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Landscape and Trial in Choi's *American Woman*

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Abstract

The proliferation of critical literary scholarship in Asian American studies raises questions over the boundaries of Asian America. This paper continues the study of Asian American identity by comparing Asian American identity formation between sites of landscape and interrogation in Susan Choi's 2003 novel *American Woman*. Building upon Sarika Chandra and Chris Chen's conceptualization of race in *Totality Inside Out: Rethinking Crisis and Conflict Under Capital* (2022), this paper argues that landscape is a relational object where class and racial boundaries are produced and reproduced. This paper examines how protagonist Jenny Shimada's Japanese American identity and personal history emerges through Choi's descriptions of the American landscape. While the expansiveness and remoteness of the landscape in *American Woman* seems to facilitate a "breathing space" for subjects where the material constraints and pressures enforcing racial boundaries are temporarily lessened, this space is ultimately illusory. Simultaneously, while outcomes of legal trial in *American Woman* reinforce racial differences, they also give way to moments of interracial and interclass solidarity.

Keywords: Asian American Studies, Identity, Landscape, Marxism, Race

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Susan Choi's novel *American Woman* (2003) is set in the mid-1970s, and it is a fictional retelling of the Symbionese Liberation Army's (SLA) 1974 kidnapping of white newspaper heiress Patricia (Patty) Hearst. The novel's protagonist, Jenny Shimada, a twenty-five-year-old Japanese American woman, is based on Wendy Yoshimura, a Japanese American watercolor painter and former member of the SLA. Yoshimura was found hiding with Patty Hearst and SLA members William and Emily Harris, and eventually sentenced for conspiring to bomb buildings and for the unlawful possession of weapons (Hoge). In *American Woman*, Jenny watches over a young group of revolutionary fugitives, Juan, Yvonne, and Pauline (based on Patty), as they hide in a rural farmhouse in upstate New York after police discover and kill their comrades. Choi's *American Woman* fictionalizes what happens during the "lost year," the year the SLA members and Patty go into hiding, of which there is little public record. Near the end of the lost year, Jenny and Pauline attempt to escape the detection of authorities after Juan and Yvonne's robbery of a bank ends in murder (Yeh 209).

Part 1 and Part 2 of the novel take place mostly in small, rural towns in New York, where Jenny and the young fugitives hide in a farmhouse and Jenny is tasked with encouraging them to start their book manuscript, a project intended to explain the fugitives' revolutionary cause and make a profit. Part 3 and Part 4 of the novel moves beyond New York as Pauline and Jenny drive across the U.S. and eventually wind their way back to California. The novel ends after Jenny and Pauline's arrest and conviction; following Jenny's release from prison, Jenny and her father attend a reunion at the Manzanar internment camp site in Owens Valley, where her father was previously incarcerated during WWII. As the novel moves geographically, Choi describes in close detail how the landscape changes, with long, frequent descriptions of landscape and Jenny's impression of it: vistas of the Sierra Nevada mountains, the Hudson River, the Owens Valley Desert.

Landscape in *American Women* establishes a sense of surround, a sense of vastness and totality that provides temporary, although perhaps illusory, relief for its characters. In the rural land that Jenny and Pauline drive through during their time "underground," distanced from urban centers and undocumented by public record, the social boundaries between Jenny and Pauline seemingly begin to unravel. The characters feel both seen and unseen, highly visible and invisible inside the expansiveness of landscape. Jenny processes her identity in part through her changing positionality in the landscape around her; in this way, the landscape in *American Woman* becomes a relational object that Choi uses to map changes in boundaries across race and class.

This paper situates itself alongside Sarika Chandra and Chris Chen's conceptualization of race. In *Totality Inside Out: Rethinking Crisis and Conflict Under Capital* (2022), Chandra and Chen build upon Michael Dawson's concept of "linked fate" to conceptualize race beyond "identity" and stable, fixed notions of group consciousness (167). Race as "linked fate" reframes race as relational and dynamic instead of isolable, with racial boundaries being "produced and reproduced within relational fields" by "capitalist processes over time" (Chandra and Chen 167). For Chandra and Chen, race maps onto, but does not determine, various interconnected and shared material conditions among groups. Rather than being the cause or explanation for racism, or the justification for a unified political stance, the concept of race is constantly being "produced and reproduced," reflective of shifting and overlapping material boundaries. In

Choi's *American Woman*, landscape and trial are two sites of struggle where racial identity is negotiated. This paper argues that the landscape relaxes the "relational field" for characters, where material constraints and pressures enforcing racial boundaries are temporarily lessened but not eliminated, whereas interrogative forces reinforce racial hierarchies and the logic of racialization aligned with capitalist accumulation. However, the two forces each have dual effects; the opportunities for escape and separation that landscape promises are illusory, and trial can give way to moments of genuine interracial class solidarity.

American Woman follows the historical record of Patty Hearst's kidnapping closely, with characters mostly mapping onto various historical figures. The SLA was an armed radical group that formed in 1973 in Oakland, CA following the fragmentation of the New Left, a movement of radical and anti-war activists that protested the Vietnam War (Malkki). The New Left emerged after World War II, and differentiated itself from the Old Left movement prior to World War II with its focus on social issues and civil rights. The SLA took its name from the word "symbiosis," meaning mutually beneficial relationships among multiple groups (Cummings and Sayles 491). Although originally envisioned as a multicultural coalition and founded by Donald DeFreeze, a Black escaped convict, the majority of SLA members were young white people (Cummings and Sayles 486). The SLA is known for the 1973 murder of Marcus Foster, an Oakland School Superintendent, the 1974 kidnapping of Patty Hearst, and other instances of "bank robberies, bombings, attempted bombings, stickups, shoplifting, and automobile theft" (Cummings and Sayles 493). After Hearst's kidnapping, Hearst publicly aligned herself with the SLA. She was sentenced for her involvement in the SLA and participation in bombings, but her sentence was commuted, and she was later pardoned.

Interestingly, the SLA borrowed its ideology from both the Marxist rhetoric of the New Left and the rhetoric of the criminal justice movement in the 1960s and 1970s. For instance, the SLA referenced the writings of George Lester Jackson, a prison activist and co-founder of the Black Guerrilla Family (Cummings and Sayles). Additionally, the SLA's principles were "copied verbatim from black nationalist Ron Karenga's US (United Slaves) Organization" (Cummings and Sayles 491). The SLA's founding raises questions on how group language can be repurposed and co-opted, and how revolutionary and emancipatory rhetoric flows between organizations that disagree and conflict with one another under the "atomizing and combinatory force of capitalist competition" (Chandra and Chen 163).

Although Choi's *American Woman* follows closely the historical events of Hearst's kidnapping and Japanese internment during WWII, it seems most interested in telling what is not a part of public history, and how events become lost from the production of public knowledge. The novel's focus on Jenny, most likely the titular "American woman," already counters mainstream media narratives on Hearst's kidnapping and SLA activity, where the focus is on Hearst. Choi's descriptions of landscape situate Jenny as a fugitive in the world, in the literal and metaphorical sense, by evoking invisibility and lostness. Jenny is first introduced as a radical fugitive who is hiding from state authorities after being involved in the bombings of empty government buildings with her arrested lover, William. She moves to Rhinecliff, New York, where she assumes the Chinese name Iris Wong, and finds work as a house renovator for a white woman named Dolly. Choi describes Jenny taking in the view of Dolly's house after returning from a walk:

> Lines of trees began to appear as the slope grew more steep; the trees seemed to form doorways through which, as you looked riverward, the water loomed larger and larger…There really were moors, and a sense of forsaken remoteness, though once you reached the last vista before the drop-off you saw the railroad tracks just by the water, and the electric lines just beside them. Coming back to the house she sometimes felt such pleasure in the progressive unfurling of the landscape, such a sense of poignant recognition as the battered old house rose again from the grass into view, that she would forget how unlike her it was to pretend this was hers. (Choi 88-89).

There are many passages in *American Woman* that sound similar to this one, where Choi moves outward, describing Jenny's perception of the surrounding landscape with an appeal to depth and calming glow; the trees form "doorways," and the hills sink and rise, allowing different objects to be visible from different vantage points. For instance, Choi later describes the land surrounding the farmhouse romantically and metaphorically: the "ocean of grass," the "hills growing haloes of gold" (Choi 96, 131). From Dolly's house, the expansiveness of the view provides Jenny with a sense of relief that is inseparable from her loneliness. The landscape provides her "breathing space" to take in her surroundings. The landscape is described in organic terms—the looming water, the moors, the land's progressive unfurling—which establishes a sense of limitless "absent" space that resists the stamp of industrialization during and after WWII, with the railroads and electric lines that Jenny sees in the distance.

Depictions of American landscape as natural and concrete can obscure the capitalist relations that underlie the space, such as the expulsion of indigenous people and the violent removal of land. "While Asian labor personifies the abstract circuits of capitalism, settler colonial constructions of landscape express the opposite: the concrete, pure, and authentic noncapitalist dimension of nature," Iyko Day writes in *Alien Capital: Asian Racialization and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (2016). In some ways, romantic depictions of landscape can act like how Marx describes commodities; in presenting itself as a unified, separate thing, it obscures the network of social relations that produce it in the first place.

The presentation of landscape in *American Woman* at times feels like an attempt to represent the struggle for national identity. The long, expansive descriptions of rural land write against the pressures of modernization post-WWII. After WWII, industrialization and the development of new technologies in the U.S. led to urban areas spreading outwards. In his essay, "Its Own Peculiar Decor: Capital, Urbanism, and the Crisis of Class Politics in the U.S.," Christopher Wright describes how companies began to relocate their offices from urban centers to the suburbs and rural areas after WWII. The automobile and electric trolley brought far places closer together, and the rise in different transportation methods contributed to the homogenization of space, making "each place as much like every other as possible," which meant space allowed for the faster flow of commodities and "the valorization of values" (Wright). The description of landscape in *American Woman* sometimes feels like an attempt at preservation, providing subjects a sense of comfort in the land's seeming absence, distance, and lack of occupation.

Jenny's relation to the landscape and her invisibility can be read as her exclusion from it as a fugitive and Japanese American subject, alternatively, it can read as the temporary relief of

material boundaries where she becomes nondifferentiable from and accepted into the landscape. The landscape's large scale causes her to feel subjectively small, which could be read as the incongruence between her "alienness" and the social relations that the landscape produces. However, working at night in the house was "its own lonely pleasure" for Jenny (Choi 89). Jenny feels comforted by her invisibility and smallness, and finds "pleasure" in the expansiveness of the land that stretches beyond her. This suggests that landscape is a relieving force, where Jenny feels connected to her surroundings.

Simultaneous tension arises between the subject and landscape when Jenny desires to be seen and to assert individuality within the landscape. When she works at night, she "knew her bright yellow light could be seen from miles away" and finds herself, almost instinctively, imagining that she owned the land (Choi 89). Jenny pretending to own the house and land is an instance of her adopting settler colonial desire, even though it is "unlike her." Jenny's perception of the landscape blurs the boundaries between her and the land; she desires to be visible and differentiated from the landscape in response to how the landscape distances itself from her; at the same time, her invisibility provides her comfort, and her survival (as a fugitive) depends on it. For instance, Choi also describes the landscape around the farmhouse as shelter. Jenny thinks that dusk at the farmhouse was "the fugitive's hour, when the darkening air felt like shelter, yet you still had your eyes" (Choi 97). Landscape is a relational object that facilitates different kinds of recognition and non-recognition of and within the subject.

This struggle between visibility and invisibility is where racial boundaries are drawn. In Rhinecliff, the appearance of Jenny's race is constructed through her labor. She is the only one who answers the ad for the job in the newspaper, with everyone in town knowing that "Dolly rarely made payments," but Jenny "was an immigrant, unknowing, without options" (Choi 65). In the errands she runs across town, Jenny makes conversation with "the hardware-store owner, the train conductor, the librarian" in an effort to appear normal, to compensate for her "strangeness" and her "lone Asian face" (Choi 69). Here, labor options are material conditions that signify race. As Chandra and Chen write, "racial group formation is entangled with processes of capitalist value formation" (167). Jenny's acceptance of the job, which she doesn't realize is unpaid, marks her as an immigrant, "unknowing" unlike the rest of the community. Simultaneously, her Asianness is mutable, and the community seems "unknowing" of her. She goes by several names throughout the novel (Alice Chan, Iris Wong), and passes easily as Chinese. Her race is seen as homogenous and indifferentiable. In response, Jenny became "increasingly driven to make herself known" at Dolly's place, and even "volunteered" fabricated anecdotes of her history to Dolly in an effort to be seen (Choi 68). Here, Jenny's race makes her both stand out and invisible. Her invisibility has two effects, one being the result of her exclusion within the fabric of the town and the second providing her a source of comfort.

The changing relation between the subject and the landscape also allows the subject to access past memory. Seeing the landscape from a particular vantage point gives the subjects perspective, a newfound "visibility" of the world, as Jenny's father tells Jenny at the end of the novel when they attend the reunion at Manzanar (Choi 368). In one example, Jenny watches Juan, Yvonne, and Pauline run around the house, and this triggers a memory within her. She remembers running with her classmates in Japan during gym class. Jenny recalls herself as a child running "the road out of town, the stones denting her thin canvas sneakers, but sprinting

past tiredness and pain to a fleet-footed joy," and past the "distant hills rising round from the green, level ground" (Choi 132). Although she remembers jogging "endless miles, the whole day," she knew "this couldn't be true" since "it was school, after all, and they had their usual subjects" (Choi 132).

Again, the observation of landscape is connected with pleasure. Watching Juan, Yvonne, and Pauline run in the landscape "weirdly thrilled" Jenny (Choi 131). Landscape mediates subjects' different understandings of time. Jenny remembers running "endless miles" and "the whole day," even though that was not the actual reality of what happened. There are parallels here between the expansiveness of the land that Choi describes, and the expansiveness of Jenny's memory. Her memory is joyful and nostalgic, and the typical constraints on the event that she is remembering are not present. By allowing subjects to process and become immersed in past memory, landscape creates breathing space for the subject. Temporarily, subjects can find relief from the material and temporal forces that press against them in the present.

Perhaps the most significant scene where landscape facilitates remembering and the processing of history is the scene at the end of the novel. Jenny and her father, Jim Shimada, drive to Owens Valley to attend a reunion at Manzanar. This marks both a moment of reconciliation between them and a change in their relationship over the arc of the novel: "She'd never been the driver, and he the passenger, before" (Choi 367). On the drive, the landscape reminds Jenny of her time at the farmhouse: "The pine forest rose on either side of them like a dusky cathedral; she remembered the days at the farmhouse, lying in the cistern on the hillside with her head back, staring up at the trees" (Choi 366). The landscape around Manzanar is the site where Jenny and her father process different memories of Japanese internment:

> The forest was gone and now the due brown hills dotted with sagebrush rolled into the distance, to meet the white wall of the mountains, still the Sierras, exposed to their very spine now, and continuing their march to the south. The Owens River came to accompany the road on their other side and she felt that they'd left California and gone to some far-flung frontier, or perhaps the past. 'My God,' said her father, uncrossing his legs. 'It all looks exactly the same. (Choi 367-368).

Manzanar was the first Japanese internment camp established in the U.S. In Manzanar, over 10,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated (Colborn-Roxworthy). During the period of Japanese internment during WWII, over 120,000 Japanese civilians were incarcerated in concentration camps for about three years, and many had their property forcibly taken away (Parks). The U.S. government hosts an annual reunion at the Manzanar War Relocation Center, turning the original site of Manzanar into a National Park (Colborn-Roxworthy). The Japanese American Memorial Pilgrimages organization also organizes events at Manzanar, where former internees are invited to share stories about their experiences and the public is encouraged to listen to informational presentations and participate in discussion-based activities.

Here, Jenny and her father return to the internment site where her father was incarcerated as a teenager. Landscape becomes a boundary object where subjects come up against their visibility and invisibility, and their relationship to historical processes. Jenny describes the landscape as a distant, almost mythical place: a "far-flung frontier" and "the

past." Jenny and her father have different relationships to the landscape around Manzanar. For Jenny's father, it is a part of his lived experience. He sees the landscape and recognizes it as "exactly the same" as when he was there. The landscape transports him to his past, and through that recognition, an interpersonal boundary between Jenny and her father dissolves. In losing himself to the landscape and his memories, his father begins to talk to Jenny about his experience, something he does rarely: "Most people find this too lonely. These ugly hills, how tall do you think they are?" (Choi 368).

Jenny, however, processes the history of Japanese internment through what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory," which describes how generations removed from the immediate generation that experiences collective events remember and internalize those collective events. Hirsch describes how later generations remember events "not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation" (qtd. in Day 124). Jenny imagines and assembles the Japanese internment experience not from her father's stories, but mostly through outside sources. When Jenny once asks her father about his experience, he responds, "Why ask about that? All that was a long time ago" (Choi 163). Still, his lived experience imprints onto her, and through that process, it is transformed and directed into a different political position. Jenny's father remains uninterested in politics; after he is released from the concentration camp, he tends to the plants in his greenhouse and intentionally avoids interacting with others. However, learning about her father's experience at internment camp is what sparks Jenny's development as a radical fugitive. While Jim wants to forget and distance himself from his past, Jenny wants to excavate it. For Jenny, her "postmemory" of Japanese internment is what will allow her to understand him:

> Her discovery of what he'd endured was the beginning of her discovery of history and politics, of power and oppression, of brotherhood and racism, and finally, of radicalism; but it only drove them to fight with each other. As she grew increasingly involved in the antiwar movement she and her father fought with increasing fury, but not increasing complexity—never about issues, never about the war itself, only about her arrogance, or perhaps it was her stupidity, or her naivete, in daring to oppose it. *What do you know*? he would shout. (Choi 163).

Jenny's postmemory of Japanese internment mobilizes her to see the linkages between WWII and the Vietnam war, driving her to support the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War, while Jim's experience at the internment camp is a reason why he opposes Jenny's involvement. Jenny assigns her father's lived experience to a broader political praxis, whereas her father remains apolitical. In fact, Jenny's father harbored a secret wish to move them to New York, "the place he could teach her to be a citizen of the world, a Universal Human" (Choi 338). Her father's wish submits to the promises of Western liberalism, although he acknowledges it as "romantic" and unrealistic (Choi 338). What differentiates Jenny from her father is perhaps her "imaginative investment and creation" of lived experience according to Hirsch's description of postmemory, which sounds similar to the stance of Christopher Lee's idealized critical subject. Christopher Lee's idealized critical subject is a theoretical subject that represents the "group consciousness" of a particular racial identity and imagines a unified political stance towards a liberatory future. In both Hirsch's account of postmemory and Lee's

idealized critical subject, experiences are abstracted and universalized. The point of view that is adopted is of theoretical political recognition rather than lived political experience.

Chandra and Chen are critical of notions of "group consciousness" as ways of understanding racial identity. They discuss lived experience as something that is "often mobilized to answer questions of who racially belongs, who can determine the boundaries of racially representative political perspectives," and who can make "political movement demands" (168). Still, the same lived experience, or the processing of the same lived experience, can produce conflicting political positions. As Chandra and Chen discuss, lived experiences do not determine political stances, but instead are a result of material forces such as expropriation, exploitation, and expulsion that delineate and construct group boundaries in ways that accumulate capitalist value.

Japanese internment was a force of expropriation. In *Alien Capital*, Day builds upon the work of Colleen Lye and uses Marx's labor theory of value to explain the mechanisms behind Japanese internment during WWII. Day argues that the act of incarcerating Japanese civilians in the U.S. was in part motivated by beliefs about Japanese Americans as having "excessive efficiency" which was "associated with having control over relative surplus-value" (118). Japanese Americans in the U.S. in the early 1900s were participating in industries and owning property, such as "boats, land, and equipment" which caused them to be seen as not just "a devaluation of white labor," but as "the creation of *unnatural value*" (130). Japanese American labor was alienized and seen as a manifestation of the threat of capitalism to white labor in the U.S. This unnatural value was interpreted as control over relative surplus value and thus the Japanese American became "a specter of destructive innovation in a landscape of ceaseless modernization" (Day 123). Japanese American labor was seen as a threat to white labor in its innovation-like qualities, acting as technology does.

After the incarceration of Japanese Americans, Day argues that the labor of Japanese Americans became re-signified. After the violence of "relocation, internment, and labor exploitation" and the dispossession of property and land for Japanese Americans, Japanese labor transformed into a non-threat, "a dependent surplus labor force" (149). As Colleen Lye describes in *America's Asia*, Japanese internees were used "as replacements for the volunteers and employees of New Deal domestic programs" and to supply labor during labor shortages (161). In the case of Jenny's father, incarceration meant, among other things, that "he wasn't getting into UCLA after all" (Choi 328). The forces of internment barred internees from pursuing further education, again creating material linkages and barriers around race and citizenship that differentiated groups of people. The internment was a material process that transformed groups from threats to non-threats in relation to capitalist accumulation. Capitalism produced dynamic, "relational interlinkages among different domains of social life through a general measure of capitalist value" (Chandra and Chen 157).

Internment naturalized and domesticated Japanese American labor to the U.S., making Japanese American labor appear less foreign. Day argued that internment was a process of indigenization, where the concentration camps functioned to "indigenize Japanese North Americans as surplus labor through an ideology of romantic anti-capitalism" (118). Internment indigenized Japanese Americans by depowering Japanese American labor through holding

Japanese Americans captive and dispossessing Japanese Americans of their property, and then integrating Japanese Americans back into the American economy after the threat of their "unnatural value" had been eliminated. Like the relation between subjects and landscape, finding belonging for Asian American subjects in relation to national identity is at times contradictory. The sense of relief, comfort, and memory that landscape facilitates in *American Woman* can be the result of a temporary breathing space where the material and historical boundaries enforcing race are lessened, leaving room for connection and reflection; at the same time, the romantic descriptions of landscape can obscure the violence involved in the naturalization between subject and landscape.

Interestingly, Lye notes that Japanese internment camps were most often built on infertile, barren desert and mountainous land in the West, yet expected to become "economically self-sustaining" under "grandiose visions of western land reclamation and frontier settlement" (161). The placement of Japanese Americans in internment camps divided them from the rest of U.S. citizens, yet at the same time, camp activities were intended for Japanese Americans to exercise and perpetuate national identity, such as "western land reclamation" and contributing their labor to governmental programs. The different ways Jenny and her father interpret the landscape at Manzanar reveal this divide in what the landscape signifies, between feelings of belonging and the friction felt between the Asian American subject and the American landscape.

On the road trip to Manzanar, the pine forest to Jenny is a "cathedral," and as she drives she sees all of these "amazing transitions in the landscape" (Choi 367). Her father, however, describes the landscape as containing "a certain austerity," and the hills as "ugly" (Choi 368). The disconnect between the two of them is made apparent when Jenny says, "so you did have an all right time out here," and her father responds, "An *all right* time? They let us go hiking *one time*, under guard. With goddamn rifles pointed at us" (Choi 368). Here, there is a disconnect between Jenny's removed understanding of internment and her father's direct experience. Although Jenny realizes that the phrasing of her statement about her father having an "all right" time is off the moment she says it, her statement is still indicative of her desire to interpret the reunion at Manzanar optimistically. Jenny sees the act of returning to the landscape as a way of reconciliation with the concept of national identity, while her father resists reconciliation. Patricia Chu writes that Jenny and her father's return to Manzanar replaces the "less 'ethnic' narrative of Jenny's political life with a specifically 'Asian' one" (547). However, despite Jenny shifting to a different kind of politics with the return to Manzanar, one that seems more aligned with her father, she still retains part of the romantic vision of landscape and settler colonial vision in her interpretation of the landscape at Manzanar as a "frontier" containing transformative potential.

Jenny's politics is also contrasted against the satirized political beliefs of the SLA and members Juan, Yvonne, and Pauline in *American Woman*. Given Jenny's distance from and disagreement with their politics throughout the novel, Lye argues that *American Woman* falls within the type of 1960s Asian American historical novel where Asian American actors are commonly "bit players" in surrounding social movements, and where the "protagonist is racially exotic within her activist milieu" (221). In *American Woman*, Jenny is often at odds with Juan, Yvonne, and Pauline, as she struggles to chaperone them while they resist completing the book

manuscript—as a result of their disinterest in the project and their protests that writing the autobiographical book will not be politically effective. In Part 2, Jenny refuses to participate in Juan's plans of an armed robbery at a grocery store, arguing that it was an act of violence that had no political rationale, that it "did nothing to alter" the system of capitalism (Choi 216). Juan responds, arguing that the robbery of the "store-owning pig" will help "Your People, Third World People" (Choi 213). In response to Jenny's arguments, he insists that "this ain't theory, this is practice" (Choi 216).

Juan uses Jenny's race to justify why Jenny should participate in the armed robbery, framing Jenny's protests of the robbery as too theoretical and her inaction as politically privileged. Later, Juan again tries to convince Jenny to join them, arguing that she "can't go denying" her race and that her "skin is a privilege" (Choi 141). He tells Jenny that he "always wished" to be Black and would trade places with anyone who was Black because being someone of color carried an intrinsic sense of "integrity" in the movement (Choi 141). Juan's comments reflect the influence of Third-Worldism, Black nationalism, and other 1960s movements on the politics of the SLA. SLA members believed that people associated with the Third World, a definition that emerged during the Cold War era to refer to countries that were not aligned with the U.S. or Soviet Union and that typically shared histories of being colonized, should lead the movement. Here, Choi satirizes Juan's beliefs on race. Juan's comments on race subscribe to what Chandra and Chen identify as the false idea that race is static, that it signifies "innate capacities" and assumes a set of political stances (138). Juan's attempts to align Jenny's race with the SLA movement and his dismissal of her resistance is arguably an attempt to "collapse heterogenous political perspectives into a language of positionally, or politics into 'identity'" (Chandra and Chen 139). In *American Woman*, Jenny as an Asian American subject comes into being dynamically and relationally to the politics of her father and the politics of Juan and the SLA. On one hand, the material constraints of Jenny's labor in Rhinecliff and her relationship to the landscape produces racial boundaries; on the other hand, Jenny's particular responses to her material constraints is what allows for "diverse and sometimes contradictory" political stances to emerge out of those racial boundaries (Chandra and Chen 162). In *American Woman*, Jenny comes into being through the contradiction between her distance from the SLA/other movement activity of the 1960s, and the fact that movements of the 1960s were what gave rise to the boundaries of Asian American race-making in the first place (Lye).

Additionally, the relationship between Juan and Jenny maps onto the "universality/particularity opposition" that Chandra and Chen describe as commonly "tied to notions of identity that pit a class-based universal subject of history against the particularism of a range of other group identities and group-based demands" (167). However, Chandra and Chen view this "class-based universal subject of history" as not ahistorical or transcending the particular, but a subject that is produced by capitalist social relations and that reflects capitalist value—in the same way that "particular" racial groups are produced. They argue that this linkage between universality and particularity is "key to reframing the race/class problematic as a relational form" (167). In *American Woman*, Juan tells Jenny, when trying to convince her to assist in the armed robbery, that she doesn't "just owe the revolution in general" but her "people in particular" (Choi 139). When Jenny tries to identify with "human beings" in general, Juan says she is "denying" her race" (Choi 139). Here, Choi explores the relationship between

universality and particularity present in movement ideology and theorizations on identity during the 1960s, though the split pressures Jenny faces to both affirm her racial solidarity and commit to actions that support the revolution "in general."

Landscape in *American Woman* is an object that tethers subjects, allowing them to process their past memories and anchoring them to past historical events. Simultaneously, landscape also offers a hiding space where subjects can disappear. Landscape is often characterized in *American Woman* as separate and unreachable by public history. Choi describes the landscape as seemingly isolated; for instance, Jenny thinks of Rhinecliff as "lost land, connected to nothing" (Choi 102). Later, when Juan and Jenny are in the car driving to the supermarket, Juan looks out and says, "This is beautiful land, you know that? You can look at land like this and almost forget what a sick, fucked-up country this is" (Choi 196). Here, landscape is characterized as space that is removed from the rest of the world, providing comfort, shelter, and relief in its seeming remoteness and organic beauty.

During their time underground, Jenny and Pauline hide inside the landscape, running from authorities after separating from Juan and Yvonne following a bank robbery. The landscape offers them a kind of protective bubble, sheltering them from the state. Choi writes about their time underground as a kind of love story, as Jenny and Pauline become intimate and try to survive without getting noticed. Here, the novel shifts to focusing on the dynamics that develop between the two of them. One night on the road, when they are together in a motel, Choi writes that "in sleep their bodies twine together" with "their bare thighs front to back, their cold feet, their old T-shirts and panties" (Choi 280). Prior to this, Pauline asks Jenny if she's ever slept with a woman and when Jenny replies, "no," Pauline says, "You might have had the feeling, but it was somehow disguised" (Choi 280). The suggested queer intimacy that develops between Jenny and Pauline forms during their year underground, and it is limited to their time underground.

Moving through the landscape allows Jenny and Pauline to connect in ways that previously were constrained. Arguably, the landscape lessens the relational field that enforces racial and group boundaries between them, and the survival and "fates" of the two become intertwined. Choi emphasizes how separate this period of time is for Jenny and Pauline, how detached it is from their previous lives. When Jenny and Pauline wake up together in bed, they "don't remember their childhood homes, what their parents look like" and in this "sticky cocoon," "prior history all seems unreal" (Choi 281). Jenny and Pauline forget themselves and their past histories; they "don't remember they are two girls, fabulous prey, on the run from the law everywhere" (Choi 281). They lose their previous identities during this period, and undergo transformation. Choi emphasizes how landscape creates an in-between, fluid space for different kinds of identity formation.

Grace Yeh argues that this lost year in *American Woman* is queer because it "occupies a space and time outside of a 'normal' life or notions of respectability defined by a 'reproductive temporality'" (209). Arguably, the boundaries of race and class are also challenged in this lost year. The landscape and its remoteness allow Jenny and Pauline to live underground, secluded from time and public history. Institutionally mediated forms of identity dissolve, opening up spaces for confession. For instance, Pauline tells Jenny the background of how she became

integrated with the revolutionary group, and confesses parts of her personal past. Jenny comments on their luck in escaping recognition: "anyone who had committed the magical act of 'going underground,' of dropping into a rabbit's warren of the imagination where reinvention of the self was possible, believed in" luck (Choi 283). It is during this lost underground year where Jenny and Pauline's identities transform and become reimagined through the development of queer intimacy. In so far as race is the thing that connects differences in "linked fate" across groups as Chandra and Chen assert, then the period where Jenny and Pauline go into hiding is a period where their life chances become inseparable from each other. Their fates are linked in ways that they couldn't be elsewhere. The landscape they are hiding in is characterized as another world unrecognizable by the current one. It is difficult to find a sense of place. Jenny is "not sure where they are" the night at the motel, and doesn't know if they were in "the piney chasm of the Sierras, or the Valley" (Choi 280).

The time Jenny and Pauline spend together during the lost year is inaccessible even to themselves, after they arrive in California. They struggle to remember what happened, and the entire trip feels like "a fever dream" (Choi 88). The memories of themselves feel foreign to them, as if the memories are attached to another person. When Jenny tries to remember driving with Pauline, she remembers catching "the glimpse of her own eyes in the rear view staring back like a critical stranger's" (Choi 284). Here, Jenny and Pauline feel a sense of dislocation and lostness when they think back to their time driving together, again emphasizing how Choi's landscape can be separate from the space of public history and knowledge. The landscape is mystified, and subjects transform in it in unfamiliar ways. Jenny wonders if the car they drove "carried them across an invisible border into somebody's movie," since the "wind and the hair and the critical eyes seem so strangely familiar" (Choi 284). The time that Jenny and Pauline spend together feel unreal, and they remember it at a remove, separating the time they spend underground from their lives afterwards.

Luck is also a force of mystification in *American Woman* that conceals social relations, working alongside landscape. Jenny often attributes luck to explaining differences in material conditions. When discussing her father, Jenny believed that "the titans of American industry" were just "several lucky steps from the sort of hustling her father had done, locklessly, all his life" (Choi 68). The farmhouse is described as "luckless" (35). Additionally, Jenny often refers to luck to explain how her and Pauline were able to escape recognition:

> Anyone who had ever acted on the premise that she could escape the clutches of an unjust law indefinitely was likely to be a subscriber to the doctrine of luck just as much as the doctrine of racial equality. Outlaws live on luck, and they were outlaws as well as soldiers. In the end the verdict seemed very clear; they made it to the other side not merely unscathed but anointed by one enemy after another, who had looked them in the eye and not seen them, and so added more force to their state of enchantment. (Choi 96).

Like landscape, luck as an explanation can be its own form of "enchantment." Luck mystifies the connection between different material outcomes and capitalist relations. Jenny's reference to "racial equality" also obscures the capitalist relations that produce the boundaries of race itself. Capitalism is reduced to "empirical measures of income, occupation, and

educational attainment" (Chandra and Chen 136). Luck and landscape are two forces that work together to mystify subjects in *American Woman*.

When Jenny and Pauline move to California, they move into an apartment and "assume a conventional distance apart" (Choi 281). Their previous intimacy is lost. After Jenny and Pauline are identified, convicted, and sentenced, the "enchantment" of the landscape and their time spent on the run is broken. Here, Choi establishes a contrast between the world of landscape and the world of legal trials and historical fact, where the material and racial boundaries between Jenny and Pauline are resurrected. Jenny and Pauline experience different outcomes from their trials. Pauline ultimately betrays Jenny, telling the authorities that Jenny was a terrorist, and naming her as a person implicated in the robbery. Jenny suspected that "she was destined to be so revised, to be described by Pauline as 'nicer than most of the people I met—but still a terrorist I lived in fear of'" (Choi 356). Through the process of the trial, Pauline and Jenny's identities are re-constructed along racial and class boundaries. Although both of them are sentenced, the two of them "pay different prices" (Choi 354). Pauline emerges from the trial relatively unscathed, with her participation in the SLA as something that "makes her more interesting by her adventure" and Choi describes the result as symbolizing the "immutableness of her class" (Choi 354). Jenny later watches Pauline get married on TV years after their sentencing. Their abilities to move past the events of the lost year and to re-institutionalize themselves into society are different.

In Part 4 of the novel, Choi introduces a journalist character, Anne Casey, responsible for covering the trials. Anne's character shows how knowledge gets lost in the public documentation of events. Anne researches Jenny's family background, including the story of Jenny's father's incarceration, but eventually decides that they cannot be part of the news story because "there's no room" (Choi 323). Jenny and Pauline's time together is also not a part of public record; the two of them never share what happened during the lost year to the public. Jenny finds relief in the fact that "she and Pauline would be tried, and convicted, and sentenced, only for the acts they had committed before they had met—so that their time together would be further obscured, or rather, never inscribed into the record at all" (Choi 323). Interestingly, when Jenny reflects in prison on the intimacy that developed between her and Pauline, she recalls it as "complete," with each of them knowing"the whole of the other one's past" (Choi 358). Here, *American Woman* reveals the gap between public documentation and history. The trial system and news media are narrow in their understanding of events, creating its own kind of illusion.

Although processes of trial and interrogation lead to outcomes that differentiate Jenny and Pauline, there are moments of interracial class solidarity within institutional systems in *American Woman*. During Jenny's trial, for example, "the courtroom was full of the Japanese and Filipino and Korean and China faces, the tight-knit people her father had always avoided," "wearing buttons that simply said JENNY" (Choi 359). The support from these strangers is what causes the judge to sentence Jenny "to the minimum" (Choi 359). Interestingly, Choi characterizes the supporters that show up at Jenny's trial as previously apolitical people, like Jenny's father. They were "truck farmers or small business owners" that "all insisted on donating money" to Jenny's trial fees and viewed Jenny as their daughter or granddaughter (Choi 353). Here, the political positions of racial groups are dynamic and subject to change.

Jenny's trial instigates a political transformation in the people that attend to support her, mobilizing them into acts of group solidarity. The supporters relate to Jenny as part of their family, and so the trial space becomes a site where new "familial" networks are created and where collective solidarity is exercised.

Ultimately, landscape and trial are two boundary forces in *American Woman* where racial identity is negotiated and reproduced. Landscape in *American Woman* is often characterized in organic terms, in contrast to and separate from institutionalized forces like legal systems. Landscape in *American Woman* largely provides relief for its subjects, but that relief can serve as a powerful force of mystification of the social exchanges that take place and are reproduced within the landscape. The remoteness and expansiveness of landscape appear to sever from the material boundaries that enforce racial identities and provide "breathing space" for subjects; however, that breathing space is temporary and illusory. Similarly, scenes of trial appear to be enforced in rigid ways, but can give way to flexibility and group solidarity. Near the end of the novel, Jenny begins to write in prison. She writes autobiographically and poetically, about "the hour before sunset, when a day's worth of light's alterations seem exposed all at once" (Choi 358). She is "amazed she could render herself into words" (Choi 358). Choi explores what is part of and isn't a part of public memory through subjects writing themselves (or refusing to write themselves, as with the case of the SLA members) into being. Jenny's race emerges through the split forces of boundary formation and her responses to her material conditions, as Chandra and Chen outline.

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