings”, in which it “urges newsrooms” to beware of the language used when reporting the attack in order to avoid fueling “the hypersexualization of Asian women, which has been linked to violence and discrimination”. On March 26, “AAJA Expanded Guidance on Coverage of Atlanta Shootings and Anti-AAPI Hate Incidents” is released and it notes that “[r]acism against AAPIs is highly nuanced, complex, and has remained historically invisible, and includes a long history of hypersexualization of Asian women that is rooted in Westernized and colonial perceptions of Asia”. They then cite the statistics presented by the Stop AAPI Hate report abovementioned to justify their plea.

Alongside these numbers and pleas, *The New York Times* reporter Shaila Dewan points out that “organizations that study and track hate groups and violence have warned of a phenomenon called ‘male supremacy terrorism,’ driven by aggrieved male entitlement”. A day later, on March 18, she expands her ideas on an article titled “How Racism and Sexism Intertwine to Torment Asian-American Women”, in which she explores the experience of “Asian-American women, for whom racism and sexism have always been inextricably intertwined”. “For them, racism often takes the form of unwanted sexual come-ons, and sexual harassment is often overtly racist”, she adds before moving on to interviewing Sung Yeon Choimorrow, the executive director of the

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<sup>4</sup> Stop Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Hate was launched on March 19, 2020 “in response to the alarming escalation in xenophobia and bigotry resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic”.

National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum. Choimorrow echoes the concerns of AAJA’s plea by saying that “we were afraid that the objectification and the hypersexualization of our bodies was going to lead to death”, while elaborating on her feelings of shock but no surprise on learning of the shootings. On the same article, Helen Zia, an activist and author, adds to the debate that because Asian women are stereotyped as “vulnerable . . . the object that won’t fight back”, they inadvertently become the target of entitled aggressors. Nicole Hong and Jonah E. Bromwich – on their March 18, 2021, article for *The New York Times* “Asian-Americans Are Being Attacked” – aptly summarize a common feeling in the aftermath of the shootings: “Many Asian-Americans have been left wondering how much cultural stereotypes that cast them — especially women — as weak or submissive targets played a role”. To make matters worse for women of Asian descent, *NBC news* reported on October 1, 2020, that “domestic violence calls are surging for Asian American women amid the pandemic”. All of these pieces of news put together lead me beyond speculation – they bring me to the conclusion that being a woman of Asian descent in the United States at the moment implicates being susceptible to all kinds of danger.

Nonetheless, *at the moment* seems to be an inaccurate expression when we take a leap back into some historical events which help to understand why Asian diasporas’ experience in the United States, particularly that of women, has been permeated by discrimination, exclusion, attacks and thus trauma. *The Exclusion Era*, as Patricia P. Chu coins it in her essay “Bildung” for *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature*, was a period spanning from 1882 to 1943, for the Chinese immigrants, and from 1882 to 1952, for other Asian groups, in which

a series of laws and legal rulings established that Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, South Asians, and Filipinos were “aliens ineligible to citizenship” and could not apply for

naturalization . . . and in practice these laws drastically reduced the number of Asian women immigrants during this period while permitting “old-timers”—men who had come earlier—to remain, or to visit their Asian homeland and return to the United States. (412)

This era was mainly brought about by what is now called the *yellow peril*, “a phrase marking the threat that Asians were believed to pose to those of European descent” (1050), *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature*<sup>5</sup> explains in its entry for the term. Yellow peril justified “the succession of exclusion laws that strictly regulated the numbers of Chinese and Japanese immigration and ensured that the population of East Asians in the United States stayed low” (1052), as those immigrants were seen as “unassimilably Other” and were considered a threat in “economic, sexual, and cultural competition”. “As laborers, Asian bodies were cheap but believed to be preternaturally productive, outmatching the endurance, if not the skill, of their Caucasian counterparts, while requiring little sustenance” (1050), the entry elaborates on the economic aspect. In addition to having “bodies believed to produce abundantly, they also were thought to reproduce prolifically, and, in this manner, overwhelm and undermine Caucasian purity and, by extension, superiority” (1051), despite being believed to notoriously live in unclean, unhygienic, and unhealthy conditions. That added to the cultural threat – since it was unfathomable to conceive a group of bodies able to produce more efficiently and reproduce more prolifically, all the while living in barbaric conditions, they could only be, by this logic, corrupt, “irredeemably immoral”, and thus undesirable.

Culturally, all of this further sedimented the creation of an “intractable stereotype”: “the ‘Oriental’ was by turns asexual (the bachelor husband) and hypersexual (the dragon lady),

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<sup>5</sup> For concision and following MLA instructions in its 9<sup>th</sup> edition handbook, from now on *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Asian American Literature* will be referred to by the following abbreviation *GEAAL* in both in-text and parenthetical citations.

inscrutable yet preternaturally intelligent, cunning and inevitably deceitful: in short, consummate betrayers” (1052). Moreover, “the practice of ‘yellowface’ (in which white actors ‘passed’ as Asians) ensured that such portrayals affirmed rather than contested stereotypes of degeneracy, immorality, and inhumanity” (1053). And even then, in order to certify these alien bodies would be seen as “unsuitable for settling in the United States, . . . [p]ublic health authorities depicted Chinese immigrants as filthy and diseased, as the carriers of incurable infections such as smallpox, syphilis, and bubonic plague” (865), highlights the entry for “Sexism and Asian America” in *GEAAL* – which parallels what is currently happening amid the ongoing pandemics.

Unfortunately, given the rise of many vicious stereotypes and the constant representations of these immigrants as undesirable – all of which were culturally branded and historically imprinted onto the subconscious of the United States populace –, the yellow peril surpassed the Exclusion Era and all its laws, and as China becomes economically more competitive, thus threatening the United States once again, it is only natural that these historical fears come back into play within that society, even more so amidst a pandemics that happened to have its origins in China.

On a more specific historical event, we must consider the Japanese-American Internment, which was the “mass eviction and imprisonment of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II, 70 percent of them U.S. citizens” (451), who were kept in what is now called “*internment camp*” (452), according to the homonymous entry on the topic in *GEAAL*. While it may seem to have been based on war hysteria, this infamous event evidences the pervasive issue of racial prejudice, while it also serves to reinforce the fear of and racial bias against Japanese and their descendants – and for anyone who looks the part, namely Asians.

Despite all that, the AAJA has stated that the racial prejudice has been “historically invisible”. The entry “Racism and Asian America” for *GEAAL* notes that because racism in the United States has historically been a dichotomy between black and white,

Asian Americans find themselves in an ambiguous position. On the one hand, they are invisible to political discussions of race and racism; on the other hand, they are highly vulnerable to racism and racial hatred because they are regarded as racially inferior. The ideology of racial inferiority of the Asian race was formulated by Orientalism, which was historically ingrained in the Western views of and attitudes toward Asian race. (819)

The very same Western views of Asians cited above are responsible for the “hypersexualization of Asian women”, mentioned by the AAJA in its plea to the media. The “Sexism and Asian America” entry for *GEAAL* notes that the “social, political, and economic processes that racialize people of Asian descent in the United States depend on Orientalist and colonial formations of the Other” (864) and these processes will always frame Asian Americans as “deviant in terms of race, gender, and sexuality”, particularly relying on “sexism and the degradation of femininity and women”. During the Exclusion Era, for instance, laws criminalized Chinese women, because they were “assumed to be prostitutes or second wives”. “The fear that Chinese sex workers would bring venereal disease, spread opium addiction, and entice white young men was premised on Orientalist notions of Asian women as deviant, diseased, and dangerous” (865), which adds an extra layer of negative weight to this group, when compared to Asian men. “In contrast to representations that focus on Asian American women as threatening and deviant (e.g., as prostitutes or dragon ladies)”, another framing, which was as racist as the previous one, but perhaps even more dangerous for women of Asian descent, came to be:



many representations of Asian American women as victimized and desirable sexual figures [appeared]; stereotypes of the lotus blossom, for example, are predicated on a figure who is more subservient, oppressed, and diminutive than her white, Western counterpart . . . [This view] sees Asian American women as more oppressed by Asian “cultural traditions.” Migration and racism may create unequal relations of power within Asian American communities so that women and queer people are more vulnerable. (865)

So, whether Asian women are hypersexualized or represented as subservient and vulnerable, it has created a gendered imbalance of power. Either way, these women have become a fetish, an object of desire, and under an objectifying gaze they become more susceptible to violence. Morgan Dewey, in her collaboration to the website *The National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV)*<sup>6</sup> on March 21, 2016, summarizes the issue aptly:

The bodies of Asian women are exoticized and hypersexualized, and the perceived submissiveness of some Asian cultures is glamourized and erotized. This fetishization reduces Asian women to an inaccurate and detrimental stereotype, and creates staggering rates of violence. These alarming rates of violence clearly demonstrate the need to acknowledge and halt the racial discrimination behind it.

The aforementioned headlines and encyclopedia entries, along with the texts that follow them, nevertheless, are meant to share facts with the reader who stumbles upon them or researches such topics. Facts do not often have power other than the power to inform. *Story-truth* will

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<sup>6</sup> The National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV) “was founded more than 30 years ago to be the leading voice for survivors of domestic violence and their allies”, states the *Our History* section of their website.

sometimes be truer than *happening-truth*, I once read in a novel<sup>7</sup>. Pablo Picasso defended, in his 1923 “Statement to Marius de Zayas”, that albeit not being true, “Art is a lie that makes us realize truth”. Literature, as a form of art, adds an important layer to facts: empathy. Personally, I have often empathized with the pains and struggles of others through a work of fiction more so than through history books or the news.

In his essay “Imprisonment/Internment/Detention” for *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature*, Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, while elaborating on the effects of the internment of Japanese Americans, highlights the importance of literary works in dealing with trauma and making these memories reach others:

If we locate the imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II on a historical continuum with the exclusion and detention practices of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, we find the practice of detention and imprisonment to be a central connective tissue in the racialization of Asian America. Additionally, just as Chinese detainees turned to literature to communicate, commiserate, and even contest their conditions of imprisonment, Japanese American survivors of the camps also turned to literary and cultural production as a means of narrating and negotiating with the experience. (149)

Pierre Nora has also defended the role of literature as a practical site of its historical memory, as he states that “memory has never known more than two forms of legitimacy: historical

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<sup>7</sup>Throughout Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, the concepts of fiction and fact are played with, and the author, through his narrator, seems to be discussing the invaluable contribution of fiction in making historical facts even more powerful through what is coined as *story-truth* (as opposed to the less striking *happening-truth*).

and literary. These have run parallel to each other but until now always separately. At present the boundary between the two is blurring” (Nora 24). Thus, through the mixture of literature and history, memory can be elevated to *story-truth*, or Art that makes us understand the truth.

Karen Tei Yamashita, Japanese American, and Jenny Zhang, Chinese American, both deal in their stories (fictional and non-fictional ones) with characters who are defined by their looks. Despite being United States citizens, the authors themselves are seen as “others” because their facial features do not conform with the white/Caucasian expectations of what US citizens *should* look like. In Yamashita’s *Circle K Cycles* (2001) and Zhang’s *Sour Heart* (2017), through their characters or their own voices, issues of hybrid identities and lack of belonging within and outside their communities are evidenced. Ethnicity matters in their stories, and it misplaces them, it places them nowhere, it even has them questioning their own definitions of themselves.

*Circle K Cycles*, as stated by Yamashita herself, is a book that merges journal pieces with works of fiction. In the prologue, entitled “Purely Japanese”, Yamashita explains how the book came to be by providing the reader with some information about herself. Having grown up in the United States as a Japanese American, she leaves in the early 70s in search of her roots in Japan. Later, she moves to Brazil to study the Japanese immigration taking place here. After going back to the United States for a few years, she heads to Japan in 1997, settling in Seto from March to August, period when she keeps an online journal that was later, along with her fictional work, turned into the book which will be one of the focuses of this research. As presented, interestingly a hybrid-genre book itself, it seems to be the culmination of a life’s search for identity.

In her pursuit of an answer to the “Who am I?” question, Yamashita extrapolates the limits of her-self in *Circle K Cycles*, and that is what calls for a careful study of her work. As *GEAAL* notes, Yamashita has

moved away from the Japanese American experience as the content of her work. Instead, she considers the experience of Japanese Americans as they work and travel abroad. Her works *Brazil-Marú* (1992) and *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* (1990) underscore the need for multicultural identities and emphasize the limitations of both linguistics and ethnic barriers. (460-61)

The various instances of hybridity, and the representations of characters from different genders – but specially how diasporic women are portrayed – all culminating in the creation of identity for herself and the diasporic subjects she studies, make this research a relevant contribution to literary criticism, which has often explored some of her previous works, such as *Tropic of Orange* (1997) and *Brazil-Marú* and only briefly tackled *Circle K Cycles*. In his doctoral dissertation, Cláudio Roberto Vieira Braga compares both *Brazil-Marú* and *Circle K Cycles*, under the theory of diaspora. In Chapter 5, Braga devotes a section of around 7 pages to examining diasporic women represented in *Circle K Cycles* in what he calls the “representation of diasporic women subjects while performing unusual tasks<sup>8</sup>” (my trans.; 152). Nonetheless, tensions regarding gender other than work-related ones are not his focus, and neither does he explore “the othering of women”.

Jenny Zhang’s *Sour Heart* presents the reader with seven short-stories told from the point of view of six women characters – all of whom are acquainted with one another in the same said fictional universe created by Zhang – who look back into their young girls’ experiences navigating their way into womanhood whilst struggling to survive the poor conditions their Chinese immigrant parents were faced with upon arriving in 1990s New York, after having escaped the Cultural Revolution in China. Through the eyes of Cristina, the only character who is featured in

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<sup>8</sup> “representação de sujeitos diaspóricos femininos no exercício de tarefas inusitadas” (Braga 152).

two of the short-stories (the first one, “We Love You Crispina”, and the closing one, “You Fell into the River and I Saved You!”), the reader is informed that “[e]veryone said it was normal to go through hell your first year in America, but no one prepped us for our second” (13) year of financial difficulties, family fights, generational tensions, and, more specifically for this research, identity issues and “the othering of women”. Through her characters, Zhang depicts a raw view of immigrant struggles while portraying a range of emotions that will touch (or disturb) the reader. Born in Shanghai, China, she was left there by her parents, who moved to the United States to study and find better opportunities. Only when she was five, she immigrated to New York to join them. In her personal account for *Glimmer Train* website titled “The Truth”, she expresses very clearly how she felt about this period: “what I wanted to say was: *Why did you leave me here?*”, by adding that even at that age she already felt like an outcast for not speaking Shanghai dialect. Her stories carry much of those feelings in them. When concluding her account, she says that the made-up stories she grew up telling herself and her family in order to charm, reassure, and comfort everyone are *not at all* like her fiction. For her fiction, she concludes: “I know it isn’t much to say: Tell the truth! But it’s the only thing I have, and it’s the only thing I can offer you”.

A quick *Jstor* search will show Jenny Zhang’s works have not yet received much critical attention. Nonetheless, *Sour Heart* has gathered praise and awards: it was the winner of the Pen/Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction in 2018. Its closing short-story, “You Fell into the River and I Saved You!”, was originally submitted to *The Iowa Review*, and later selected and published in the 2011 Fall issue. *Sour Heart* was included in the syllabus of a Harvard course named “Telling Her Story: Narrative, Media, and #MeToo” taught by Alexandra J. Gold in 2018. Despite being Zhang’s first work of prose fiction, she has been a prolific writer, with numerous published essays in different outlets – *Hags* in 2014, and *How It Feels* in 2015, which was submitted and later

published by The Poetry Foundation's magazine *Poetry*, are two worthy of mention – and a collection of poetry titled *Dear Jenny, We Are All Find* in 2012.

Both *Circle K Cycles*, by Yamashita, and *Sour Heart*, by Zhang, focus prominently on women, portraying them as more well-rounded than the male characters, highlighting the absurdities that women, more specifically immigrant and diasporic women, face. They are often objectified and assaulted, even within their own communities and families, they get paid significantly less, and they are left to deal with jobs which are either stereotypically and historically relegated to women, or the ones involving sex work. Gender matters in their stories and it misplaces them, it puts them in danger, it even has them struggling far more to come to a sense of self, and self-worth.

The aim of this Master's Thesis is, then, to analyze Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles* and Zhang's *Sour Heart* and examine the literary representations of hybridity and diasporic characters, particularly women, in their stories, as well as the way those representations influence the sense of identity/belongingness of such characters, by emphasizing or refuting stereotypes concerning Asian American women and Asian American narratives. Theoretical perspectives on the concept of hybridity are presented as well as theoretical framework regarding diasporic subjects and gender, specifically Susan Stanford Friedman's concept of "the othering of women", followed by an analysis on how gender and hybridity are portrayed in *Circle K Cycles* and *Sour Heart*. I will conclude with a comment on the importance of literature in shedding light on the issues of Asian American diasporic women.

The present Master's Thesis is organized into five sections. The Introduction focuses on the contextualization of Asian American experience, particularly that of women, in recent American history. Section 2 discusses the theoretical framework concerning hybridity, diasporic

subjects, and “the othering of women”. Sections 3 and 4 examine Yamashita’s *Circle K Cycles* and Zhang’s *Sour Heart*, respectively, discussing them under the light of the concepts previously developed, and focusing on whether the literary representations of characters reinforce or refute stereotypes related to Asian American narratives. Finally, in the Conclusion, a discussion on the importance of literature as well as these writers’ contribution to the debate of gendered violence against Asian American women is presented.

## 2. Hybridity, gender, and its discontents

In her essay “Growing Up Asian in America”, Kesaya Noda, an American-born grandchild of Japanese immigrants to the United States, presents her readers with the difficult task she faces of having an identity shaped “from the outside by the heritage of the Japanese community and the influences of her parents and grandparents” (92). Not only that, but she also sees her personality fractured into three divisions – each connected with the three subheadings of the essay: race, nationality, and gender.

First, in “I’m Racially Japanese”, she explores her roots and the way in which they affect how people see her in the United States. She describes an identity pasted to her face, causing people to stereotype her based on her obvious racial background. She argues that a “third-generation German American is an American” (94), while Japanese descendants will always be Japanese-Americans, being treated as “perpetual foreigners”.

In “I Am a Japanese American”, she deepens her historical roots to explain what makes her both Japanese and American. She focuses on the historical aspect of how her issei grandparents and relatives built their lives on a bare land and how they compromised their roots to do so, to Americanize, to adapt and assimilate. She also points out that the hard work was done with and for a whole community of immigrants – not only relatives – that everyone took care of each other, and she states the Japanese side of it all: “I come from a people with a long memory and a distinctive grace. We live our thanks” (97). She then ends this section by concluding: “And we are Americans. Japanese Americans” (97).

Then, in “I am a Japanese American Woman”, she discusses how her views on womanhood and feminism affected her perception of her mother and, consequently, of herself, thus shedding



light on the fact that gender issues are also relevant in a discussion of diasporic subjectivity. “I was looking for a black feminist or a white feminist. My mother is neither white nor black” (97), Noda states her initial frustration before coming to terms with it.

Noda’s essay is informed by a question she poses right in the beginning: “How is one to know and define oneself? From the inside – within a context that is self defined, for a grounding in community and a connection with culture and history that are comfortably accepted? Or from the outside – in terms of messages received from the media and people who are often ignorant?” (93).

As this Master’s Thesis will demonstrate, Noda’s concerns translate well the considerations on diasporic subjects, always negotiating between an insider’s and an outsider’s view, which can be seen and reflected in the characters in Yamashita’s and Zhang’s stories. In this section, while discussing why ethnicity matters and how hybridity complicates matters for these diasporic subjects, I will review key theoretical concepts on the different facets of hybridity. After that, while exploring the representation of Asian American women, I will introduce the concept of “the othering of women” by Susan Stanford Friedman, which will guide my investigation on the representation of gender in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Circle K Cycles* and Jenny Zhang’s *Sour Heart*.

## 2.1. The different facets of hybridity

The concept of hybridity deserves some attention in terms of theoretical background. In their book *Hybridity and its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture*, editors Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes intend to compile examinations that challenge many of the established ideas concerning hybridity. One of them is Homi Bhabha's concept of *cultural hybridity*, widely known and serving as a guiding line of sorts to the analysis presented in this Master's Thesis. John Kraniauskas, for instance, in his collaboration to Brah and Coombes' work, argues that Bhabha's view is limited in a way he ignores political economy (13). Nevertheless, Homi Bhabha's concept is not dismissed – rather it is discussed and updated. Throughout *The Location of Culture*, he proposes that an individual's identity cannot be limited by only certain aspects, such as race or gender. A person's identity, in his view, should be perceived through the mixed cultural influences that give a being its true colors. This notion, known as cultural hybridity, is presented in Bhabha's introduction, in which he debates that:

It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable? . . . The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective,

is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (2)

While debating these questions, Bhabha seems to suggest that conventional ideas of ethnicity, for instance, no longer have value, but are negotiated. No longer are readers to deal with the prejudicial idea of purity or fixed identity; rather they should understand that even given the same shared historical context, individuals could be completely different from one another.

As Vanessa Guignery, in her introduction to *Hybridity: Forms and Figures in Literature and the Visual Arts*, aptly summarizes, Bhabha “resituates the monolithic categories of race, class and gender in terms of borderlines, crossings, in-between spaces, interstices, splits and joins, and proposes to find the location of culture by focusing on that border area, that liminal, in-between space” (5). As an advocate of the term, she later argues that it “demands that one should repeatedly question and challenge its critical significance, to try and validate it anew, by demonstrating why it still matters” (6), answering the question of why hybridity still matters posed in the title of her introduction to the compilation. The term can well be applied to Yamashita’s and Zhang’s works analyzed in this Master’s Thesis.

Since hybridity is closely connected to the idea of identity in multi-ethnic subjects, as well as diasporic communities, Yamashita’s *Circle K Cycles* and Zhang’s *Sour Heart* must be examined under the light of such concept. Once again, Guignery’s words explain the importance of taking the term into account while reading Yamashita and Zhang, as the writers introduce to their readers groups of “people of multiple identities and mixed origins who experience their hybridity with more or less serenity and whom society welcomes with varying degrees of benevolence” (5). Moreover, “[i]dentification of the hybrid text, moment or event – which occurs as diverse cultures are juxtaposed and interact, forming ‘new’, distinctive cultures – is a key component of such

critiques” (Young 155), says Lola Young in her contribution to the book by Brah and Coombes, thus further emphasizing the importance of the term and the relation of it to Yamashita’s *Circle K Cycles* and Zhang’s *Sour Heart*.

In terms of how language is used to help represent the hybridity in Yamashita’s book and Zhang’s short stories, Stuart Hall, in his introduction to *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, mentions language as a *representational system*, and its signs and symbols as what people use to represent to others their concepts, ideas and feelings (1). Yamashita mixes languages in her work; not only does she present her unadvised reader with a short story in Portuguese and an essay in Japanese (“Zero Zero One-derful” has a Portuguese mirror “Zero Zero Hum ...aravilha”, and “Circle K Rules” offers a version in Japanese), but also her collages and clippings alternate the three languages, and even the Japanese words used come from three different writing systems: kanji, katakana, and hiragana. She does so to convey her point that no single language is able to express the identities presented and her own. She argues that further in one of the essays in *Circle K Cycles*, “Saudade”: hybrid identities require hybrid languages. Zhang does the same mixing of English and her mother tongue although to a lesser degree. Some stories contain Chinese ideograms, some of which are translated, and some of which are not, leaving the reader to wonder, such as on “My Days and Nights of Terror”, in which a character simply says, “建军” (233) and no translation is offered. Meanwhile, some of her characters are also left to wonder the meaning of some Chinese words used by their grandparents or other relatives who are unable or unwilling to use English to communicate, whether they are visiting the United States to be with their families or welcoming their families back in China. “More and more she used words I didn’t understand” (129), states one of the narrators, in “Our Mothers Before Them”, while filling her narration with increasingly more frequent gaps like this “[\_\_\_\_\_]” to signal the words

she could not comprehend. Zhang, differently from Yamashita, seems to do this to further explore the sense of non-belongingness that her characters experience both within their communities and outside of them.

Besides language, Hall proposes a few other ways in which culture can help represent people. According to him, “the word ‘culture’ is used to refer to whatever is distinctive about the ‘way of life’ of a people, community, nation, or social group . . . Alternatively, the word can be used to describe the ‘shared values’ of a group or of society” (2). It is difficult to analyze Yamashita’s work in that sense, because of the hybrid cultures she deals with. Nevertheless, the author does describe the so-called shared values (for example, the rules) of the three groups she explores in her book. Zhang’s stories, on the other hand, depict some values which seem to be shared by the Chinese communities, such as the idea of parental sacrifice to guarantee the next generation’s freedoms or access to a better life, which in turn costs their children the weight of *filial piety*, “the parenting ideology that the role of the child is defined by filial debts and obligations” (Ninh 53), originating, according to *GEAAL* entry on the homonymous term, from a Confucian value system “concerned with the need to produce beneficial behavior patterns from children who are expected to care for their parents” (268). But it is valid to point out that there is no such thing as a universally common immigrant experience, and the diasporic subjects in the literary works under analysis will express different levels of acceptance of their communities’ values.

Culture can also be defined by what can be seen on someone else’s face as it communicates a message, who a person is, his/her identity, even if it is not a deliberate choice (2), Hall argues, echoing Noda’s essay and the sole core of Yamashita’s and Zhang’s stories. As discussed previously, when it comes to hybrid ethnicities and diasporic subjects the message communicated

by someone's face can lead to certain misinterpretations. The issue of culture and identity in a globalized world is that people will simply ignore history, and attach tags to others: a nationality tag, a racial tag, a class tag, a gender tag, etc., based solely on outward appearance, for instance.

On the other hand, Hall states that it is also possible to “give things meaning by how we *represent* them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them” (3) which is how Yamashita and Zhang break the image people have of their diasporas, by writing about them and turning these characters and themselves into fully rounded characters, not just types without memory or history.

Another important concept related to the idea of hybridity to bring into the debate, which can enrich the discussion of Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles* and Zhang's *Sour Heart*, is Pierre Nora's in-between concept, *les lieux de mémoire* – introduced in his essay “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire” (a collaboration to the journal *Representations*), in which he explores the concepts of memory and history as they merge in literary texts.

After spending a few paragraphs exploring memory and history as opposing ideas, Nora then moves on to explain how they started becoming integrated, or blurred, as he later points out. The fact that “[t]he quest for memory is the search for one's history” (13), as he states in the introductory paragraph of a later section named “Memory Seized by History”, starts hinting at this new concept. At this point, it is possible to establish connection between Nora's text and *Circle K Cycles* – Yamashita starts her journey as a quest for memory, a search for her own history, and this journey takes her to more than just her history, it takes her to the history of her diaspora, which culminates in the two novels mentioned in the introduction and the work presently being examined. In *Circle K Cycles*, Yamashita seems to use her journals and collages as archives, records of “remains, testimonies, documents, images, speeches, any visible sign of what has been” (Nora 13)

to illustrate the historical value of her journey, while in her fictional short-stories, she explores memory. Her work is both an exercise on historiography and memory. Nora states that “[t]he transformation of memory implies a decisive shift from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual, from the objective message to its subjective reception, from repetition to remembrance” (15), and this process can be seen in Yamashita’s work – in her non-fictional pieces she conjures certain stereotypical images of Brazilian people (not even named Japanese-Brazilian in most of her texts), whereas in her short-stories she transforms these historical and social stereotypes into more individual, psychological and subjective characters, which still seem exotic, but are much more nuanced. Not all are lazy, silly, accommodated, unwilling to fight. Zhang’s short-stories, while not as explicit as Yamashita’s *Circle K Cycles* in terms of being a quest for memory/search for one’s history, depict the many traumatic experiences of the first-generation Chinese Americans through narrators who, now adult women, remember their childhood/early teen years trying to better understand how those days have influenced their perceptions of their parents, grandparents, relatives, communities, classmates, and, ultimately, themselves. In “Our Mothers Before Them”, which is presented as a sort of journal that alternates between 1966 and 1996, the reader finds in the 1966 sections the narration of events triggered by Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution, which falls more under the historical, social scope; while the 1996 sections explore the effects of such events on the different generations of Annie’s family, which falls under the psychological, individual scope.

Another explanation for both author’s trips down memory lane is the case made by Nora, in which he claims that “[t]he passage from memory to history has required every social group to redefine its identity through the revitalization of its own history . . . Following the example of ethnic groups and social minorities, every established group, intellectual or not, learned or not, has

felt the need to go in search of its own origins and identity” (15). The problem presented by Yamashita is that, since her identity is hybrid, a redefinition of identity would prove to be a difficult task. Interestingly, in trying to solve this task, Yamashita has gifted literature readers and researchers with a work permeated by questions rather than answers. In Zhang’s case, her characters struggle not only with their bicultural statuses but also with the dread of looking for an identity outside of their families.

In effect, some of Nora’s questionings find echo in the stories:

How can we but see in our taste for everyday life in the past a resort to the only remaining means for restoring the flavor of things, the slow rhythms of past times – and in the anonymous biographies of ordinary people the understanding that the masses do not allow themselves to be measured as a mass? How can we fail to read, in the shards of the past delivered to us by so many microhistories, the will to make the history we are reconstructing equal to the history we have lived? (17)

Yamashita and Zhang present their readers with these so-called biographies of ordinary people and microhistories, and they seem to do so in order to prevent the diasporic community they deal with from becoming an indistinguishable and unimportant mass of people. Through the search for memory, they seize history, review it, and present it back as literary work, which in turn is seized by this hybrid, in-between concept, *les lieux de mémoire*, thus adding historical and literary legitimacy to their narrations on their diasporic communities of Asian descent. This reflects the need to rewrite their own history, to come to terms with their own identity – in Yamashita’s case, quite literally; in Zhang’s case, through her characters (one of which, perhaps not so coincidentally, is called Jenny). It also finds echoes in the idea that “[r]epresentation proceeds by strategically highlighting, selecting samples and multiplying examples” (Nora 17), which in *Circle K Cycles* is



done through the journals, short fictional texts and even the clippings Yamashita chooses to include in her book; while in *Sour Heart*, this is done through having the six characters interwoven in the same so-called fictional universe, in which Zhang subtly crosses their paths over and over.

Later in his text, coming closer to a conclusion, the words of Nora further help understand the structure and importance of *Circle K Cycles* and *Sour Heart*. He states that “the very possibility of a history of *lieux de mémoire* demonstrates the existence of an invisible thread linking apparently unconnected objects . . . There is a differentiated network to which all these separate identities belong, an unconscious organization of collective memory” (23), so the subjects Yamashita explores, fictional or not, despite being so different, are all connected by certain networks – for instance, they all follow social rules and celebrate cultural events. In Zhang’s stories, the subjects are not disconnected, seeing that their paths cross again and again in the same setting. Through the glimpses of such characters from different perspectives/narrators, the reader can have a more nuanced perception of them, and thus more reliable collective memory is built. Even though dealing with different diasporic groups, the authors approximate them within their books, and to the readers, they present these collective memories which seem so different on close inspection, but are so much alike in broader view.

In his conclusion, Nora states the way in each his concept of *lieux de mémoire* combines memory and history: “[h]istory has become the deep reference of a period that has been wrenched from its depths, a realistic novel in a period in which there are no real novels. Memory has been promoted to the center of history: such is the spectacular bereavement of literature<sup>9</sup>” (24). In the same manner, Yamashita’s history is pulled from her past, her origins, and rewritten in a hybrid

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<sup>9</sup> *Bereavement* should be understood, in Nora’s text, as a reflection on the past, its meanings and its effects on the life and identity of the writer.

book, *Circle K Cycles* – a novel of sorts, a biography at times. Zhang's *Sour Heart* uses the remembrance of the characters to try to deal with the past and finally come to a sense of self. At the same time, the memories explored of the people being written about can be seen as historical documentation of diasporas that can certainly benefit from having it. And this circles back to the power and importance of literature.

## 2.2. The gender issue – “the othering of women”

Having started section 2 with Kesaya Noda’s essay, in which she approaches the main aspects discussed in this Master's Thesis – how race, ethnicity and a hyphenated nationality affect the definition of oneself, and how being a woman on top of all this complicates the matter further – I will now move to the latter issue, gender.

Asian-American women have long been marginalized in American society. As first discussed in the introduction to this research, they have been seen as an exotic body, a foreign threat, and an unassimilable Other, being subjected to discrimination and violence, both from within and outside of their communities. Most notably, they have been subjected to sexual violence and exploitation. Up until “the civil rights movement, the second-wave feminist movement, and the Asian American movement in the 1960s and throughout the 1970s” (257), Asian-American women had also been largely invisible in the American literary canon, notes *GEAAL* on the “Feminism and Asian America” entry. Yamashita briefly echoes this idea in one of her essays for *Circle K Cycles*, “Circling Katakana”, by contesting the belief that “real thinking was done by men . . . The hierarchy in the *authority* of writing is of course nothing new” (Yamashita 53). It was only by joining forces with other minority groups, namely African Americans and Hispanic women, that Asian-American women were able to question and resist that reality, and one of the first results was seen in a university classroom, when

universities such as the University of California at Berkeley and San Francisco State University made an effort to first introduce Asian women and then Asian American women’s oral histories in their curriculum and offered courses on Asian American women to help raise Asian American feminist consciousness. The effort led to the first journal,

*Asian Women*, being published in 1971. It included papers students wrote for the first class on Asian women at the University of California, Berkeley. (258)

Following such victory, Asian-American women turned to literature to contest stereotypes by reflecting “immigrant women’s efforts and struggles to construct their cultural identities. Chinese American women’s writings played a leading role in creating new images of the self in self-representation or biographical writings” (258) in their works. Some stereotypes that have been challenged over the years are those of the hypersexualized Asian women, who are frequently “the targets of an exoticizing sexualization that renders them completely Other, always foreign and always ready to sexually please” (“Mirikitani, Janice” 698); and, on the other side of the spectrum, the subservient ones – often shown to be docile, submissive, and accepting of their husbands’ infidelity and emotional abuse, as well as being the ones who will not fight back.

As more Asian-American literature by women writers was published, nevertheless, literary critics started pointing out that some would inadvertently emphasize stereotypes they were expected to deconstruct, or, in some cases, even create new ones. One such example is *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) – Amy Tan’s first novel – which was not only critically praised but also popularly adored, becoming a best seller. While some claim it helped “to tackle stereotypes about Asian and Asian American women as submissive, weak, passive, inarticulate, and silent” (“Tan, Amy” 908), others have complained that it portrayed Chinese men too negatively and that it solved cultural clashes rather too easily, by means of “assimilation into American citizenship and identity” (“Nationalism and Asian America” 756). In addition, narratives such as Tan’s are criticized for having contributed to the spread of a “stereotyped juxtaposition of the China-born mother and the American-born daughter” (“Asian American Stereotypes” 54) conflict, often exoticizing a China of the past while presenting the United States as a multicultural nation.

Susan Stanford Friedman, which I will introduce shortly, brings ideas and concepts on diasporic narratives in the advent of the “new migration” which help understand how more recent literary production tends to dispel the myth of the United States as a multicultural “melting pot”; help comprehend that assimilation is not necessarily what the new immigrants desire; and help refute old stereotypes by placing women’s diasporic narratives at the center of the debate.

Friedman’s essay “Bodies on the Move: A Poetics of Home and Diaspora” asks “what happens to the human spirit between worlds, to desire and longing as they cross and recross geographical and cultural borders, to the domains of intimacy and family in migration, dislocation, and relocation?” (190) and affirms that diasporic subjects are always negotiating between an insider’s and an outsider’s view and that “[n]o matter what passport one carries, the body that looks ‘foreign’ is subject to a variety of gazes – from the curious and rude to the dangerous and violent” (191), effectively echoing Kesaya Noda’s concerns on having an identity formed from the outside by people who are often ignorant. Throughout her essay she conjures different pieces of literature and theory to further investigate her initial question. In doing so, she makes observations which I will use to look at the works I am investigating. For instance, she brings up the idea of the affective body, the one responsible for feelings, and how it can suffer as much as the physical body, being both “the site of pleasure but also of pain; the place of resistance but also of mutilation and abjection” (190). In a further section “Longing for Home: Adages”, Friedman expands on it by stating that homesickness is “experienced viscerally in the flesh, in the ‘affective body’” (191), emphasizing the idea that emotions and the physical body are intrinsically connected.

In the section “Home Away from Home”, Friedman states that “[b]orn of displacement, diasporas spawn the creation of an imaginary homeland, a place of fixed location and identity” (195), which explains why some diasporic characters in the stories I analyze are constantly

reimagining their pasts or dreaming of fictionalized presents and futures. In another section, “Stranger Bodies”, Friedman parallels Stuart Hall, when she investigates why the body is a sight of cultural determination, thus marking someone to be perceived as the stranger:

it might be the skin, the eyes, the hair, the shape, the sex; it might be the walk, the posture, the angles of movement; it might be the clothes, the jewelry, the shoes, the decorations, adornments, and accoutrements of the body; it might be the sounds that come out of the mouth, off the pen or keyboard – the cultural materiality of speech, accent, rhythm, style, writing. (198)

She covers, with these speculations, topics ranging from race/ethnicity, to language, to class, to gender, which she further explores in another essay I will mention shortly. Another aspect explored in this other essay by Friedman is briefly explored in the present one, in the section “Violence on the Home Body”, when she provokes the reader with another question: “what if home itself is the site of violence to the body?” (199), indicating that there might be no safety at home/homeland just as well as there is no safety outside home/homeland.

Friedman concludes with a section titled “Writing Home”, in which she expresses the importance of writing as an exercise that helps form identities shaped out of memories of locations that no longer exist. Further echoing Pierre Nora’s hybrid term *les lieux de mémoire*, Friedman affirms that:

Memory is the first rewriting of home, an act of re-presentation of what was as the precondition for writing home in the medium of text – the page, the book as the corpus of memory . . . Writing the narrative of identity in motion fills the gap with sign symbols of homes lost and new homes in the making. (206)

Such ideas are present in Yamashita's and Zhang's stories, and therefore this essay will help me better analyze the characters in them.

Friedman ends this essay by affirming that “the families we are born into and the homelands to which we belong don't always make us feel at home” (208), which is further investigated in her other essay, “The ‘New Migration’: Clashes, Connections, and Diasporic Women's Writing”. In it, Friedman aims to pinpoint how diasporic narratives by women are significant “in exposing the misleading assumptions underlying the rhetoric of the ‘new migration’” (9). The assumptions she is targeting are those which say that the “new migration” – starting after World War II and increasing near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – is, according to scholars and the media, a system of “pull” and “push”. The West pulls and attracts “people with initiative and dreams to leave the familiar for the possible”, while the “the inequitable structures of global power . . . leave people outside the West with few options to stay in their homelands” (7), thus pushing them towards the West. Friedman states this is problematic for two reasons – the first being that this idea reinforces the West as superior in several ways, the second being that “the rhetoric of the ‘new migration’ overemphasizes the clash and ignores that blending that migration brings” (8). These, in turn, “have intensified the diasporic dimension of migratory experience and complicated the issues of assimilation” (8), and she believes that women's diasporic writing can bring light into the discussion.

Before diving into that, she justifies the use of the word *diaspora* outside the “so-called ‘classic’ diasporas [such] as the Jewish, African, and Armenian” (9), which I believe is pertinent to the present work as well. According to Friedman, the term has suffered adaptations to be used after the World War II to describe other groups, which now include “those who migrate for reasons other than communal victimization” (9). In connecting the term with the advent of “new migration”,

she points to how the modern technological ways to travel and communicate have emphasized the sense of “interconnectedness”, for better or for worse, thus having

increased diasporic consciousness among migrants because the old home or homes can be so much more present in the lives of migrating peoples. Migration lacks the permanence it once often had, and the borders between homeland and hostland have become much more porous and fluid. (9)

This fluidity, in turn, has an effect on the sense of identity, and this can be found in narratives post-“new migration” – in them “more heterogeneity, more resistance to assimilation, more bilingualism and hybridity, and less willingness on the part of American society in general to integrate these newly racialized immigrants” (10) is evidenced. Nevertheless, she claims, something is missing and women’s diasporic writing will help illuminate that.

According to Friedman, the “new migration” begins in the United States following the Immigration Act of 1965, which completely lifted the previous racial quota system and the laws created in the previously discussed Exclusion Era. However, as the rates of immigration into the United States rose, so did the fears of Others – but not just any Other, seeing that

Irish, Jews, Italians, and Slavs . . . gradually acquired the privileged status of whiteness in opposition to black, native, and Asian populations, who remained racial others, perpetually marginalized, legally segregated, and not fully “American.” The immigrants from the post-1965 wave . . . have become “people of color” rather than becoming “white.” (17)

Thus, a stigmatizing gaze on the diasporic bodies of the “new migration” ensued.

As Friedman continues to explore the matter, she emphasizes that such gaze will unavoidably have a stronger effect if the body in question is the body of a woman. In the conclusion of her essay she invokes different diasporic narratives which “highlight how gender – particularly



the experience of women – is the flashpoint of complexity” (22, 23), thus helping destroy the reductive interpretations of the “new migration”. These narratives “also demonstrate the othering of women within the diaspora through acts of violence committed on their bodies by members of their own families . . . [the narratives] turn on the gendered vulnerability of women within the multiaxial structures of power centered in sexuality and the family” (18). So not only is the body of diasporic women the target outside their communities, which was sadly a given, but it also becomes the target within their diasporas. I will use the concept of “the othering of women” to analyze the portrayal of women characters in my Master’s Thesis when I explore Yamashita’s and Zhang’s works because, as she concludes her thoughts on the “new migration” narratives, Friedman states that

the differently situated narratives of these [diasporic] writers posit the centrality of violence – especially violence against the female body and spirit – as core elements of migration’s turbulence. They suggest that the displacement of diaspora begins *before* the journey from home to elsewhere, begins indeed within the home and homeland and travels with the women as they face the difficulties of negotiating between new ways and old ways of living.  
(23)

Diasporic women, consequently, are multiaxially threatened as the othering of their bodies happens due to their ethnicity or race, class, language, generation, and, above all, gender – not only outside home or homeland, but also inside home or homeland. This echoes, parallels, and mirrors similar issues found in *Circle K Cycles* and *Sour Heart*. As the narratives in these works are first introduced, they might look like more of the same. Is Yamashita just exoticizing the diasporic subjects she writes about, the Japanese-Brazilian community in Seto, and inadvertently erotizing the body of the woman that comes from this *mistura*, *okazu*, or mixture? Is Zhang presenting her

readers with more of the so frowned-upon mother-daughter conflict, and the generational tensions that ensue, thus focusing on the dichotomy negative-old-China versus positive-modern-America? Or are they able to go beyond the stereotypes and bring their readers a new perspective on the women in their diasporas? In the next sections, as I go over the narratives they have created, I will share my findings and thoughts on the matter.

Until now, while establishing a justification for this research and highlighting key historical evidence and theoretical concepts that will guide it, I have been referring to Yamashita and Zhang as well as some parts of their books which I will now focus on. The excerpts chosen for the following sections help illustrate the questions posed and open space for more in-depth analysis. Following the themes of hybridity and its different facets, as well as gender and “the othering of women”, I intend to go over the most relevant aspects of journals, short-stories and essays, in Yamashita’s *Circle K Cycles*, and the stories in Zhang’s *Sour Heart*, connecting them to theory whenever possible. In choosing a thematic structure, I might not follow the order in which the books are organized closely, so the focus is not lost. Also, some short-stories will carry more prominence, being more deeply analyzed, which does not mean that the others have less to offer in analytical terms. It simply means some of the aspects they present might not be relevant in order to enrich the particular discussion I wish to pursue here. Although the present Master’s thesis focuses mainly on Asian American women, it is necessary, in order to show how they are more prominently represented and better developed in the stories, to mention the men that surround them when appropriate, particularly when those men are responsible for “the othering” of those women.

### 3. Karen Tei Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles*

Yamashita opens her book with a prologue in which she presents a few questions regarding her own origins, what survives assimilation and integration into a new culture and society, and finally what makes her and others, who are so different from each other, so purely Japanese. She presents these questions in order to highlight them and point out some reading guidelines for what follows; she does not, however, sign a contract stating she will directly address them or even provide the answers. Nevertheless, her work demands intense participation on the part of her readers.

*Circle K Cycles* is a hybrid book in many ways. To begin with, the work moves from journal sections to fictionalized ones. “Why *fictionalized?*”, one might ask. And to this question I shall answer that taking into account *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* and its definition of the verb ‘fictionalize’ – “to make a film or story about a real event, changing some details and adding some imaginary characters”. I feel certain this book is neither an autobiographical account in its purest meaning, nor is it mere fiction where it seems to be. Some in-between collages, for instance, provide the reader with some newspaper information that functions as a springboard to supposed fictional events presented later in so-called fictional texts. There is no need to go this further now, though. Yamashita herself chooses the verb “merge” in order to present the structure of her book (11), which implies that at some point journals and fiction become intertwined, or, simply put, just one indistinguishable piece of writing; facts and imagination or invention are mixed, thus creating a hybrid genre. Nevertheless, a certain pattern can be observed, and for each month of her stay in Seto, Japan, there seems to be a journal or essay followed by a fictionalized piece of writing. Among those, there is yet another element that adds to the hybridity of the book:

collages can be easily spotted throughout its presentation. Alongside the journals, essays and fiction, a mixture of clippings from magazines and newspapers, photos, banners, leaflets, recipes, and such, can be found, proving the unique hybridity aspect of Yamashita's work – a work in which no single genre stands alone. As if that were not enough, the work presents its readers with texts in three languages: English, primarily, but also Portuguese and Japanese, are a part of the construction of its hybridity, all of which comes in hand to help build Yamashita's book – through the unique way of organizing her work, she parallels the multi-ethnic aspect of her characters. The literary hybrid genre the author creates is in tune with the hybridity issue present in her characters and herself, thus exploring the Japanese diaspora in an enriching and important manner to literature as a whole, and more specifically to Japanese-Brazilian and Japanese-American Immigrant Writing.

In “Dekasegi Starter Dictionary”, which is introduced to Yamashita's readers prior to the prologue of *Circle K Cycles*, the words and definitions presented start hinting at the theme of hybridity. *Gaijin*<sup>10</sup>, *Nikkei*<sup>11</sup> and *Mestiça*<sup>12</sup> are some of the terms one must understand in order to navigate the work of Yamashita – and all of them are connected to the idea of having a hybrid identity, or being perceived as having something other than a pure race. Yamashita, Japanese-American, brings the term race into discussion in her prologue, “Purely Japanese”, while narrating two different encounters. The first takes place while she visits Japan for the first time, in the early seventies, researching her family history. Questioned about her ancestry, she is then able to trace 14 generations back to Japan. To Japanese questioners of her ancestry, that fact implies she is “a

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<sup>10</sup> “Foreigner, outsider; more specifically, and sometimes negatively, non-Japanese” (Yamashita 10)

<sup>11</sup> “Of Japanese ancestry or lineage; belonging to the Japanese tribe; however, some dictionaries translate this word to mean Japanese emigrant, or even Japanese American” (10).

<sup>12</sup> “Of mixed racial ancestry” (10).

pure Japanese” (12), which makes her feel hurt and resentment. She then adds, echoing the essay by Kesaya Noda, a few words on the hardships faced in the United States and now faced in Japan: “I came from a country where many people, including my own, had long struggled with the pain of racism and exclusion. Purity of race was not something I valued or believed to be important, and yet, in Japan, I was trying so hard to pass, to belong” (12). However, instead of focusing on the Americanization process like Noda, Yamashita sees herself trying hard to pass as Japanese while in Japan. Later comes her second encounter, while in Brazil studying the group of Japanese immigrants in São Paulo – she is once again asked about her ancestry, this time by an *issei* who immigrated to Brazil in the thirties, and he reacts with shock and disbelief at how different their people look by the third generation, implying that Yamashita, a *sansei*, represented, in her words, “a strange and curious transformation” (13). This way, the author establishes the hybridity surrounding her existence and how representation has become an issue in her life. She also prepares to explore the Japanese-Brazilian community further – intrigued by how her questions on herself would apply to the diaspora, she asks, echoing Homi Bhabha, at the end of her prologue: “how could any one image represent the lives and experiences of so many who have become so different and yet so purely Japanese” (14)?

Throughout the book, Yamashita proceeds to provide numerous images – varied examples of representation – in order to “encompass the brave new Brazilian world experienced within Japan” (14). At first glance, however, some of these images might be perceived as stereotypes. For instance, in the opening journal, “March: Backache”, Yamashita mentions the green and yellow arrow-like sticker on the back of the cars in Seto, to show there are Brazilians driving, and they are not used to driving in different directions. “Cuidado. Brazilians in car” (16), the sticker warns.

It is the first of many examples in which she seems to connect Brazilians to problems and chaos. Is she inadvertently stereotyping the Japanese-Brazilian community she aims to portray as brave?

Firstly, let me borrow once again from Stuart Hall and his *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, in which he includes a chapter named “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’”, where he explores “the representational practice known as ‘stereotyping’” (Hall 225). He discusses:

What, then, is the difference between a *type* and a *stereotype*? *Stereotypes* get hold of the few ‘simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person, *reduce* everything about the person to those traits, *exaggerate* and *simplify* them, and *fix* them without change or development to eternity. This is the process . . . [that] *reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference’*. (258)

By fixing ‘difference’, stereotyping creates binary oppositions, he argues throughout this chapter. And even though his focus is on the white/black binary opposition, his words relate to Yamashita’s book. Does she create a binary opposition between the Japanese-Brazilian community in Seto and the *mattaku*<sup>13</sup> Japanese? Or is she able to escape the contradictions of the binary structure of racial stereotyping? Does she, as Hall proposes, “contest ‘negative’ images and transform representational practices around ‘race’ in a more ‘positive’ direction” (225-26)? Moreover, are Japanese-Brazilian women more interesting because they are doubly exotic? Going through the book, some findings can help debate these questions further in the following sub-sections, which cover different portions of the book as a pattern related to stereotyping can be observed.

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<sup>13</sup>“[E]ntirely, completely” (145).

### 3.1. Reinforcing stereotypes (?)

Starting with the first short-story “What If Miss Nikkei Were God(dess)?”, the central character is a *nikkei* who has won a modelling contest which grants her the nickname Miss Hamamatsu. She is described as having an exotic appearance to be blamed on the mixture of her Italian and her Japanese blood and “[t]o top it off, she carried these Venus-like qualities with an easy Brazilian charm, as if the sun anointed her naked body” (19). In terms of personality, some of the description suggests she is shallow, vain, proud, and naïve. Her overall description seems to be prejudicial. She works in a hidden room behind a warehouse for imported Brazilian goods. Her job is very *dekasegi*<sup>14</sup>-like: she makes illegal copies of Brazilian TV shows, particularly soap operas. It is not a *san k*<sup>15</sup> job at a factory, like her mother used to have, but it is still not one that offers ideal conditions. Meanwhile, Jorginho, a coworker who “noticed her in this dungeon, slaving among the tapes” (21), seems to be made up to represent the Brazilian ‘jeitinho’. He uses many tricky ideas and slippery talk, trying to convince Miss Hamamatsu by playing with her hopes, shallowness, and naivety. He seems to have all the right connections with the ‘I know someone’ speech. “I’ll have to make some of it up, but who’s going to check up on all the marvelous work you’ve done in Brazil?” (25), he says, clearly cheating. While playing with her naivety, Jorginho turns her beauty queen dreams into opportunism and sex exploitation. While the two characters are going over some of her modelling photos, the description clearly indicates that *modelling* might as well be *sex-work*: “luscious exposures of her full lips and eyes filled with desire . . . nude poses,

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<sup>14</sup> According to the Starter Dictionary provided by Yamashita, in her book *dekasegi* means “migrant laborer in Japan”.

<sup>15</sup> According to the Starter Dictionary provided by Yamashita, *san k* are the three k’s “kitanai (dirty), kitsui (difficult), kigen (dangerous)”.

poses in string bikinis, poses in miniskirts, jeans, fitted jersey dresses. It was enough to drive any man crazy” (22). Therefore, at first, it seems like characters are indeed two-dimensional portrayals of Brazilian people, and Miss Hamamatsu seems to be particularly objectified, at least in the eyes of Jorginho, whose gaze is othering a member of his diasporic community. Nevertheless, in this story we get a first glimpse of a sense of community among these diasporic women, always helping each other. Miss Hamamatsu could not afford to go to a real beauty salon but “Brazilian women went to each other’s houses. Her mother’s friend Arlete did her nails. Her girlfriend Flávia did depilation and face masks. They shared cosmetics and exchanged clothing” (25). Furthermore, through the influence of a soap opera she makes copies of, *O Rei do Gado*, Miss Hamamatsu is able to elaborate on her reality beyond her naivety: “As a *dekasegi*, Miss Hamamatsu appreciated the message of the downtrodden, those without land. They had every right to take over land held by the absentee landlords and make it productive . . . She with other *dekasegi* would take over Japanese contract companies” (27), she considers when realizing the problem such companies pose to the *dekasegi*. Furthermore, echoing Friedman, for Miss Hamamatsu, “[b]eing away from home engenders fictionalizing memories of the past and dreams of the future” (“Bodies on the Move” 195), which explains why she spends most of her time fantasizing about different realities.

Next, in “April: Circle Trash / Maru-Gomi”, Yamashita’s second journal entry, Japanese are said to be superstitious about old, used things, while for Brazilians, this ‘lixo’ found during ‘gaijin scavenging’ is what will make up their new houses in Japan (30). Brazilians are also apparently not concerned about the rules for trash disposal in the condominiums as seen in the “Sunday, April 6” entry (31). “It’s oddly quiet by Brazilian standards” (32), Yamashita observes and later adds that Brazilians live in a part of the condo right after pointing out to the mess hanging over the balconies. Could these be simply observations? Based on what follows, I guess they are



indeed observations. Also, by stating that Japanese are superstitious, the author starts showing that peculiarities exist in all communities, which will culminate later, in “July: Circle K Rules”.

Still in this journal, an interesting allusion to identity can be noticed in the “Friday, March 7” entry, in which Yamashita describes the process of opening the wrappings of a box of traditional sweets received as a gift:

The box is presented to us in a colorful paper bag with handles. It is wrapped in stylized rice paper, hiding the box itself – a sturdy cardboard construction pasted with more fine paper. Parting another layer of tissue, within, the box is segmented, each plastic partition bearing an individually wrapped confection. We slowly unwrap each confection which is in turn wrapped in a final edible wrapper. (30)

One can understand the layers mentioned as the layers one must go through to reach the real, ‘edible’ identity. All the previous colorful, stylized layers are mere mask-identities used to facilitate the acceptance in a given community; stereotypes, if I may say so. The gift – the real content of someone’s identity – takes the work of unwrapping, deconstructing all stereotypes, fancy masks, and sturdy protection in order to be reached.

Furthering her investigation even more, Yamashita ends this journal by speculating about these diasporic subjects and what their lives must have been like before coming to Japan to become *dekasegi*:

Their lives in Brazil may have been different; they may have never worked a factory job before . . . A bank clerk presses metal into car bumpers. An engineer hangs pigs on hooks in a meat processing plant. A stationery store owner drives a trash truck. A fifteen-year-old boy mixes cement at a construction site. A grandmother solders tiny wires to electronic plates. They are the same people in Japan as they were in Brazil but there are new and

different uses for their lives. And if the bank clerk loses his finger or the grandmother suffers a heart attack, there is another clerk with fingers, another grandmother with a heart.

(32)

Yamashita exposes the condition of the migrant laborer in these lines – they become bodies, easily replaceable bodies. The fact that her daughter is saving broken pieces of ceramics to make art, which she calls “the beauty of trash”, adds a hint of irony – trash is reusable and recycled, people are replaced.

### 3.2. Moving beyond stereotypes

In the short story “Three Marias”, the *dekasegi*, or Japanese-Brazilian workers, still seem to be portrayed in a stereotyped manner. Here are just a few clippings that I have selected, which show some level of generalization:

“The Brazilian is an accommodating animal” (34);

“Down deep, *dekasegi* are a bunch of tricksters” (34);

“Brazilians were fools for the comfortable, wanted everything handed to them on a silver spoon” (39).

Nonetheless, a new pattern can be noticed – the portrayal of women starts to become richer. While Zé Maria, the male character, is very flat, the three Marias after which the story is named seem to go from sexually objectified saints, as the idealistic Maria da Conceição, to a self-employed realistic woman, as the capitalist Maria Madalena, to an integrated bureaucrat Embassy worker, as the pragmatic Maria da Graça. Then, in the collage “May: Touch Your Heart Circle K”, while some clippings point to Brazilians as trouble – such as the headline that reads “Nikkei mostra penis a japonêsa” (45), stores that warn Japanese shoppers and clerks of the presence of foreigners (47), and *dekasegi* who are unable to adapt due to language barriers (50) –, a few clippings show Brazilians as entrepreneurs, mainly in the food business.

These tendencies continue in the short-story from May, “Zero Zero Hum ...aravilha / Zero Zero One-derful”. Maria Madalena is depicted as a pro-active multi-tasking woman who has three phone lines and keeps three parallel conversations at the same time, two of which involve business transactions. In her personal line she is talking to a friend, Alice, to whom Maria tells her dreamlike experience of how she got to Japan and also offers her straightforward opinions on and

comparisons between Brazilians and Japanese people. Alice, referred to as the “obento lady” (71), has a ‘marmita’ or lunchbox business. Maria claims to have done it all alone, while some Brazilians “here some seven years who still don’t know more than to ask for the toilet. They arrive here thinking that life owes them something” (76). She also presents another allusion to identity as something not easily seen: “Anyone ever told you about honne / tatemae? It’s what’s inside and what’s outside. It’s what you don’t see and what you see. The Brazilian never learns this, but it’s essential to know for life here” (77), she concludes hinting at the fact that Brazilians are easily fooled when they get to Japan because they fail to comprehend that what is outside does not correspond to what is inside. The same could be said about identity and even how identity is developed over the chapters in Yamashita’s book – slowly being unwrapped to show more than just stereotypes, to reveal what is inside. Another point to be made is that the two above-mentioned characters seem to appear in other stories – Maria Madalena is most likely the same from “Three Marias”, while Alice appears again in “Hantai” – and this recurrence of characters in different contexts will help contribute to better portray these women beyond stereotypes.

It is precisely from the June short-story “Hantai” that Yamashita shifts from the seemingly two-dimensional characters to well-rounded ones. Curiously, this story is somewhat located halfway the book. It follows two children, Iara and José, who are struggling to adapt in this strange land, with a strange language, and families which are far from the so-called “normal”. José is having the hardest of times since he cannot understand Japanese, he is teased by other children, and much like his drunk, violent father, Sérgio, he wants to go back to Brazil. Iara, on the other hand, is in a better position to try and help him navigate through his difficulties. She has no problem with the Japanese language and she is learning Portuguese. Besides that, her relationship with her mother, Fátima, is a caring and collaborative one, and they have a great time together making

‘pastéis’ to sell. Other characters – including Alice, the obento lady from “Zero Zero One-derful”, and her *mattaku* Japanese husband, Joji – are also more richly developed in this piece. There are background stories to some of them; their relationships, positive and negative, are explored; their jobs and businesses – including the three self-employed women, lunchbox lady, Alice, Fátima and her ‘pastéis’, and Portuguese teacher, Célia – do not fall into sex exploitation category; most importantly, they are all portrayed with their complexities and with no underlying judgement, with the understanding that, as *dekasegi*, there are limited options in terms of work. Cláudio Roberto Vieira Braga elaborated on this topic in his doctoral dissertation by saying that:

The women characters are not in the assembly lines of Japanese factories, which would be expected of *dekasegi* women, but rather find themselves performing unusual professional tasks, in shops or in small businesses, which we call diasporic jobs. Through such activities, Maria da Conceição, Alice, Miss Hamamatsu and Maria Madalena place themselves, each in their own way, in the globalized and contemporary context of the diaspora in *Circle K Cycles*. (my trans<sup>16</sup>; 152)

It is through this process of placing these diasporic women characters in a globalized and contemporary context, and through their humanization that Yamashita starts shattering the stereotypes surrounding the Japanese Brazilians she has been observing and writing about. The story ends mirroring its beginning: José being teased by some boys under Iara’s worried vigilance. However, this time Joji, comes to his rescue, and after telling him to go home, Joji corners the boys

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<sup>16</sup> “As personagens femininas não estão nas linhas de produção das fábricas japonesas, o que seria esperado de mulheres *dekasséguis*, mas encontram-se em atividades profissionais incomuns, no comércio ou em pequenos negócios, que chamamos de *ofícios diaspóricos*. Por meio dessas atividades, Maria da Conceição, Alice, Miss Hamamatsu e Maria Madalena se posicionam, cada uma à sua maneira, no contexto contemporâneo e globalizado da diáspora de *Circle K Cycles*” (Braga 152).

and yells: “Who do you think you are? . . . You don’t even know his name or where he’s come from or what he likes to do or why he is here . . . You could be his friend, but instead you make him an outsider. You should be ashamed of yourselves . . . Who taught you to treat another human being so cruelly?” (97), he ends his rant. Finally, to Iara’s surprise and happiness “someone had come to save José and her” (97). It is also clear in this story the domestic abuse ingrained in migrant women’s experience, or “the othering of women” from within their communities. Yoshiko’s husband – or José’s father, Sérgio – is portrayed as a drunk who tends to get violent and break things. “He never hurts me . . . He’s never touched me. He only destroys everything in sight” (94), Yoshiko defends while apologizing to her friends who have come together to clean up the mess Sérgio left in Alice’s kitchen. While showing support and a sense of community, these women also understand the need to move on and get to work, as seen from Alice’s statement: “If we can clean this area here and this counter, Fátima can start her work on time. We can just keep cleaning around her while she works” (94). And while comforting Yoshiko, she emphasizes that “it’s just stuff” (94). The young girl Iara, shocked by the whole ordeal, becomes a kind of wake-up call – when noticing her, the women seem to gather strength to move past the whole incident “to show her what they were made of” (95), and Alice even starts making plans, as she tells the women she wants to open an internet café. This kind of agency and pro-activity, which is found in the women characters more and more as we go through the stories, helps to build a non-stereotypical limited view of these subjects.

From the same month, in “June: Circle K Recipes”, Yamashita could be using food to imply how hybrid identities are becoming the new normal in a globalized world, as she narrates the case in which a “Nikkei whose family traveled from Okinawa to Bolivia to Brazil to Yokohama recently opened her kitchen in Kawasaki, offering both Okinawan and Brazilian dishes. Everybody is

making okazu. Everybody is making mistura” (86). This ‘mistura’ would then equal the hybrid identities and cultures, thus making it harder, as argued by Bhabha, to talk about national identity or purity of race. “Nothing is sacred. Your tradition is someone else’s originality” (86), Yamashita concludes, further echoing the idea that national divisions are no longer sacred and that traditional ideas of purity will eventually become something new, or possibly disappear. It is also in this essay on food that Yamashita explores the importance of *the obento lady*, a job that the character Alice has, and which goes beyond serving ‘marmitas’ to the *dekasegi*, as “[she] also brings news, gossip, and motherly advice. Often she’s a walking social service; she’ll give you information about health insurance, your visa, your driver’s license. She’s been here a while, started her own business, knows the ropes” (84). This idea of going far and beyond, usually to help the community, debunks the myths connected to the Japanese-Brazilian subjects, especially the women: not lazy nor fragile, but strong agents of their own destinies.

In “July: Circle K Rules”, Yamashita presents a collage of rules found in flyers and bulletin boards which exposes idiosyncrasies from three main groups – Japanese, Brazilian and American – thus helping build the notion that all cultures can be connected to stereotypes, but should be understood beyond them.

From the “Japanese Rules” board (107), for instance, one can confirm based on rule 6, that women get paid less than men for the same job in Japan, approximately 300 yen less per hour. Notably, rule 12 stipulates increases in salary according to a man’s age – women are completely left out here. As if that was not enough, cultural sexism in Japan means, according to rule 13, that “His opinion is her opinion is my opinion is your opinion”, implying that men will always have the final say, and nobody should disagree.

The board with “Brazilian Rules” (110) brings up the unruly, trickster Brazilian stereotype seen before in the book, even proposing as rule number 3 the (in)famous “Dar um jeitinho. (There is always a way.)”. Most of the rules concern disregarding the rules (as rule number 1 suggests, “There are no rules”), or taking advantage of situations or others for personal gain (rule number 10 proposes that “Taking advantage of a situation is not necessarily stealing”).

The Brazilian identity is also expressed through physical touch, the kiss and hug being an important part of it, while ‘cold’ Americans are happy with a handshake, and Japanese will be satisfied with a respectful bow. And upon closer inspection, sexism has a place in the Brazilian identity too – in rule 5, it is clarified that while men have fun with beers, women belong “in the kitchen”.

When it comes to American culture and how it can be identified, even though this is not the focus for many of the texts in *Circle K Cycles*, it is possible to draw some conclusions based on this collage-essay. Firstly, they are self-centered, as rule number 7 will inform the reader: “We are the world”, it reads among the “American Rules” (112), thus re-affirming their sense of superiority which makes them fear any culture which might threaten this dominance. Secondly, they are a power-focused culture. Based on Rule 2, which hints at the power of money – “He who *has* makes the rules”–, one can infer that the American identity is also very concerned about having. Being the world and having the world at their disposal, makes it difficult for the standard American subject to accept difference and understand equity, thus making them very likely to become racist and sexist.

At the end of the piece, Yamashita presents a final board “Circle K Rules” (114), which seems to be aimed at the hybrid communities. The first of them proposes the following: “Immigrate into your own country”. At first glance, it may read quite discrepant, but I personally believe what



the author means is that a search for the past, the origins and roots might be required in order to better comprehend one's identity. As Yamashita herself does in the journey presented in this book, one might find it easier to understand the present by revisiting the past.

The second calls for present action: "Learn to cook your favorite meals". Cooking one's favorite meal might seem frivolous when analyzed superficially – with so many kombini, or convenience stores, around the world, cooking does not seem essential. However, a more careful look points towards more important ideas: pro-activity and independence. In a fast-paced world, where differences tend to create abysses, relying on others does not sound like a safe bet. If food is one's sustenance to go through life, one should be enough educated to provide for oneself, regardless of help. This will guarantee one's independence. Besides allowing one to take control of one's life, cooking the favorite meal might be understood as keeping the rituals and habits that are an intrinsic part of one's identity; as explored in "Circle K Recipes", food and cooking are closely connected to one's heritage, and each 'ingredient' from one's ancestry will make up the whole that one is – a *mistura*, or *okazu*, of different cultures and ethnicities in the case of the characters and people portrayed in this book.

Thirdly, "Ask the next question", the author proposes. Having searched for the origins, having assured both independence and ways to keep in close contact with the identity discovered, it is time to look ahead, ask the next question and move on into the future.

Her last journal, "August: Just Do It in 24 Hours", signalizes towards an end – she is leaving Japan, getting ready to move on. She presents her observations made while joining a group of Brazilians – including her Brazilian husband and her son – going to a World Cup match between Brazil and Japan. "To lose a day of work is no small thing, but the choice is a particularly Brazilian

one, steeped in a confusion of identity, rebellion, and saudades” (130), she states, bringing up the deep connection between Brazilians’ identity and soccer.

The concern for the soccer match itself was close to nothing, though; as Yamashita observes, the crew was not interested in the result, but rather in experiencing the *Brazilianness* they miss. While she states that no one was going to miss “this game” (131), she later concludes that the game they were in fact interested in was “a chance to test their ingenuity, their infallible charm, their cunning, their facility to play” (133). During their courageous and intrepid adventure to get to the game, they were in charge for once – they were in control of their destinies, even if for a brief moment. For instance, they become the center of attention as Brazilian women and men show how to dance “Dança da Garrafa” and “[t]he Japanese women follow along in good humor” (131), promoting *okazu, mistura*. Her husband’s friends get tickets for the match by slipping into a special ticket line; they also sneak in the stadium before the game, playing some sort of hide-and-seek with authorities – it is all a big game, their game.

However, much like Cinderella, who goes back to rags after having had a wonderful time at a royal ball, “[a]t midnight, he will turn back into a dekasugi” (132). Thus, soccer is important because it briefly suspends the pain of the harsh reality. She further explains, by defending that “[t]he stories aren’t focused on dishonesty; they are told to reveal the trickster, cunning, a good joke, the stodgy made foolish, the system turned on its side” (130). This connects to previous chapters and characters that seemed to be defined by opportunism, but are now redeemed somehow. And, even though the author brings up this trickster side of Brazilians once more, as if an inherent part of their identities, in this piece she paints them in a humanized way, almost justifying this trait of their identities, rather than simply stereotypically portraying them.

### 3.3. “Samba Matsuri”

In her closing short-story, “Samba Matsuri”, organized into four sections, Yamashita analyzes the relationships of three different couples and each individual’s relationship with their own identity before reaching the section that gives the story its title. As mentioned earlier, *nikkei* means a person is of Japanese ancestry, or a Japanese migrant.

In the first section, we find that the Nikkei to Non-Nikkei couple, Paulo and Marcolina, respectively, are at odds when it comes to agreeing on what defines *Japaneeseness* – he seems to believe it is blood ties, while she believes it is the culture, by which she has always been fascinated. “After she got married to Paulo she learned to cook Japanese food. She also studied flower arranging. Paulo never cared about Japanese culture the way she did” (137), the text informs us as we learn about the characters – contradicting his own ancestry, Paulo, unlike his wife, prefers Brazil. We also discover that Marcolina, despite being the complete outsider, has adapted well to life in Japan, having started a child care center and achieved a good reputation among other mothers in the Japanese-Brazilian community. Marcolina’s agency and the time the text spends informing us of her motivations and desires contrast with the brief characterization of Paulo, who is portrayed as a bitter man.

In the next section, we are introduced to the Nikkei to Nikkei couple, Mariko and João, who never dated other *nikkei* in Brazil. However, the preconceptions they had of *nikkei* back in Brazil disappeared after a few years in Japan. “After a couple of years in Japan, like other *nisei*, both Mariko and João had found themselves in a strange limbo. When in Brazil, they were always called *japonês*; now in Japan, the Japanese treated them as foreigners, wrote their names in *katakana*. Who were they?”, (139) the narrator asks echoing the issues of hybridity discussed by

Noda and highlighted here, once more, by Yamashita, through her characters. We are further informed of Mariko and how her first husband, before João, needed too much taking care of, “a grown man [who] was reduced to a child” (138), evidencing the extra weight women must carry when men cannot cope with their problems. As she ends this relationship and meets João, “a sudden recognition” (139) brings them close together now that they are both seen as Others.

The third section brings the Nikkei to Mattaku Nihonjin couple, Marcos and Yoko, respectively, and shows two people with a thirst for change. Marcos moves around quickly, not really concerned about being a Nikkei, but making use of it to move so. Yoko, pure Japanese, is tired of the status quo:

Certainly, she had a curiosity and a kind of relief that her world, which seemed so predictable and mundane, could after all be different, spontaneous, invented. She joined Marcos on his journey, a journey she would make her own.

Marcos and Yoko began to work and travel through Japan. After Japan, awaits the world.  
(140)

Both characters seem to embrace their identities without effort, focusing on their routes rather than their roots. This will give them an advantage, as we will see later.

Finally, in the section homonymous to the title, “by some act of providence, or fiction” (140), Yamashita metalinguistically informs through a narrator that all three couples attend the Samba Matsuri, a festival supposed to combine the Brazilian and the Japanese cultures, despite segregating Miss Nikkei and Miss Matsuri, and having a clear division in the same park, much like “oil and water” (143). For Marcolina and Paulo things end badly – echoing a passage from Yamashita’s first journal, they are talking at the same time, “but my time is not your time” (17), and they have an argument in which Paulo insists that the body of Miss Nikkei is not pure enough

for her to get that title, while focusing on her Brazilian-like butt. This argument, which blows out of proportion as bystanders jump in to share their unsolicited opinions, shows both the layer of hybridity issues and that of gender issues that the Asian diasporic women must deal with. Paulo is stuck in the old idea that purity of blood determines identity while objectifying Miss Nikkei at the same time, her butt carrying more meaning to define her than anything else; meanwhile Marcolina seems to be closer to Bhabha's and Noda's idea that identity is shaped in a culturally multi-faceted manner.

During the event, Mariko and João help a man who was beaten – we also learn, as she shares the news of her pregnancy with him, that their relationship is on-going, but only time will tell if it “was love” (139) or just convenience. However, for Marcos and Yoko the night does not end. They “never stopped dancing. They danced all the Japanese folk dances, the samba, the bottle dance, and the macarena. They danced with pleasure and abandon. They danced all night” (144). Perhaps they danced like that, a perfect *okazu* or *mistura* of cultural music because they, unlike the other couples, have come to terms with their identities, and the idea that those are not an end, but a means to – as Yamashita has suggested throughout the book – move on, take the next step, ask the next question.

While revising Yamashita's journey, as presented by herself in *Circle K Cycles*, it is easy to notice how it has always been fueled by “the next question”. Growing up in the United States meant she was a Japanese American; even if she represented the third-generation descendant of Japanese immigrants, a *sansei*, she was not purely just one or the other. Driven by that division, she found in Japan she was genealogically purely Japanese – but that did not mean she did not have to try hard to pass as Japanese. Perhaps intrigued by these issues, she decides to investigate others like her. She flies to São Paulo, Brazil, only to be surprised by more questions about her

origins, since she looks so different after three generations. Finally, she moves to Japan to examine a community who, like Yamashita herself, made the opposite movement— after some generations, these Japanese Brazilians made up of nisei and sansei moved to Japan. However, they were looking for jobs, money, a better life, not necessarily answers for who they were. Yamashita follows their struggle with the hard work, language barriers, *saudades*, tough adaptation, all sorts of prejudice, including “the othering of women”. Eventually, they, too, are faced with the question of identity, though forcefully. Thirty years after the beginning of her quest for historical memory and identity and Yamashita seems to end a cycle in 2001, when *Circle K Cycles* is published. The book presents different circles of people who, whether fictionalized or not, are all connected by the questions raised by the author. Throughout the book, the lives of some characters seem to meet, intersperse, and even collide. They all live in cycles – cycle of trash, cycle of work, cycle of life, and mainly the cycle of years they, as *dekasegi*, keep count of until finishing their contracts.

Through the journals, essays, collages and stories, Yamashita addresses the issues of hybridity and gender representation, while portraying a variety of characters whose identities are in question. Whether analyzing her fictional characters (present in the so-called short stories) or assumed non-fictional ones (from Yamashita’s journals), it is not possible to establish a single identity or nationality for most characters. All of them present a hybridity which is expressed through their multi-ethnic physical appearance and/or complex psychological traits. While Yamashita herself is the only character representing the Japanese diaspora in the United States, the characters who portray the Japanese Brazilian diaspora are featured all over the book, like a collage of different backgrounds. And even though it might seem she tends to exoticize them, she does so in order to shatter preconceptions connected to their culture. Furthermore, they share the same condition of not belonging here or there, of being misplaced, or even of finding no place to call

home. They struggle with an identity that is most times shaped from the outside, from the other's point of view – the other, most times, not being at a higher level of benevolence and acceptance.

Hall argues that “[r]epresentation is a complex business and, especially when dealing with ‘difference’, it engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties . . . at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple common-sense way” (226). *Circle K Cycles* does exactly that: it deals with differences by engaging feelings, attitudes and emotions, and even mobilizing fears and anxieties – through its compelling characters –, thus representing in a rounded manner the women in this hybrid community. Yamashita is able, through her collection of images and stories, fictional or not, to accumulate meanings, thus surpassing stereotypes of any group represented in her book, the Japanese-Brazilian women being the more extensively examined group. Even though at times it seems she is dealing with stereotypes, she does move to more nuanced depictions of them, as we have seen. And the subtle connections among the chapters help break the so-called stereotypes and previously built meanings, once they are more deeply explored and better exposed in different contexts throughout the stories. Hall calls that process – in which “images do not carry meaning or ‘signify’ on their own” (232), but rather accumulate “meanings across different texts, where one image refers to another, or has its meaning altered by being ‘read’ in the context of other images” (232) – “inter-textuality” (232), which is possible in Yamashita’s work given the hybrid genre she deals with.

Furthermore, beyond the debate on gender issues, what causes distress between the purely Japanese and the Japanese-Brazilian community are not necessarily just the cultural clashes – such as the way Brazilians drive, handle their trash, or deal with celebrations and physical contact. It is, and I go back to my introduction, the fact that they cannot be easily placed into a specific category or given a single tag. As Yamashita argues, they are neither Japanese nor complete foreigners or

*gaijin*. They “float ambiguously in some unstable, dangerous, hybrid zone of indeterminacy in-between” (quoted in Hall 236), and “[s]table cultures require things to stay in their appointed place” (Hall 236) – the Japanese culture being one of the most so-called stable and closed cultures in the world<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, most of the perceived stereotypes connected to the Japanese-Brazilian community come from the Japanese’s perspective, not necessarily Yamashita’s. Clippings from newspapers, public announcements in stores, “The Rule Board” found in a condominium complex – these are all evidences of the Japanese’s view of the Brazilian people, and also of their dislike towards this in-between hybrid community. Yamashita merely contextualizes these views in her inter-textual hybrid book, thus actually contributing to actively debunk such stereotyped views. Also, by demonstrating common ground among the communities – they take care of their families, they are organized by rules, they hold celebrations, and they each have their own set of deficiencies within their society and culture –, Yamashita writes a plausible book which aptly represents different communities and their idiosyncrasies in rich context, not just stereotyped characters. Or, as Hall puts it, while concluding his chapter and presenting ways to contest a racialized regime of representation, her book

tries to *contest it from within*. It is more concerned with the *forms* of racial representation than with introducing a new *content*. It accepts and works with the shifting, unstable character of meaning, and enters, as it were, into a struggle over representation, while

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<sup>17</sup> Textual evidence presented even in this book: “In 1990, the Japanese government had passed a law to allow nisei and sansei to acquire visas to perform unskilled labor in Japan. At the same time, this law more strictly prohibited work by other foreign workers considered illegal aliens . . . a way to replenish the loss of unskilled factory labor, but in so doing to also replace non-Japanese foreign workers with the more familiar faces of Japanese descendants who should, it was thought, integrate more easily into Japanese life and society. In short, it was a solution probably well-intentioned but perhaps purely in favor of race” (Yamashita 13).



acknowledging that, since meaning can never be finally fixed, there can never be any final victories. (274)

This way, Yamashita makes “stereotypes work against themselves” (274) in *Circle K Cycles*.

At the end of the book, Yamashita has come full circle – after going through a series of developments with her characters, she reaches back to the identity question. However, instead of struggling to understand what purely Japanese is, she does what some of her characters have done: reach the end of a vicious cycle and come to terms with their hybrid identities. “Wagahaiwa Nikkei de Aru” (145), she says – I am a Nikkei.

Nevertheless, her storyline is not a single cycle. Whenever she reaches a point – Japan, in the early seventies; Brazil, in the late seventies; the US, in the mid-eighties; and Seto, Japan, in 1997 – she actually ends one micro-cycle, one quest for answers, which, as we have seen, then raises more questions. It is actually a cyclical cycle, which spirals upwards: every time it reaches back the assumed original point, it presents new questions, which in turn starts a new cycle of questions. So, even though she is at peace with her Nikkei identity she asks the next questions: “geographically speaking, what exactly makes a Nikkei?” (145); “And where is home?” (146); “we’ve got Nikkei getting together to make more Nikkei. Half of the kids born in Oizumi these days are Brazilian. What is the world coming to?” (147). She concludes that “[m]aybe the next generation can answer or reject these questions” (147) and she lets go of it.

In conclusion, and referring back to Bhabha’s ideas, the negotiation of cultural hybridity is widely present in *Circle K Cycles*. And this suggests that the Japanese-Brazilian community in Japan is reshaping what identity means for that diaspora. Perhaps, as Bhabha indicates in his introduction to his book *Nation and Narration*, “despite the certainty with which historians speak of the ‘origins’ of nation as a sign of the ‘modernity’ of society, the cultural temporality of the

nation inscribes a much more transitional social reality” (1), meaning that the movements of dispersion (and now return) are bound to change the idea of a what nation is, as Friedman also defends when investigating the “new migration”. And if the idea of nation changes, the idea of identity follows. Yamashita, in her “Epilogue: Wagahaiwa Nikkei de Aru”, jokingly refers to rumors and books suggesting that the origins of the original Japanese could be connected to Korea or even a lost tribe from Israel (146). What would it mean then to be purely Japanese? This debate, as Hall suggests, “opens out into a ‘politics of representation’, a struggle over meaning which continues and is unfinished” (277) – much like Yamashita’s *Circle K Cycles*, which is not a *period*, in terms of providing answers to all questions posed, but rather an open-ended book, in terms of favoring discussion on hybridity and representation of this diasporic group.

#### 4. Jenny Zhang's *Sour Heart*

As stated in the introduction, Jenny Zhang's first work of prose, *Sour Heart*, follows six women looking back at their experiences and traumas from childhood within the context of being in a Chinese immigrant family in 1990s New York. The narrators, through their first-person recollections, seem to be searching for some kind of lesson that was learned from then – their young selves – to now – their present selves, which does not seem to be a successful quest for all of them. Much less hybrid in its form when compared to the very hybrid-genre book Yamashita has brought to the world, *Sour Heart* still deals with some levels of hybridity in its stories. Although the characters are the children of First-Generation Chinese Americans, they struggle with language and appearance issues throughout the stories – and questions of belongingness are present throughout. Nonetheless, Zhang's focus on the experience of diasporic women and “the othering of women” makes her work an invaluable contribution to the debate of gender representation in immigrant literature. An aspect that differentiates Yamashita's stories from Zhang's is the level of success the families portrayed have achieved. While characters in *Circle K Cycles* seem to struggle to survive at a basic level, Zhang presents families which struggle at very different levels – while some, such as Cristina's family, struggle to find and keep a roof above their heads, a job<sup>18</sup>, and food; others, such as Lucy's family, have been dealt with better hands or made bigger sacrifices to ensure that all the basics are guaranteed. This allows Zhang to explore in her stories aspects which are only briefly tackled in *Circle K Cycles*, such as sexual awakening, generational tensions, and guilt, all of which connect strongly with gender issues in the narrations. Although fictional, at least

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<sup>18</sup> Mostly jobs similar to the three k's explored by Yamashita: kitanai (dirty), kitsui (difficult), kigen (dangerous).

two characters in *Sour Heart* share name connections with the author. In “We Love You Crispina” and “You Fell into the River and I Saved You!”, Cristina’s father’s name is Zhang Heping, while in “The Evolution of My Brother” the narrator’s name is Jenny. Could this be evidence of fictionalization, such as can be noticed in *Circle K Cycles*? Perhaps, but I do not plan to delve into it for this analysis, because I myself find the “which is fact and which is fiction?” question distracting. Nonetheless, I still find it worth mentioning it for the purpose of further supporting my own previous citation and belief – that *story-truth* is more striking than *happening-truth*, thus fictionalized stories are more powerful to produce effect on a reader. If readers empathize with the plight of these characters and, in turn, become able to reflect that empathy in the real world, this only serves to reinforce the importance of literature. Similarly to Yamashita’s narratives, these girls’ stories do not always have a clear ending – the open-ended conclusions, although unsettling, function as provocations to the reader.

The idea or feeling of wanting to belong, fit in, get attention (from the world or just from their overworked parents) is a recurrent one in the stories. As the parents of these girls have chosen to abandon their lives and families in China so they could try better ones overseas, in the boroughs of New York, they are oftentimes exhausted from overworking at multiple jobs, or they work long hours, thus making it difficult for them to have quality time with their daughters. In turn, some of them will try to find attention elsewhere in ways that can be questionable. One of the narrators, Mande, vocals these frustrations in “My Days of Night and Terror” in an unequivocal manner:

In the three or two or one or zero hours I saw my parents every night, I kept waiting for them to ask me new questions, like how many friends did I have at school, and was it hard to be the new girl, and did I ever feel lonely when I came home from school and had to wait to see if this was a night of three or two or one or zero hours with them. (220-21)

Meanwhile, when Mande's mother is present, she is too worried about what the outside world can do to her daughter and completely oblivious of the dangers their inner community might pose, as I will discuss later.

Because the structure in Jenny Zhang's *Sour Heart* is much more straightforward than Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles*, and all the narrators are women characters within the same Chinese diaspora, I will structure this section with sub-sections devoted to the characters of: Lucy, Mande, and Cristina. Jenny's, Annie's, and Stacey's stories will not get their own sub-section but will be covered together in the first one. The reason why I have chosen to do this is the same reason why I have not covered all of Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles* – despite offering interesting material, the stories will not add much to the discussion I aim to pursue here. Finally, although Cristina is featured in the first and the closing stories, I will leave her for last and discuss both stories together.

#### 4.1. Jenny, Annie and Stacey

In “The Evolution of My Brother”, while Jenny shares the story of her relationship with her younger brother, she also explores her feelings towards her family throughout the years, and in those feelings, we can find issues of non-belongingness, which echo Friedman’s ideas in “Bodies on the Move”, and a hint of desire to assimilate – but is it so? Does she long to assimilate or is she deeply too afraid that her caring parents will protect her from achieving a sense of self?

As she informs her readers, when she was sixteen all she longed for “was to be part of a family that wasn’t mine” (150) and in looking for that she managed to convince her parents to let her spend three weeks at Stanford University<sup>19</sup> to study philosophy. This experience made her feel like she was a part of a tribe, albeit “their tribe, not mine” (150), which sounds like a realization adult Jenny has come to – when young perhaps she failed to understand that despite having classmates who welcomed her into the academic environment, they were probably always seeing her as the Other, and now she is mature enough to notice this reality. Nevertheless, looking for a tribe, even if not hers, was not necessarily looking for home in Jenny’s case. Or at least not the concept of home her parents were offering. She wanted to feel free and that could only be achieved through being outside her parents’ home, their care, their protection, their concerns for her well-being. “*I’m freeeeeeeeeeee*, I thought . . . and I hardly thought about them again for the next three weeks. It was only later, much, much, much later, that I understood and accepted that my parents paid for me to be free. All of it, I realized, had to be paid for by someone” (156)”, Jenny expresses her understanding that, in order to give her the opportunity to study at Stanford, her family spent an amount of money she could not fathom then.

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<sup>19</sup> *Coincidentally*, studying at Stanford is something Jenny Zhang, the author, did as well.

As an adult, she finally realizes that the sacrifices made by her parents did not stop after leaving China “with nothing more than eight boiled eggs in their pockets, fifty dollars that were confiscated at customs upon arrival, and a suitcase full of pots and pans and one broken broomstick for fear that they would not be able to find or afford these things in America” (151) – the sacrifices continued in America so that all her dreams could be made possible, so that Jenny and her brother did not have to become what she says her parents became, in the condition of immigrants: “people to be saved, to be helped by institutions and individuals . . . charity” (151). Young Jenny wants to distance herself from her family, not because of their Chineseness – which would make this story fall into the stereotyped narrative I have discussed before – but rather because she wants to be able to form a sense of self similarly to the girls she sees at the school her parents fought so hard to get her into, girls who are allowed to be selfish and make bad choices, and are not overprotected by their parents. Interestingly, at same time young Jenny longs to be like them, she portrays them with negative adjectives, “selfish and self-destructive and indulgent” (154), and says that “everyone was the same pasty shade of consumptive blotchy paleness” (155), which sounds a lot like a criticism. Nevertheless, she insists on the idea, perhaps not because she longs to assimilate into the American culture, but because her identity, echoing Hall and Noda, is not a deliberate choice she has made – it is pasted on her face. By desiring to be white, she wants to disappear into the crowd. By desiring to have white parents, she wants to be allowed to be flawed. Not because her parents demand perfection, but possibly because she understands the sacrifices they have made and deep down she is the one who pressures herself into not failing. This would require a more psychological approach, which is not the aim of this analysis but as an adult, Jenny certainly expresses guilt when revisiting her young self:

Whenever I'm home for a few days, I start to feel this despair at being back in the place where I had spent so many afternoons dreaming of getting away, so many late nights fantasizing about who I would be once I was allowed to be someone apart from my family . . . now that I am on my own, the days of resenting my parents for loving me too much . . . have been replaced with the days of feeling bewildered by the prospect of finding some other identity besides "daughter" or "sister." (174-75)

Jenny's words, as I indicated in the introduction to this short-story, find echo in Friedman's statement that "Home comes into being most powerfully when it is gone, lost, left behind, desired and imagined" ("Bodies on the Move" 202). When she was young, she would fictionalize dreams of a future outside home. Now that she has finally left, she longs for home. She is also still struggling to find an identity. This, too, finds echo in Friedman, as she states that the diasporic bodies on the move, no matter where they find themselves, that place will always be a site of dislocation ("Bodies on the Move" 191), thus, making it difficult to build a sense of identity. Nonetheless, Friedman also argues that "writing about what has been lost in leaving and what has been gained in moving from place to place" ("Bodies on the Move" 206) can create home and a sense of self. Perhaps, through writing, Jenny, the character, is finally coming to a sense of self.

"Our Mothers Before Them" is a journal-like short-story which alternates between the 1966 Cultural Revolution China and the 1996 Chinese-American house timelines for Annie's tale of how one generation of trauma entails trauma being passed onto the next one. It strongly parallels another of Friedman's statements on "how the violence of the state and the home echo each other, how the violence passes down through the generations of women" ("Bodies on the Move" 200), thus creating a cycle of othering of women within their diaspora. Since this short-story focuses on events taking place during the 1966 Cultural Revolution, and reiterates points made more



prominently in other short-stories, I will not delve into it. Nevertheless, as I have previously argued when debating Pierre Nora's hybrid concept of *lieux de mémoire*, the importance of the blurred lines between history and memory in adding legitimacy to literature is evidenced here.

In "Why Were They Throwing Bricks?", Stacey narrates the four different times her grandmother visits her and her family in the United States, and how both she and her brother become more and more estranged from their grandmother as they grow up. This happens for two main reasons: the first being the grandmother's blatant longing for her and her brother's complete love and attention; the second being that the lies she tells them – sometimes obvious, sometimes elaborate ones – start becoming more and more evident as they mature.

This short-story adds to the discussion of intergenerational conflict, albeit not in the same way typically seen in Asian American literature – that is, while the young ones embrace assimilation into the United States, the old ones struggle with the dislocation. At first, "Why Were They Throwing Bricks?" indeed presents what seems to be more of the same; however, it subtly redirects its readers towards a path where it is possible to see that the conflict was not based on assimilation versus alienation, but rather it is a conflict that has its roots in acts of violence against the body of women and how the "violence done to the body in both old and new homes" ("Bodies on the Move" 200) can disrupt relationships.

As a reader, I have come to realize Stacey's grandmother is a fighter – while young Stacey complains about her grandmother's ludicrous lies, she also narrates seemingly unimportant events of her grandmother's visits to the United States. For instance, during one of her visits, we learn that she found a job at a factory folding dumplings. As a seasoned worker, she folds dumplings twice as fast as the other co-workers, thus earning more money per hour. After she decides to share her trade secrets during breaktime with the others, so everyone can earn more money, her infuriated

boss creates unreasonable “quality control” rules to which the grandmother responds by promoting a Union-like strike to fight for their rights:

My grandmother pointed out that he was arbitrarily docking pay for “unfit dumplings” without any real inspection, and all the dumplings she folded, including the unacceptable ones, were thrown into the same freezer bags, and that was exploitative. She convinced the other workers to collectively demand back pay for all the rejected dumplings, and even organized a walkout one morning for higher wages. “Six cents a dumpling!” they chanted. The owner caved, and that day my grandmother came home pumping her fists like she was at a pep rally. (244)

Stacey herself admits admiring her grandmother for having done that, despite finding an illogical way to make the effort negative and diminish her grandmother by stating that she probably only did it for the money, so “what’s great about that?” – well, that *is* the reason workers go on strike: more money. Similar to the other young girls in *Sour Heart*, Stacey, as most young teenagers, lacks a well-founded sense of reality at times. This is not to judge any of them, but just to reiterate how important it is for *Sour Heart* to have its characters remembering these events – it allows the readers to pick out these subtleties and it allows me to comprehend these stories beyond the so-called typical stereotyped narrations of the Asian diaspora.

During a different visit, we learn that the grandmother, who only had access to a third-grade education, is teaching herself English so she can write a book about her grandchildren, which are so special that she believes “The world needs to know about” (252) them. She also makes a point about being proud to be Chinese since “We invented spices and gum and paper, block painting on wood and then moveable type for paper, paper money, gunpowder, fireworks, tea, silk spinning, alchemy, which later became modern chemistry, navigational tools for maritime exploration,

weapons for war and machines for peace. That is why China sits in the center of the map” (250-51), to which the girl dismissively responds by saying “Not in American classrooms” (251). In summary, every time her grandmother does or says something positive, Stacey has a negative comeback to try and diminish her. Evidently, the neediness and the lies are annoying traits in her grandmother, but it does not justify the level of alienation she puts her grandmother through, even having her younger brother resort to violence to escape her constant need for sharing the same bed and being in close contact with them.

Eventually, Stacey starts letting her guard down and admits that she “was old enough to understand how one of trauma’s many possible effects was to make the traumatized person insufferable, how [her] grandmother’s unwillingness to be a victim was both pathetic and impressive and made her deserving of at least some compassion” (252). Nevertheless, it is her grandmother’s “fourth and final visit” (249), and we are left to assume she died after that one. As Stacey nears the end of her recollection, we finally learn of the trauma her grandmother suffered – when she was a child, back in China, she was forced to flee her burning house to escape an attack and, in doing so, forced to leave her mother behind to die. Later, herself as a mother, she is forced to watch her daughter, Stacey’s mother, leave China to escape the Cultural Revolution. This is actually the event that gives the story its title – the bricks they were throwing were due to the persecution in this period. Therefore, once again, “the othering of women” is present through different generations of Stacey’s family, her grandmother having been the most affected. The lies she tells her family are lies she tells herself, once more echoing Friedman’s views that the diasporic body that has been through violence tends to create narratives “where memory and desire produce an idealized image of the homeland” (“Bodies on the Move” 200), a reimagined version of the past. Her exaggerated affection towards her grandchildren is a response to having lost so much.

Borrowing Friedman's guiding question for "Bodies on the Move", here is an attempted answer using her own theory: what happens to the human spirit in face of dislocation, violence against the body, and varied instances of othering, particularly of women? Fictionalization. Re-writing the past. Stacey comes close to understanding this, but perhaps too late. "I felt her loneliness and it scared me" (258), she confesses in the final paragraphs. She also admits to brushing these memories off as mere dreams, and learning nothing, and not changing at all (259). But then again, it is her turn to re-write.

#### 4.2. “The Empty the Empty the Empty”

This story revolves around Lucy, a seemingly frivolous, spiteful, shallow girl, and her difficult relationships with Frangie, a girl her mother has taken in; and her mother, who she resents for taking this girl in. Unlike her mother whose “compassion allowed her to feel so much for other people” (44), Lucy felt disdain for most people, which changes in the final moments of the story. Her family possesses more financial stability than others from her community. Nevertheless, this comes with a price paid back to that same community, a sort of a self-imposed need to give back, which annoys Lucy: “Our house was never just our house, it was a place that people in need passed through. We were running the world’s first zero-dollar-a-night hotel and let all kinds of randos in” (44). One of the families that passes through is Cristina’s, for whom Lucy did not show any appreciation, feeling upset that the girl always looked sad. In her selfishness, Lucy cannot understand why a young girl of ten would be so depressed – she fails to see that outside her shiny bubble others might not have it so easy.

Lucy and her mother, unlike Cristina and hers – as we will see later in this chapter –, are far from having a caring mother-daughter relationship. Quite the contrary, Lucy resents her mother as they fight over the Frangie issue throughout the story, her mother even threatening to cut Lucy’s hair as short as her brother’s, even though Lucy’s hair is the most treasured part of her body, as it brings her the attention she so desperately seeks. Frangie is “a nine-year-old girl whose own father had murdered her own mother . . . with his deathly stinginess . . . because he refused to pay for an operation that would have removed the cancerous lump in her uterus in time to save her” (44) – this description, which is one Lucy claims her mother repeats over and over to whomever wants to hear it on the phone, hints at “the othering of women” within the diaspora. At first, we can

assume that the treatment was perhaps too expensive, but later the narrative shows that Frangie's father kept both her and her mother locked in for the whole duration of the disease – further adding to the debate of violence and othering against the body of women within the diaspora. After that, the girl becomes Lucy's mother new “charity case” and is, therefore, invited to live with them and is called “cousin” out of politeness. Lucy's reaction portrays her as even more self-centered than most spoiled teen girls – she cannot fathom the fact that Frangie, a stranger up until then, could share everything in their home, and even sleep on her bed so she could experience a “warm and happy home life” (44) for once. She further expresses her anger by turning it towards her mother:

I wanted to wring my mother's neck and say, HELLO, what about your *real* daughter? What about her warmth and happiness and home life which you've so callously denied her and given to a total stranger who has a really weird name? I was supposed to feel sorry for Frangie just because her mother died (so what) and her father spent three months in a mental institution (who cared). (44-45)

As a reader, if I were to share my thoughts on Lucy after that rant, I would not be a good reader. Nevertheless, that is just the beginning of Lucy's narrative. And I believe it finds echo in Friedman's perception that home itself can be “the site of violence to the body” (“Bodies on the Move” 199). A teenager needs space to be able to develop identity – physical and affective space. If a home is constantly invaded by strangers, then it becomes a strange place, and strange reactions might occur. That being said, Lucy's reactions escalate, and the girls' relationship becomes increasingly manipulative and hurtful.

However, let me circle back to Lucy and her mother. It interests me here because I have covered in a previous section that a narrative which literary critics often criticize is that of the mother-daughter conflict, often present in Chinese immigrant narratives. While a mother-daughter

conflict indeed takes place in this story, I believe it goes beyond the stereotyped version of old China/mother versus modern US/daughter. In fact, Zhang seems to offer a re-reading of it, by presenting a drama of more psychological aspects, something Friedman calls “a complex interrogation of home and homeland as overlapping sites for violence against the female body” (“New Migration” 19). Despite her selfishness, Lucy is constantly being threatened by her mother due to Frankie’s presence. She feels alienated by her mother, who makes her feel guilty for being limited, as if “it wasn’t fair she had to love me no matter how obstinately stupid I was, or how I constantly frustrated her with my inability to comprehend what was beyond obvious. I’m sorry, I said to her in my head, all the time, but never in real life” (51). Lucy’s mother, an adult, should be able to embrace her daughter’s limitations as she is still maturing, but instead she is too focused on helping others. This, in turn, creates a vicious cycle of “othering of women”. Whenever Lucy tries to show affection for her mother, her mother reacts in a way that makes Lucy feel undesired. For instance, when noticing her mother had hurt her finger while sewing, Lucy shares that she “would follow her around and blow soft kisses at her finger, which irritated her . . . [and] made everything worse” (63), complaining about the gap this creates between them – up to the point she misses her mother despite them living in the same house.

Meanwhile her father and her brother, Eddie, are always busy studying and should not be bothered. “There’s a lot of homework for high schoolers”, her mother says of Eddie and later adds about her father: “your daddy is very busy right now. He’s studying for his exams so he can get a better job so we can move into a bigger house, remember?” (50-51). Unbeknownst to her, she might be the one raising Lucy to become so materialistic after all. Ultimately, while Lucy’s mother makes her feel inadequate, incorrigible, and small, with “her sudden bouts of impatience” (52) – effectively destroying the poorly constructed self-esteem the girl had – she turns to Frankie to keep

the cycle of hurt going. The threats she hears from her mother become threats she makes to Frangie, “like slipping some crushed-up poison into her soda” (49). The inadequacy imposed by her mother becomes inadequacy she imposes on Frangie, like when she orders the girl: “[do] not be such a little wimpy piece of hangers” (49). Eventually, Lucy just tells the girl, “You know, not everyone feels sorry for you” (49), to which Frangie responds with a painful smile before running towards her irresponsible father’s house.

At school, in trying to get the attention she does not get at home, Lucy uses the exoticizing gaze she gets from schoolmates to her advantage: “I was the best-looking girl in fourth grade. I had straight, long black hair that never tangled . . . the other girls . . . ran their fingers through my hair and told me they wished they could be me” (41), thus adding to the idea that “the othering of women” permeates this story in different ways. The only way she feels chosen is when she uses her body as a weapon to attract a boyfriend and the other girls’ admiration. In a stream-of-consciousness-like excerpt she is able to elaborate her complicated feelings – being self-centered while feeling abandoned, thus forced to use her body to get some sense of belongingness. While talking about her nightmares, Lucy understands herself and foreshadows the harrowing ending of the story:

a confused little girl who wanted someone to pay attention to you, to show you how to be a person because actually, if you really really looked long enough, if you really really didn’t look away, you’d see that you weren’t just a confused little girl desperate for attention, but a child who was in real danger of becoming someone no one would want to know, and even worse than that, what you feared the most was a day when no one could hear you cry for help, a day you must have been heading for your whole life because there had always been something about you that made it seem like you didn’t need any help, which was why your



mother reminded you so often of all the other needier, more deserving people in the world.  
(59-60)

As she goes on, she also points out how the absence of her father was terrifying and how she feared one day she would cry for help, and no one would hear and come to help her. Surely, it must be reminded that this is adult Lucy remembering these events – present evidence being the use of the “you”, as if adult Lucy is trying to explain to her-younger-self how the event was not only her fault. Even though she might have had similar nightmares, she can only elaborate her feelings on them now that she has matured. Nevertheless, the nightmare comes true for young Lucy. Under the (mis)guidance of a prematurely sexualized fellow student, a horrifying plan is conceived. Francine and Lucy devise a plot to have Jason, Lucy’s boyfriend, practice sex so that he can become good at it for Lucy. Who is he practicing with? A tied-up Frankie. Ironically, this echoes a threat made by Lucy’s mother earlier: “I’ll tie up your hands and shave your head bald” (48). The cycle of violence on the body of women comes full circle. In the final moments of the narration, Lucy realizes the predicament she is in, but it is too late – as she predicted, no one is near enough, physically or affectively, to rescue her. Even her brother, across the hall, shouts at them for making too much noise while he is trying to study. “But I’m here, I said to him in my head. I’m here, Eddie. ‘What if I needed you to know I’m here?’ I said in the smallest voice I had” (72), Lucy whimpers, having been diminished to her smallest self while under the control of Francine. It is then, albeit too late, that she sees Frankie is not so different from her, two diasporic girls who, alone, must deal with their sense of non-belongingness amid poorly structured families who are failing to guide them. “I felt a deep disappointment in myself that when I looked at Frankie on my bed, I could only picture myself. For a brief moment, I felt like I was going to puke but then Francine was in charge again and things started happening quickly” (70), Lucy adds. Finally, trying to comfort

Frangie, she keeps begging the abused girl to close her eyes, all the while imagining her own family and how distant they are, their eyes closed to the danger she is facing inside her own home.

“Frangie, please. Please close your eyes” (74), she pleases, as if also talking to herself.

“The othering of women” in this story is present in the mother-daughter relationship, albeit not as the stereotyped conflict discussed earlier – Lucy’s mother is worried about helping others in her community and sparing her husband and her son from any inconvenience but she fails to show the same care for her daughter for reasons seemingly unknown. Ultimately, Lucy continues the cycle of othering by repeatedly hurting Frangie’s affective body until it culminates in sexual abuse, which entails the othering of both physical and affective body. Frangie, who already carried the trauma of coming from a disrupted family in which “the othering of women” was present, will now carry a more haunting one. “The othering of women” happens within the diaspora, and it happens at home. Taking from Friedman once more, “no simple resolution to the problem of violation of the body’s borders, particularly the bodies of women” (“New Migration” 20) is presented here. The story ends as the character interrupts her recollection of such a traumatic event. The realizations have probably happened after it and are now included amid the memories. The reader is left to wonder what happens next. But as the title suggests, emptiness might have taken over.

### 4.3. “My Days and Nights of Terror”

Mande starts her narration by commenting on how everyone knows or suffered at the hand of a bully in school. She introduces the topic in order to highlight what seems to be the main plot of her story, so much so that we learn the name of her bully prior to learning her own name:

That someone who ruined my health, whose very existence diminished me, the girl who literally chased after me like a poacher desperate for ivory tusks or a ravenous wolf about to pounce on a poor little rabbit, for me, that person, that fatal cancer, that bloodthirsty wolf, that greedy cutthroat poacher was Fanpin Hsieh . . . She considered me her best friend and I considered her my worst nightmare come to life. (179-180)

This ill-fated one-sided friendship begins because the girls’ mothers are friends, and when Mande’s mother goes to Fanpin’s mother’s house to catch up, the girls are forced to interact. And it is in this context, introduced much later in the narrative, that we learn about the underlying narrative. “I’d see Fanpin now and then, weekends when my mom’s face was more or less unbruised, she’d bring me over and I mostly sat around, shy and unwilling to leave my mother’s side” (191), Mande says, subtly letting us know of the violence suffered by her mother.

However, before delving into this matter, this story brings up some other interesting issues I will cover first. For instance, their alien status. When giving us a physical description of Fanpin, she says she looks like an alien, but admits that she was an alien too, since they all checked the same box in every immigration form, Fanpin herself an immigrant from Taiwan. She jokingly asks if aliens have unalienable rights or whether they are entitled to liberty and justice (180), but many points in the story prove that they do not. One such moment comes when her father is explaining the origins of her American name:

She'll go by Mandee here, my father said, and just like that, I was renamed. I would have two names, just like all the other Chinese people in America did, just like how my father went by Jerry and my mother went by Susan so that people didn't have to refer to them as 张建军 and 陆诗雨. . . My father said they needed "American" names on their resumes when applying for jobs; they had to have names that were pronounceable to white American English speakers because they already had faces that were considered vile to look at and who was going to hire someone with their faces *and* their names? I thought my mother and my father had beautiful faces but my father corrected me, Not in America. We're ugly, and it's that simple. They look at us and think we're cretins. You think they like us going to their schools? You think they're okay with us working in their offices? Taking their jobs? You think they're happy to pick up laundry and takeout from businesses we've opened up? You think they want to go to the corner store and see our eyes and our teeth and our skin looking back at them from behind the counter? No! They don't want us here. They don't want to look at us and they sure as hell don't want to have to try to pronounce our Chinese names. (212-213)

Despite it being a long section, I find it echoes the ideas presented by Friedman in "New Migration" when she states that "the rhetorics of American cosmopolitanism and pluralism – *e pluribus unum*, the melting pot, the glorious mosaic, the rainbow, the callaloo, the stir-fry, the quilt, and so forth" (17) can be easily countered with the prevailing racial tensions towards "people of color" – no matter the positive image the United States has been trying to create and sell, its history and its general population still reserve a gaze towards the Other that is not positive at all. That, added to Mande's father rant above, further supports Noda's belief that the diasporic subject which is not

white will have to deal with their identities being defined from the outside by people who are often ignorant.

Another issue evidenced in Mande's narration is that of language. Starting with the spelling of her name, which, due to fear and a sense of inadequacy, ended up being spelled with just one *e*, instead of the originally intended *Mandee*, on her first day of school (213). This mistake on the very first day, she says, makes her feel like "a failure right from the start" (213). The way she inflects sentences also revealed her "alien soul" (182), and not even members of other Asian diasporas respected that. She complains that being bullied because of her linguistic difficulties was made "even worse" when the Korean girls joined in the mockery,

because most of them also spoke English with an accent, and there was something so undignified about having someone torment you for something they themselves were probably tormented for a year or two ago. It made me think the whole world was vicious. No one had it in them to have a heart for anyone, not even themselves, or at least, not the selves they once were that other people still had to be. (203)

In here, clearly expressing her difficulties in having an identity shaped from the outside, she also points to the irony behind being taunted by the Korean kids, who, like her, probably struggled with adaptation and language learning as well. Nevertheless, this group was the best at tormenting her for linguistic reasons, because they knew too well Mande's Achilles' heel. During an argument with the Korean girls, while pleading for some compassion, she states the hybridity of her linguistic situation: "I don't come home and say, 'Mom, I'm home!' I say, 'Wo hui lai le ma ma.' I say, '妈妈, 我回来了'" (204). Her home self and her social self are still not connected. And as a divided girl, she becomes an easy target for tormentors.

Circling back to her bully, one day she is pulled into the girls' bathroom and forced to touch Fanpin's breast – a sexually charged assertion of power – while also told not to wash her hands or she will get a beating. When seeing Fanpin's hand rising to strike her, she flinches, claiming “It was an all too familiar gesture” (206), a gesture she had seen at home one too many times. Her father would often end arguments “by striking her [mother] in the face or grabbing her arm so hard” (188) that she would spend nights afflicted by the images and noises connected to these fights. She points out the irony of her overprotective parents looking for ways to shield her from the dangers of the world while not even trying to protect her from hearing their fights. “If I somehow escaped drugs, pregnancy, pimps, and gangbangers, then I would still have to deal with my parents” (184), she concludes rather ironically, trying to face her fears. One of her fears being that she might be the burden that keeps her mother in such predicament:

I was hiding in the bathroom, listening in on our moms talking about all the things that oppressed them. I waited for my mom to reveal that, in fact, I was one of the things in her life that kept her from being happy . . . that I was the primary cause of her imprisonment. But they only ever spoke about the shortcomings of our fathers, or how this place was worse than anything they had ever experienced in China. (200)

On learning that her father's empty promises and America are the main problem, not her, Mande complains that “if America was so terrible”, it is questionable that they had brought her to this hell, a place where she is forced to deal with all kinds of violence.

Her family's cycle of violence, nevertheless, has its roots in historical events, I believe. Much like Annie's and Stacey's families, Mande's family carries deeply rooted trauma from events back in China's Cultural Revolution. One evening, after an unwelcomed Jehovah's Witnesses visit, Mande's father starts a long rant about the lack of God when her mother's grandfather was tortured.

While he describes in raw details the kind of torture inflicted on teachers during the Cultural Revolution, I could not help but think having witnessed such horrid scenes had some effect on the violent person he became. Once more, another of Zhang's story echoes Friedman when she says that the violence perpetrated by the state passes down through generations of traumatized bodies. Another aspect of the torture emphasized by Mande's father is that it went beyond the physical body as the group of Red Guards

took all his paintings and dumped them in the river. They burned his books and ripped up his scrolls . . . They literally torched his family history that had been scrupulously recorded and passed down for generations. In a matter of minutes, it was all lost. Forever . . . He had no paper to write on. He was a poet without paper! His home was emptied of beauty. (194-95)

I believe what the father is trying to communicate here is that, by erasing this teacher's culture and history, they are effectively ending the whole of his identity, not just his body. None of this justifies the violence he inflicts on his wife, and indirectly on Mande, but it does represent well Friedman's belief. This particular cycle of violence becomes a sort of Ouroboros, the snake that eats its own tail, as seen from Mande's description below:

He would grab her by her throat or twist her arm or hit her in the face until she was quiet. She would grab a knife from the kitchen and say that she was going to stab him to death and then herself . . . I would hate him for hating her and then I would hate her for hating him. Then I would hate myself for not protecting my mother and then I would hate my mother for needing me to protect her, and then I would hate my father for causing my mother to need that protection, and finally, I would hate them both for insisting that the person who really needed protection was me. (220)

Violence leads to hate and hate leads to an abyss between the members of Mande's family. The violence on her affective body taking place at home is nothing compared to how blinded her parents are, and in their blindness, they fail to see she is becoming a victim of violence against her physical body within their own community. She complains once again that "no matter how much they tried to see and anticipate and prevent all the things that could hurt me, in the end, [they] had no idea what truly frightened me" (218).

This whole predicament also has Mande question her own ancestry. She feels she should be better at defending herself considering her bloodline: "If I was descended from people who found a way to belong anywhere, it didn't show. If I came from adventurers and poets who lived for themselves and resisted captivity, those qualities must have skipped me. I was an embarrassment to my bloodline" (209). This is yet another instance in which violence makes her feel like she does not belong, makes her question her own identity and origins.

Going back to Fanpin's attack, Mande takes a stand and fights back, successfully evading her abuser's punch by throwing hers first to both their surprises: "I shot one fist straight out and punched her . . . I swear to God Fanpin met my eye with what looked almost like respect and then dropped down to the ground" (210). Nevertheless, as Mande points out, "There was no way to be free in this world . . . And to be safe? Forget it" (207), she adds foreshadowing the event that ends her narrative. Her bully plot, which seemed to be the main one, is over on page 210. However, what seemed to be a secondary plot becomes the main focus. The gendered violence in her nuclear family comes to a shocking conclusion in the final paragraphs.

During an unusual road trip, since her parents are often too busy with work, an argument between Mande's parents breaks out over frivolities. As a consequence, her father forces her



mother to leave the car in the middle of the road and drives away, abandoning her, to the shock of both Mande and the reader:

My father swerved across the two lanes to his right, parked in the emergency shoulder lane, took his hands off the steering wheel, opened the passenger seat door, and pushed my mother out of the car.

“Get out,” he said. “This isn’t your car. You didn’t pay for any part of it.”

“建军,” my mother said. (233)

It all happens very fast and then the story is cut short. Once more, it leaves the reader with more questions than answers. In the final lines, Mande keeps hoping for her father to regain common sense and drive back to pick up her mother, but, as the final word is written, their fates are left open ended. “The othering of women” within their diaspora reaches home. “The safety of familiar territory” (“Bodies on the Move” 204), as Friedman argues, is not sacred.

#### 4.4. “We Love You Crispina” / “You Fell into the River and I Saved You!”

In the first short-story, “We Love You Crispina”, we follow Cristina’s narration, which does not shy away from depicting raw and shocking images of First-Generation Chinese immigrants’ lives in 1990s New York while keeping the tone too light-hearted for such depictions. The very first lines are as follow:

Back when my parents and I lived in Bushwick in a building sandwiched between a drug house and another drug house, the only difference being that the dealers in the one drug house were also the users and so more unpredictable, and in the other the dealers were never the users and so more shrewd—back in those days, we lived in a one-bedroom apartment so subpar that we woke up with flattened cockroaches in our bedsheets, sometimes three or four stuck on our elbows, and once I found fourteen of them pressed to my calves, and there was no beauty in shaking them off, though we strove for grace, swinging our arms in the air as if we were ballerinas. (3)

This almost too jovial manner continues throughout the book and creates a contrast – while the events being narrated might be too much to endure, they are told by a young woman revisiting her childhood, whose younger version is trying hard to see it all through a more positive, colorful lens. Cristina herself points out in the beginning: “we liked recasting our world in a more beautiful, melodious light” (5). The “recasting”, once more, echoes Friedman’s belief that being “away from home engenders fictionalizing memories of the past and dreams of the future” (“Bodies on the Move” 195), so that the subjects can more easily deal with the harsh reality of dislocation. This “beautiful, melodious light”, however, does not comfort the reader when topics such as excrements, rape, domestic violence, and other types of abuse, surface on the pages of *Sour Heart*, as we have

seen. The title of the book itself alludes to this disturbing sensation – according to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, sour means “having a sharp acid taste, like the taste of a lemon or a fruit that is not ready to be eaten” and it is also the opposite of sweet. Cristina being the character whose title is connected to (she and her mother “both love eating sour things” (28), granting her the nicknames sour girl, sours, sour candy, sour grape, sour gummy, sourheart, etc.), and the only character to be featured in two stories (while always being referred to in other stories since the stories are a part of the same shared universe), should function as a warning to the reader of the sharp acid aftertaste her stories, and those of the other characters, will leave – no matter how sweet, or humorous, or absent-minded the narrators seem. Despite the tone, Cristina’s narrative is perhaps the most complex because many of the issues only found scattered in the other stories are present in “You Fell into the River and I Saved You!”.

Tensions between different immigrant groups arise throughout the book, especially Chinese versus Koreans, which recurs in different stories but more prominently in “My Days and Nights of Terror”, in which, as we have seen, Mande is mocked by Koreans who go to the same school just because of her struggles with the English language. The irony of it all is striking. But, in “We Love You Crispina”, the reason why Cristina hated being mistaken for Koreans, which happened a lot, was the fact they were horrible to everyone in the neighborhood:

Our neighbors were island people from Martinique and Trinidad and Tobago. A couple of them confronted my father one evening to set the record straight that they weren’t Dominicans. We’re West Indians, they said. Tell your kids that. My father came home confused by the entire interaction, but later my mom and I figured they must have been referring to those asshole Korean kids who lived a little ways down from us and hung around outside their apartments wearing baseball caps with the bill unbent and pants that

sagged around their knees, calling out whatever pitiful insults they could think of . . . Those Korean kids were goons who were going to end up dead or incarcerated or dead one day, and my parents and I loathed them and loathed being confused or associated with them just because to everyone else in our neighborhood, we were the same. (5-6)

This excerpt highlights the fact that not only Americans, but also other immigrant groups, tended to place Chinese and Korean immigrants under the same Asian umbrella – “to everyone else in our neighborhood, we were the same”, Cristina complains. Nevertheless, she still highlights the despise from “rich white people” towards her community when telling the reader about a father who had to work two jobs to take care of his family, one of which was delivering “Chinese food to rich white people who hated us but loved our food” (35), echoing Mande’s father speech I have covered in the previous sub-section, and the theory discussed in section two, particularly Kesaya Noda’s statement on how it feels being defined from the outside by ignorant people.

Cristina’s narrative also brings to the surface the debate on assimilation – Friedman argues that the “new migration”, particularly the one into North America, is not a matter of “clash of civilizations”, but “far more about the failures of integration, especially into educational, economic, political, and cultural institutions” (“New Migration” 11). The fact that the diasporic awareness of many immigrants has been strengthened by the new technologies in travel and communication, thus increasing the levels of cultural retention, is not the only reason why some “reject assimilation” (“New Migration” 10) or resist integration into the United States. A very important aspect that Friedman defends is that “migrants push for greater access to educational, economic, and political integration” (“New Migration” 11), and when the hostland, in this case the United States, fails to provide such demands due to its own resistance to accepting migrants of color, the effect is that the racialized, stigmatized, segregated groups will, naturally, respond by trying to “preserve

homeland language and cultural practices” (“New Migration” 11). Cristina observes that in her surroundings, and while initially positing that it is an issue, she admits to changing her view on it later in life:

The Martinicans and the Trinidadians were the kind of people who acted like their homeland would always form a small, missing, and necessary bone in their bodies that caused them ghostly aches for as long as they were alive and away from home, and it bothered me how they clung to their pasts and acted like bygone times were better than what was happening in the here and now. They were always having cookouts in the summer and dressing in bright colors as if our streets were lined with coconut-bearing palm trees and not trash and cigarette butts and spilled food. Eventually though, I came to admire them greatly. (Zhang 6)

At first, for Cristina, it seems silly to try to retain the culture, much like the Martinicans and the Trinidadians in her neighborhood would do. However, as the character matures, she changes her mind. Another moment in which she questions herself on that matter is after an observation made by her father while they were watching *Gone with the Wind*:

My father remarked to my mother, “These people will never let go of the past, will they?” and I didn’t know if he meant the white people in the movie or the black people, but I knew we were not “these people” and to my parents that was a good thing, but I wasn’t so sure. (20)

Her father seems to be implying that not letting go of the past – especially a traumatic one if we assume he is commenting on the African-American subjects from the movie – is a bad thing, perhaps even a burden when trying to move on. In turn, we can assume he is an advocate of assimilation. Cristina, on the other hand, states that she is not so sure. Two readings are possible

here. The first is that Cristina is not so sure that letting go of the past is good – as she grows, remembering and revisiting the past become necessary to better understand who she is, her sense of self hanging in the balance, thus echoing Friedman on the importance of memory to write the narrative of identity (“Bodies on the Move” 206), as well as Nora on the relevance of literature where memory and history come together (24).

The second is that she is not so sure that *not* being white nor black is a good thing – which echoes the historical invisibility of the Asian diasporic subject in the racial debate in the United States. If they are neither black nor white, what cultural representation will there be of them, in a culture where the racial debate has been binary for years? This parallels Noda’s vexation when she says she wanted to find a black feminist or a white feminist and her mother was neither (97) – having had access to scholars who were either black or white, she could not see her Japanese mother as a source of strength in this particular debate. In sum, while the first reading points to the importance of memory, the second reading points to the importance of representation.

Cristina’s father is the source of another remark that has Cristina question his views and her own. Having brought Cristina to spend time with him at one of his jobs, a language arts teacher at a poor middle school in East New York, Mr. Zhang is upset when he finds that his students, who adored his daughter, made her a banner that read “WE LOVE YOU CRISPINA” (which explains the title of the story) to make the girl happy. On noticing the typo, he dismisses the students by saying: “It’s just so typical of these kids . . . They don’t care about doing things right. They have no standards” (22-23). To which Cristina responds with an inner monologue:

“Oh yeah,” I said, even as something soured inside me (and not in the delicious way) like it always did whenever my dad talked like that, as if he was so sure. Didn’t it bother him that he was teaching his students poetry when he was certain it wouldn’t make a difference

in how their lives turned out? Didn't it bother him to be so sure that it was futile to even try? And what about us? What standards did we have? Weren't our fates sealed as well? What was I ever going to become? What stopped other people from looking at us and pitying us, how we didn't see the pointlessness in working so many jobs, moving from one shit place to another and scrimping on pennies, how we couldn't face the reality of our situation: that none of this was leading up to anywhere that was any different from where we had just been. (23)

Her words convey her disagreement over her father's condescending belief that his students were perhaps limited, inferior and pre-determined to fail, while at the same time they suggest that she has come to the realization that this was how others perceived them – Cristina and her family, subjects to be pitied.

In addition to this misguided realization, another tension that clouds young Cristina's judgement is that she is unable to envision herself advancing further than the level of her parents – both in terms of the English language, and, more subconsciously, in terms of achieving success in life in general:

“What makes you happy makes Mommy happy,” she would always say to me, sometimes in Chinese, which I wasn't so good at, but I tried for her and for my father, and when I couldn't, I would answer them in English, which I also wasn't so good at, but it was understood that while I could still improve in either language, my parents could not, they were on a road to nowhere, the wall was right up against them, so it was up to me to get really good, it was up to me to shine and that scared me because I wanted to stay behind with them, I didn't want to go any further than they could go. (6-7)

The separation anxiety she foresees and wrestles with – as she believes she will assimilate whereas her parents will unavoidably stay behind – adds to her sense of guilt. She describes it as “an oozy desire to come up with all the ways I could possibly sacrifice enough to catch up to my parents, who were always sacrificing” (7) – so while she fears they will not catch up with her evolution, she also fears she will never catch up with the sacrifices they have made, thus feeling a paralyzing guilt. Such guilt resonates with filial piety, and of all characters depicted by Zhang in *Sour Heart*, Cristina is the one who struggles with it the most. Nevertheless, it is a contradictory sense of guilt, as the sacrifices made by her parents were done so that she could have better opportunities and evolve beyond them.

Apart from the racial tensions, the questions regarding assimilation, and the crippling sense of guilt, Young Cristina’s problems also stem from squalid living conditions and constantly moving from one impoverished neighborhood to another, sometimes sharing a single room with multiple migrant families. As discussed earlier in this research, some of the families portrayed fared slightly better than Cristina’s. Her situation in New York is marked by descriptions as haunting as the one I used in the beginning of the section. Another example she mentions is an apartment “in Ocean Hill that would have been perfect except for the nights when rats ran over our faces while we were sleeping and even on the nights they didn’t, we were still being charged twice the cost of a shitty motel just to stay there” (16).

On top of all that, we discover that Cristina’s father cheats on her mother, which was not a secret, “it was just one of those arrangements where one person got what she wanted at everyone else’s expense,” (10) Cristina explains. Later she adds that her mother never complained about it and often reassured her that they were still the ones he came home to, adding that: “he still loved



us more than anyone else, we were still his number-one girls” (11). However, the day comes when this certainty is shattered:

. . . when my father didn’t come home for dinner because he was with his girlfriend, which meant my mom and I had nothing to eat because my dad had all the cash we had left and he was supposed to come back with food for us. The two of us went hungry that evening, our stomachs aching at first from hunger, then from laughing, then again from hunger, and then later when we went to sleep we heard each other sniffling but it was the sort of night when neither of us could be moved to console the other and that was when the great depressed hollow opened up between us and remained for the duration of the night. (29-30)

This kind of abandonment is yet another level of “the othering of women” in Zhang’s stories. Later, Cristina’s mother finally takes action by telling her father, ““You’re the reason why we suffer. You’re the reason we live like this and I can’t do it anymore”” (30). However, the chain of events following this argument leads to a path Cristina becomes extremely resentful of – her parents decide they will send her back to China until they are able to stand on their own feet and provide for the girl. Reluctant, she argues they should not be sending her “back to that hellhole of a place” (36), and even jumps into the Harlem River in order to escape being sent back to China, where she will be away from her parents, who are her only solace. She only finds comfort between them – both physically when they share old mattresses on the floor of apartments, and affectively when they give her the only sense of self she knows – so when the separation she has always feared becomes a fact, it throws her into a downward spiral. What identity is left for her to hold on to when separation is imminent?

“I want to stay here. It’s not enough. Don’t give me away.”

“We haven’t given you up,” my mother said. “It’s only temporary. It’s going to be as short as possible. It was only ever going to be the smallest amount of time.”

I felt her shivering, and I felt myself fading out . . . my mom and my dad and I were huddled together promising each other things that could never be. (40)

Cristina describes feeling as if she were “fading out”, her *self* disappearing, indeed, vanishing into the waters of the Harlem River as her parents’ promises that they would soon be back together sounded like nothing but impossible.

In “You Fell into the River and I Saved You!”, Cristina, now a grown-up, rememorates seven different family reunions and the brief interactions with relatives she would only sporadically see on such occasions, while diving deeper in questions about coming to a sense of self. This story also brings the book full circle, as it introduces Emily, Cristina’s younger sister who was born in the United States and was lucky enough to not have experienced the drama Cristina had to go through, and who now, as a young adult, gets to experience a much improved and gentrified New York, with less violence and racial tensions in areas where there was so much of when Cristina was growing. During a walk around the areas they used to live, a shocked Emily reacts to prices they had to pay for barely legal living conditions in the 90s: “‘How’s that even possible?’ Emily said. I didn’t know either how any of it had been possible. It was one thing to live through it, it was another to remember” (288). Cristina seems to be commenting on the fact that it is one thing to live trauma, but a completely different one to remember it.

The sense of guilt is also very present in this ending – what has she become? Is she still, like her parents, too Chinese? Has she assimilated well and become perhaps too American? If she cannot answer those questions, were her parents’ sacrifices in vain? Cristina dwells on these issues for most of her narrative and as an adult she does not seem to come to terms with it. On the contrary,

her visits to China only complicate the matter, seeing that she is expected to be Chinese among her family, but fails to do so, considering their Chinese standards:

I was sullen from the shock of not knowing the place where I was from. Everyone stared at me when I went outside. Waiters and shopkeepers asked my mom if I was deaf or dumb or mute or just plain stupid when I took too long to answer their questions . . . I was overwhelmed by it all, and I didn't want anyone to pity me or laugh at me or throw their hands up in the air at the absurdity of a Chinese person who couldn't speak Chinese. I didn't want to promise to learn Chinese perfectly because I still needed people in America to look at me and know instantly that I spoke perfect English instead of looking at me and assuming that I didn't know how just because I was quiet. I took my parents at their word when they said my time in China was temporary, and if it was temporary, then I wasn't going to commit to being a Chinese person in China when I already had so much trouble being a Chinese person back home. (279-80)

Through this confession, Cristina voices her difficulty in being Chinese both in China and in the United States, echoing Friedman's statement that "both home and elsewhere," no matter where she travels and relocates, "are sites of dislocation" ("Bodies on the Move" 191).

Ultimately, it is still through the recollection of the days when she was forced to sleep between her parents in overcrowded squalid apartments in New York, while struggling with bleeding itches and bugs, that she finds some sense of self and belongingness: "How did we end up with such a sour girl? How did we get so lucky? they'd say, clearing away the frantic voices of who I thought I was supposed to be, and though I knew it wouldn't last forever, I stayed between them until I remembered who I was again and no longer felt lonely" (300-01). This goes to show that having her parents as her sole constant in these in-between spaces, the countless apartments

in New York, has molded her sense of self more than it should have, thus creating a rift in her identity when she is forced to be without them. Friedman says that through “writing about what has been lost in leaving and what has been gained in moving from place to place” (“Bodies on the Move” 206), one can create home, and come to a sense of self – and perhaps that is what Cristina is doing, through the act of remembering. On her level of success in such attempt, I will quote Cristina herself, when she says that there is no such thing as failure, “only starting over a million times and then some” (13).

## 5. Conclusion

In the introduction, inspired by Kesaya Noda's essay, I began with the question "How does one define oneself?". As we have seen throughout this research, this question matters a lot when one is defined by others based on one's outside appearance. Hybridity and gender in diasporic subjects complicate matters even further. One of the many clippings from newspapers and online media that I highlighted during the introduction presented another question Asian-Americans have been asking themselves: "How much have cultural stereotypes that cast them – especially women – as weak or submissive played a role in turning them into targets?". As discussed, stereotypical depictions of Asian Americans throughout history have established them, in the eyes of the white American, as the unassimilable and undesired Other, while literary portrayals of these diasporic subjects have sometimes failed to rebut such negative stereotypes, and other times helped to create even new ones. The "Lotus Blossom" Noda refers to in her essay is an example of stereotype that might have been responsible for turning Asian-American women into targets amid the ongoing pandemics. It portrays women of Asian descent as an object of desire – the exotic beauty, the subservience, and the lack of agency are characteristics that make them both desirable and easily disposable. Therefore, it is imperative that we break with the past and its stereotypical portrayals of these subjects.

Yamashita has dived herself into years of research in order to explore her Japanese diasporic group's hybridity and its representations. Meanwhile, Zhang claims to use her own experiences as a Chinese-American immigrant, as well as the accounts of historical events shared by her ancestors, to create fiction that resonates truth. Much like historiographers or ethnographers – who write about or describe a group of people, race or nation –, before sitting down and making

literature, Yamashita has been a dedicated researcher and Zhang has been a powerful observer. Why? What purpose does it serve literature when an author dives into history, trying to understand people with their customs, habits and idiosyncrasies, like Yamashita, or trying to comprehend how trauma can influence a person or even generations of a community, like Zhang? And what is the benefit for history when a writer collects data and fictionalizes a period of time, or the backgrounds of a diaspora?

“We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left” (7), Nora claims in his “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire”, justifying it by stating that “[a]n increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good” (7) surrounds us with what he calls “[t]he acceleration of History” (7). This acceleration of history, according to Nora, has connections with the “movement toward democratization and mass culture on a global scale” (7). The real environments of memory and collective memory itself no longer exist. Due to the fast rhythm life has gained after industrial development, and now technological advances, ours is “a society deeply absorbed in its transformation and renewal, one that inherently values the new over the ancient, the young over the old, the future over the past” (12). Nora then justifies the origins of the hybrid term *lieux de mémoire*, explored in section 2.1, by claiming that we no longer have “spontaneous memory, [so] . . . we must deliberately create archives” (12) to protect us from vanishing in the fast-paced history, thus losing the sense of self and identity.

Memory in itself, much like literature, carries an unreliable aspect; history has a pedagogical value, but it distances itself from all the colors of life – after all, *story-truth* is truer than *happening-truth*. *Lieux de mémoire* is the best of both: it organizes and archives memory while keeping its colors, its appeal. Yamashita and Zhang, through their books, do the same. By making the best use of literature to combine memory and history, Yamashita uses a unique hybrid

genre to transform the cycle she covers of the Japanese diaspora into an even more powerful documentation than it would have been if it were a history book, while Zhang uses the first-person narrations of Chinese Americans rememorating their transition from girlhood to womanhood to expose and try to work through their traumas. The stories reverberate truth and emotion, whereas, perhaps, just facts would not have done it so powerfully. Even individuals with similar historical backgrounds will experience their hybridity in different manners, with different levels of serenity. The authors build a diverse and nuanced portrayal of women within their diasporas, which lack historical and memorial documentation, through compelling books. Thus, through the mixture of literature and history, memory can be elevated to story-truth, or Art that makes us understand the truth.

Ultimately, as I bring it all together, the convergence of memory and history, as presented by Pierre Nora in the hybrid in-between term *les lieux de mémoire*, adds legitimacy to the literary works of Yamashita and Zhang, further corroborating the relevance of literary representation. As Yamashita and Zhang present readers with narratives of ordinary people going through extraordinary ordeals, they do so in order to prevent the diasporic communities they represent from becoming an indistinguishable and unimportant mass of people, who would otherwise become easy targets of stereotyping, all the while saving them from vanishing with the acceleration of history. An exercise in literature, in history, and in memory, which renders *Circle K Cycles* and *Sour Heart* an importance that deserves to be discussed.

Nora notes that “the *lieux de mémoire* is double: a site of excess closed upon itself, concentrated in its own name, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations” (24). *Circle K Cycles* and *Sour Heart* are *lieux de mémoire* preserved by Karen Tei Yamashita and

Jenny Zhang, respectively – full of excess, condensed in nuances, and therefore open to many possible interpretations.

In conclusion, *Circle K Cycles* and *Sour Heart*, through the narratives and struggles of the Asian-American women they portray, support the need for shattering stereotypes that have long been related to their subjects. Despite the time gap of sixteen years separating them, the two works address issues that are sadly very current in our present society, since the undesirability attached to Asian diasporic subjects is still ingrained in American society, and the supposed vulnerability Asian women have been connected with make them targets. Asian women's diasporic writing, which, according to Friedman, helps understand the "new migration" as it gains more ground within diverse areas of society; also gradually encourages the need to deconstruct the stereotypes which affect so many lives.

In my investigation I aimed at examining the literary representation of the diasporic women characters in Yamashita's *Circle K Cycles* and Zhang's *Sour Heart*, in order to determine whether or not the authors were able to refute stereotypes connected with Asian-American narratives and women. Following the hybridity and "the othering of women" present in their works and trying to connect the analysis with appropriate theoretical framework, the present Master's Thesis concludes that the nuanced portrayal of Japanese-Brazilian and Chinese-American women as well as the deconstruction of old stereotypical narratives connected to the Asian diaspora are not only present, but also reiterate the importance of literature in shedding light on the issues of Asian American diasporic women.



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