“Trafficking in Seeds”: War Bride, Biopolitics, and Asian American Spectrality in Ruth Ozeki’s *All Over Creation* *

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**Abstract**

Taking a cue from Pheng Cheah’s discussion of nationalism’s paradoxical relation to life and death and his invocation of the idea of spectral haunting (in light of the Deleuzian “nonorganic vitalism”) as the genuine source of life in postcolonial cultures, this article conceives a life-begetting Asian American ethno-politics via a reading of the ethno- and biopolitics represented in Ruth Ozeki’s novel *All Over Creation*. I argue that *All Over Creation* intervenes in the discussion of Asian American ethno-politics of life and death not simply because it engages with food politics and advocates agricultural biodiversity, but also because it creates narrative linkages between biodiversity and ethno-diversity. First, by telling the story of a Japanese war bride, *All Over Creation* brings to the fore Japanese war brides to emphasize their significance as the “ghostly figures”—or “random seedlings”—occupying the margins of both Asian American and white communities. Moreover, the novel introduces “seed-dissemination” as a(n) (agri)cultural logic that makes “Asian American” less a category of hereditary permanence than an avenue for one to generate and become others. *All Over Creation* spells out affirmative life forces that sprawl from the migratory trajectories of people and seeds (or “people as seeds”)—trajectories that bring disorganizing force to the inherited logic or vertical continuity of both agricultural and ethnic cultural productions with lateral networking and changeable relationships.

**Keywords**

Asian American, Japanese war bride, biopolitics, spectrality, seed-dissemination,
Ruth Ozeki, *All Over Creation*

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In his seminal study on postcolonial national culture, Pheng Cheah points to nationalism’s paradoxical relation to life and death: though etymologically linked to “nativity” or “natality,” nation, when turning into a strictly organized structure and an oppressive ideology, could become “the exemplary figure for death” (1). Probing into late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century German philosophical thought for the genealogical roots of national cultures, Cheah teases out the “organismic vitalism” at the roots of postcolonial nationalism, yet he also indicates that the revolutionary conception of people as “a self-actualizing vital force” in pursuit of freedom and life in subaltern studies is frequently compromised due to the reification of a nation following the prescription of the “homogenous, empty time” (4). The philosophical promise that “organic life” and “organized matter” are analogous to freedom, that the sociopolitical structure of a nation-state may be appropriated to foster—rather than repress—both life and freedom, more often than not is not carried out through the vicissitudes of postcolonial national developments. Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower underscores this inherent paradox of national organismic vitalism: being no longer “the power to kill” but the power “to invest life through and through” (139), biopower is nonetheless no less powerful (than its pre-modern sovereign counterpart) in regulating and subjecting bodies. Since individual bodies are fostered via discipline, their concrete existences are programmed into organizations that reduce, rather than bring into full play, the plenitude of life. Likewise, although postcolonial revolutions might be initiated with an impetus to ensure that subalterns live beyond their biological finitude through the establishment of an enduring nation-state, the identificatory prescription

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1 Cheah borrows the idea of “homogenous, empty time” from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. Anderson characterizes modern nation in terms of a special type of temporal apprehension close to what Benjamin calls Messianic time: “a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present” (24). “Homogenous, empty time” indicates a temporal experience that is “measured by clock and calendar” and thereby transcends geographical and ethnographical differences and contingencies (24). Anderson claims that the idea of “a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which also is conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history” (26).

2 Foucault describes in *The History of Sexuality* the modern power over life in two basic forms as differentiated from the pre-modern sovereign power to “take life or let live” (138; emphasis in original): the first form focuses on “the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls”; and the second form centers on “the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity” (139).
and teleological construction of nation-states tend to bind individuals to the inflexible imaginary configurations of nationalist historicity.

The fact that national political organisms serve as but a thin veneer covering up, but in effect facilitating, a politics of control and deprivation (of the multitude and the alternative of concrete lives) makes one question the extent to which postcolonial nationalism might move beyond the Eurocentric limits of universalist nationalism/imperialism. Yet Cheah is not completely pessimistic about postcolonial cultures. After revealing organismic vitalism as an inadequate model to sustain freedom, Cheah suggests a theoretical alternative: “the most apposite metaphor for freedom today is not the organism but the haunted nation” (12). Here, Cheah’s invocation of the idea of spectral haunting as the genuine source of life transposes nation and nationalism from being embedded in German idealism to being aligned with a Derridian poststructural spectrality. The genuine life is not a life parasitical to the nation but a life exceeding the mechanic structure of nation-states, which is most exemplarily embodied by the unassimilable ghostly figures moving across the national geographical and racial/ethnic cartographies. Moreover, Cheah’s turning away from the teleological ideal of an organismic actualization of freedom compels a radical repositioning of postcolonial liberation from projected futures to lateral transgressions. Enumerating the vicissitudes of postcolonial conditions in the second part of Spectral Nationality, Cheah ultimately suggests a Deleuzian rhizomic “nonorganic vitalism” to replace organismic vitalism as a new way to conceive the liberating potential of postcolonial cultures (382). He argues that it is not genealogical continuity or filiative progressivity, but contingencies and contaminations deriving from the mutual haunting of the center and the margin, the inside and the outside, the nation-state and the global processes, that endow life with the promiscuous force of becoming.3

This article does not intend to follow Cheah’s path to probe into the German philosophical origins of postcolonial nationalism or to narrate postcolonial nations in contemporary Asia and Africa, yet Cheah’s insights into the paradoxical link

3 Different from Foucault who associates biopower mostly with governmental regulatory practices over life, Gilles Deleuze teases out a more affirmative life-force in Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life. Moving beyond the Greek dichotomy between zôê (bare life; the life excluded from governmental rationality) and bios (the life of citizen; the socially constructed and endorsed life), Deleuze meditates on an a-subjective and impersonal life force, which derives not from individual bodies but from an immanent plane that allows the contiguities and conjunctions of pre-individual singular lives. Following the logic of “And” rather than the organismic “Is” of predication, the life force as conceived by Deleuze is nonorganic and laterally transgressive. More will be elaborated later.
between life and death, freedom and ghost, and the organismic and the nonorganic inspires my discussion of Asian American ethno-politics via a reading of the ethno- and biopolitics explored in Ruth Ozeki’s novel All Over Creation.⁴ Cheah’s discussion of postcolonial culture is apposite to our study of Asian American culture and politics also because the emergence of Asian American studies in the late 1960s was inseparable from the Third World movements against colonialism. The Asian American movement, as contended by Arif Dirlik, was not unlike other ethnic movements of the 1960s: it “identified externally not with Asia per se, but with other Third World societies that were the objects of colonial oppression” (35). Asian American movement in the 1960s and 1970s followed the postcolonial nationalism to pursue an Asian American nationalism that evoked a pan-ethnic consolidation of power against racial exclusion and discrimination in the U.S. However, tensions have remained as the self-defining label “Asian American,” coined in 1968 by the Japanese American historian Yuji Ichioka, out of analogy with other terms of racialized identification such as “African American,” never seems fully capable of encompassing the heterogeneous constitution of the people identified as “Asian Americans”; nor could the nationalist appeal of “Asian America” fully address the needs and concerns of a population consisting of different genders, classes, languages, and religious origins. Cheah’s insight into the inherent contradictions of the postcolonial nation and postcolonial nationalism in relation to life and death is conducive to our understanding of the double-edged force of the label “Asian American.” To what extent has “Asian America” risked being homogenized into an entity of exclusivity, regulation, and hence death? Or, in what manner has it retained the life-bearing vitality of contingency and transformation? To what extent could Cheah’s model of spectrality, which emphasizes the importance of lateral transgressions and nonorganic vitalism initiated from the margins of a postcolonial nation-state, help us conceive a life-begetting Asian American politics?

All Over Creation intervenes in this discussion of Asian American ethno-politics of life and death not simply because it engages with food politics and advocates agricultural biodiversity but also because Ozeki creates through her novel

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⁴ The term “biopolitics” as it is employed in this article must be distinguished from Foucault’s concept of “biopower.” Robert Sinnerbrink points out that Foucault tends to conflate “biopower” and “biopolitics” as both terms in Foucault’s texts refer to the regulatory management of life. However, “politics” contains forces and attempts of resistance, which are irreducible to the idea of regulatory construction and control. I hereby follow Sinnerbrink’s suggestion to use “biopower” as “the functional biomanagement of the population,” while reserving “biopolitics” for “forms of political contestation, driven by the experience of injustice, that are manifest in social struggles against dominant forces structuring biopower regimes” (249).
narrative linkages between biodiversity and ethno-diversity. Largely inspired by and indebted to Michael Pollan’s *New York Times* article “Playing God in the Garden,” *All Over Creation* yet offers more than a reiteration of Pollan’s message of anti-biotechnology and anti-monoculture. Although the novel in its most obvious sense is an accusation against potato monoculture, or more precisely a protest against the global capitalist structure behind the demise of biodiversity, Ozeki is able to move beyond the limitation of writing a novel that addresses the biotechnological impact on agriculture. Weaving the stories of potatoes not only into the transnational corporate development of genetically modified crops but also into the family saga of the Fullers—an interracial family of a white potato farmer Lloyd, his Japanese war bride Momoko, and their daughter Yumi—Ozeki presents a web of narratives that takes potatoes as both an integral element and a metaphor of the politics of race and ethnicity. If, as pointed out by Elizabeth DiNovella in her review of the novel, at the center of *All Over Creation* is the question “Who controls life?” (41), Ozeki has offered complicated answers as the conspicuous powers of corporations, the media, paternal authority and ethnic/racial commonality are so intricately woven into each other that it is difficult to name any single culprit. On the other hand, however, life as described by Ozeki is not completely subjugated to capitalist laws and identificatory categorizations. While depicting the murder of biodiversity by the standardized mass production of agribusiness, *All Over Creation* also delves into the more affirmative life forces that are generated out of the migratory trajectories of people and seeds (or “people as seeds” according to the novel’s cross-species imaginary)—trajectories that bring disorganizing force to the inherited logic or vertical continuity of both agricultural and ethnic culture productions with lateral networking and changeable relationships.

*All Over Creation* is Ozeki’s second novel. Continuing the project that her first novel *My Year of Meats* began, it explores, via the inroads of food politics, the possibilities of individuals’ infiltration into transnational capitalist mega-powers. Yet, while *My Year of Meats* features as its leading character a half-Japanese and

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5 In her interview with Simon C. Estok, Ozeki talked about her reading of Pollan’s article and her “symbiotic relationship” with Pollan: “We feed each other” (8). Ozeki and Pollan got into email exchange after Ozeki finished her manuscript of *All Over Creation*: “we had been cross-pollinating, and I was delighted. I was so honored that he was reading my stuff, and he was happy that I had read his” (8).

6 About the cross-species imaginary advanced by *All Over Creation*, see also Susan McHugh. McHugh describes *All Over Creation* as “a transgenic plant fiction,” which takes on the “representational challenge by bringing together cross-species metaphorical and structural relationships in a narrative of one historically significant GM crop plant” (27).
half-white American female TV-series director Jane Takagi-Little, who is endowed with the ability—though not without limitations—to engage with cultural representations and transmissions, All Over Creation introduces protagonists inured in the mundane practices of life that make them, at least at first glance, unlikely candidates to intervene in the global bio-political power structure. In My Year of Meats, although Jane’s subservience to BEEF-EX (Beef Export and Trade Syndicate), which represents the power of the American meat industry and the violence of transnational capitalism, accounts for her anxiety of becoming “a go-between, a cultural pimp” that makes a living by selling off her dual affiliations with Japanese and American cultures (9), Jane probes, through the process of making TV documentaries, into the use of the synthetic hormone DES (diethylstilbestrol) in the beef industry and thereby becomes a subject who is fully aware of the evils of capitalism. Her resistance to the beef industry is based on her knowledge and a self-initiated refusal to become complicit with transnational corporations. In All Over Creation, however, neither the mixed-race protagonist Yumi nor her mother Momoko shares Jane’s level of self-awareness, much less her self-determination, to rebel. Their stories evoke a mode of biopolitics that hinges not as much on self-empowerment or identificatory consolidation as on their marginal positions and volatile relationships with the dominant structure of power, a biopolitics more closely aligned with the postcolonial nonorganic haunting described by Cheah as will be illustrated in following discussions.

All Over Creation opens with Yumi describing her experience of growing up in Idaho, in a fictional rural town Liberty Falls of Power County, as “a random fruit in a field of genetically identical potatoes” (4). Half-white Caucasian and half-Japanese, Yumi is born into “a large track of land known as Fuller Farms” as the only daughter of the large-scale potato farmer Lloyd, yet she inherits a taste for rice from her mother Momoko, which, according to Yumi, is “tantamount to treason” in “a state of spuds” (4). Indeed, it is from this idea of “treason,” or more precisely from the feelings of a Japanese war bride and her mixed-race daughter’s being traitors to a place and a community, that evolves Ozeki’s 420-page-long novel of multiple narrating voices and complicated plots.

At first sight, Momoko is a marginal character in All Over Creation. A silent woman who spends most of her time tending her small kitchen garden next to her house, Momoko hardly speaks through the novel. As a war bride Yumi’s white American father Lloyd brought back from Japan to Idaho after the Second World War, Momoko is a true random seed that is expected to be either assimilated,
weeded, or simply forgotten in a foreign land with little Asian presence.\footnote{Although Idaho, as well as other parts of the American west, has been described as mostly lacking the presence of Asians, writers like Robert T. Hayashi have tried to write against the grain by bringing into presence the traces and impacts of Asians in this area. Hayashi’s book \textit{Haunted by Waters} offers one example to recount the histories of racialized minorities—including Native Americans, Chinese, Hawaiians, and Japanese—in Idaho, and it details these minorities’ roles in defining and shaping the American western landscape. The existence of Japanese war brides, however, is not mentioned in \textit{Haunted by Waters}. \textit{All Over Creation} as such makes contributions by drawing attention to the stories of war brides in the American west.} For a long time Momoko has been taken as an outsider in Yumi’s eyes. Yumi confesses that before running away from home, her “allegiances” are firmly with her American father while Momoko appears to be someone who has “put herself outside” or could be “banished . . . entirely” (19). Besides, when Yumi finally returns to Idaho in 1998, 25 years after she leaves home, Momoko has suffered from Alzheimer’s. Though physically still healthy, she becomes amnesic, forgetting the names of things, even the names of the seeds she has planted and collected through her life.

Momoko is thus not a conventional agent who exercises individual will or nourishes ambitions of revolution. This article would nonetheless propose to understand her as the epicenter of the novel, arguing that \textit{All Over Creation} would lose its cause of movement, the driving force of plot evolvement, without Momoko and her seeds. To be specific, were it not for Momoko’s accidental immigration into Power County, the potato county in the novel would remain a field of genetically identical potatoes. Without Momoko’s small kitchen garden and its exotic vegetable wonder, which propagates “varieties of fruits and flowers that no one had ever seen before in Power County” (5), there would not be the Fullers’ mail-order seed business that Momoko initiates first on her own and is later joined by Lloyd after he gives up large-scale potato farming to follow his wife’s route into the garden. Moreover, without the small underground community gradually developing out of the mail-order seed business that sells hundreds of varieties of open-pollinated seeds, the five anti-biotechnology activists who call themselves “the Seeds of Resistance” would not be attracted to Power County. Ultimately, without the assistance of the five “Seeds of Resistance,” Momoko and Lloyd’s local efforts of seed distribution would not grow into a “computerized seed-library database,” that, via “the nonhierarchical networking potential of the Web,” disseminates seeds at a national and even global level (356).

\textit{All Over Creation} as such tests out an ethnopolitics and biopolitics that is not propelled by the organicism vitalism of a nation, a hereditary identificatory category, or an individual’s drive for resistance and transformation. Rather, the politics that
sprawls from Momoko’s seemingly unimportant kitchen garden in a remote Idaho location to national and global arenas is built on the random chances of encounters and network-making exterior to Momoko’s national and ethnic filiations. The fact that Momoko is a Japanese war bride with a volatile national and ethnic position is not without significance. Designating the group of Japanese women who married foreign military men after the Second World War, “Japanese war brides” used to be a term of stigma employed by the Japanese media in the 1940s and 1950s. The Japanese senso hanayome, which is a literal translation of the English term “war brides,” “invoked a negative and dark image associated with Japan’s defeat as well as a highly gendered image of ‘brides,’ which in combination made them a symbol of the American [men’s] control over Japan [women] and thus a symbol of national ‘shame’” (Yoshimizu 115; brackets in original). The marginal positions of war brides vis-à-vis both the Japanese and Japanese American communities were attributable to these brides’ images as “traitors” to Japanese national and racial heritage.

And if war brides were generally excluded from Japanese and Japanese American communities, they were likewise unable to achieve an unproblematic presence among white Americans. Caroline C. Simpson in “‘Out of an obscure place’: Japanese War Brides and Cultural Pluralism in the 1950s” contends that war brides and their interracial marriages were usually referred to by the U.S. media in a way to figure the fulfillment of American cultural pluralism, and yet the media’s attempts to whitewash war brides from “Madame Butterfly” into “American wife” were never free from contradictions (68). Indeed, the American media tended to foreground the difficulty of instilling American womanhood into Japanese war brides, reinforcing the stereotypes of these women’s being exotic. Oral stories of Japanese war brides also expose the racism these brides suffered in the U.S. 8 For the public media, moreover, assimilation might connote nothing more than “disappearance.” Not surprisingly, William L. Worden’s report for The Saturday Evening Post in 1954 is entitled “Where Are Those Japanese War Brides?,” which reiterates that the war brides “vanish” because they did not belong to the Japanese ethnic community (39): “The existing Japanese community just doesn’t accept the brides” and thus “few of the brides cling to Oriental communities”; “as Japanese

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8 See, for example, Smith and Worden’s report “They’re Bringing Home Japanese Wives,” which details the experiences of “little Madame Butterflys” (sic) in the Japanese brides’ school studying “hamburgers, Hollywood and home on the range, before coming to live in the U.S.A.” (27). For oral stories of Japanese war brides, see Crawford, Hayashi, and Suenaga, Japanese War Brides in America: An Oral History.
Evident is the deprivation of Japanese war brides of their subjectivities within the Japanese and the U.S. bipolar nationalist ideologies. In “Like a Bamboo: Representations of a Japanese War Bride,” Debbie Storrs invokes the image of “bamboo” to illustrate Japanese war brides’ lack of self-autonomy, as their subject position was constrained not only by “a patriarchal family structure” but also by “the larger cultural frames of race and nationality” (200). Storrs therefore proposes a moving away from the narrative frames of racial purity and nationalist assimilation in order to comprehend Japanese war brides’ agency. Reflecting on the narratives of the war-bride movement that has risen since the 1980s, Ayaka Yoshimizu also cautions against the over-reliance on nationalistic rhetoric. She argues in “‘Hello, War Brides’: Heteroglossia, Counter-Memory, and the Auto/biographical Work of Japanese War Brides”:

What I find particularly problematic is the nationalistic nature of these narratives [in the recent war-bride movement]. In an attempt to subvert the old narrative that war brides are a “shame” to the nation, the new narrative powerfully claims that rather they are “authentic Japanese women” and “ideal daughters of the Japanese nation” who have served as “ambassadors” from the homeland. . . . In fact, this highly nationalistic narrative does not adequately capture the transnational experiences and shifting identities of many war brides who have moved across borders and developed multiple senses of belonging . . . . (130-31)

In order to free Japanese war brides from the conventional representations as traitors, victims, or the assimilated—hence the forgotten—wives scattering into white domesticity, it is imperative to re-conceive war brides as figures exceeding the boundaries of nationalistic politics. In effect, war brides’ interracial affiliations make them a pliable nexus of differences. Read in light of Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih’s concept of “minor transnationalism,” war brides, as I would argue, could figure the juxtaposition of minority positions and transnational lines of flight. They might have played key roles in transnational encounters, capable of pushing for the proliferation of mixed-race lives and horizontal affiliations as demonstrated in the fictional figure of Momoko.

All Over Creation intervenes in the writing of war brides. It attempts a re-configuration of war brides from figures of ethnic stigma and nationalist
exclusion into figures conducive to life and change. Momoko, as mentioned above, is not characterized as a revolutionary subject with self-awareness and a strong determination to challenge existing power structures. She is not a Foucauldian subject whose life is defined as either a product of or an opposition to governmental rationality. The life force deriving from Momoko’s experiences could be understood instead from Deleuze’s correlation of life with the randomness on a plane of immanence. Deleuze conceives life force as exceeding the regulatory power structure and irreducible to an individual’s cogito. In his essay “Immanence: A Life,” life force is described to emerge from a transcendental field of impersonality, “a pure stream of a-subjective consciousness, a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness, a qualitative duration of consciousness without a self” (25). Precisely, immanence gives rise to life not out of any individual’s will-power but by allowing the free play of chance encounters, conjunctions, and mutual contaminations of “singular lives”—i.e., lives exterior to individuation and free of identity. Instead of associating life force with selves of identity and collectivity, Deleuze identifies a plane undivided by the function of subject and object as where the radical empiricism of life becomes possible. In All Over Creation, chances and randomness constitute the driving force of change as if illustrating Deleuze’s theory. The fact that Momoko is a “traitor” first to Asian/American ethnic/national commonality, then to her own consciousness and memory after developing Alzheimer’s, and ultimately to her seed business by giving all her seeds away, makes her a Deleuzian “singular life” par excellence.9

As shall been seen, Momoko’s subjectivity is repetitively cast into question. Momoko is described by her neighbors as Lloyd’s “crazy wife” (9)—the “old Japanese woman” who “still spoke with the deliberateness of a foreigner, carefully pronouncing words, lining them up one after another, and launching them tentatively into the air” after living fifty years in Idaho (10). Besides, Momoko strikes people as being unusually small, which further deprives her of adulthood. In Lloyd’s eyes, Momoko sitting at a table is “like a child at a task” (69). Lloyd once jokes about the smallness of Momoko to his neighbor: “Momoko’s too small. She’ll just buckle. Look, I’m afraid I’ve bent her in half already” (11). Yumi also associates her mother’s small stature with her lack of adult authority and

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9 “Traitor” is an image Deleuze appeals to in his theory on immanence and assemblage (agencement). In Deleuze’s own words: “What other reason is there for writing than to be traitor to one’s own reign, traitor to one’s sex, to one’s class, to one’s majority?” (Dialogues 44). In another passage, he writes: “. . . it is difficult to be a traitor; it is to create. One has to lose one’s identity, one’s face, in it. One has to disappear, to become unknown” (Dialogues 45).
independence: “She was as small as my child, and I felt her frail bones next to my breast and her heartbeat against mine. She clung to my waist like a vine . . .” (334). A character lacking physical strength and social stature, Momoko nonetheless “impacts” the world in some other ways. *All Over Creation* keeps reminding readers of Momoko’s unintended “imprints” in the world—the “by-products” of Momoko’s life. For example, Yumi notices that in Momoko’s kitchen there are “the imprints of Momoko’s feet, . . . the by-product of hours and years she must have spent standing there washing dishes” (65). In another episode, Yumi describes—not without symbolic implications—how her mother walks with “a damp wad of Kleenex” tucked into “the rolled cuff of her sleeve” to blow her nose, and this results in “[w]herever she went, she left behind a trail of soggy tissues” (146).

Momoko leaves traces, be they as trivial as the trail of “soggy tissues” or as influential as the seeds she cultivates in her small kitchen garden. And these traces are made mostly not out of Momoko’s one-way relationship with the outer world. Prevalent in *All Over Creation* is the two-way interaction—the encounter, the linkage, the symbiotic codependence or even coalescence—between Momoko and the exterior materiality. Besides engraving her bodily weight and everyday life practice onto the kitchen floor, in one passage Momoko is described as refusing to take off “a ratty old sweater with holes in the elbows, dotted all over with balls of pilled wool that clung to her like dung to a sheep’s bottom. Crusted bits of food and sticks and dirt had become part of the knit” (146). This description not only indicates how the old sweater has become indistinguishable from Momoko but shows how “food and sticks and dirt,” elements from the external world, have been affixed to the texture of the old sweater and hence become part of Momoko’s body. Indeed, when read with an awareness of Momoko’s intricate relation with the exterior world, the image of a “vine” to which Yumi compares Momoko assumes fresh meanings. Denoting Momoko’s physical frailty and lack of individuality on the one hand, the image of a “vine” on the other hand reveals vividly Momoko’s symbiotic entanglement with the world she inhabits. Also following the logic of the two-way interaction between the interior and the exterior, or between the self and the other, is Momoko’s politics of seeds. The Fullers’ collection of seeds is described by one of “the Seeds of Resistance” as embodying “the fruitful collaboration between nature and humankind” (162). Through the process of cultivating her seeds, Momoko plays the role of “the birds and the bees,” and indeed she is “more reliable than the birds and the bees, and with a far greater reach,” so that she is able to “play out the range of [plants’] diversity in the fullness of nature’s cycle” (113, 114).
This emphasis on Momoko’s role as a nexus, a linking point, between humans and other species in order to give to the full play nature’s bio-diverging potentiality resonates strongly with Deleuze’s proposal to substitute the logic of “And” for that of “Is” in conceiving the life-generating plane of immanence. While “Is” denotes the organismic vitality that predicates the linear growth of beings and collectivity, “And,” as pointed out by Deleuze, is a conjunction that is not “subordinate to the verb to be” (Dialogues 57). If “Is” heralds the replication and reproduction of an existence, the continuity and inheritance of certain sets of genetic essences, “And” then points toward “extra-being” or “inter-being” (Dialogues 57). Moreover, “And” does not simply bring about relations between two terms or two sets—relations that keep intact or join into a union the features of two terms or sets. The life-generating potential of “And” resides rather in that it “gives relations another direction, and puts to flight terms and sets”: “And” makes relations “shoot outside their terms and outside the set of their terms, and outside everything which could be determined as Being, One, or Whole” (Dialogues 57). In a word, “And” generates multiplicities; it accounts for the radical otherness to flow out in-between or outside the existent, as a rhizomic shooting off from the side and into another direction.

In fact, the birth of the Russet Burbank potato, the famous potato type out of which McDonald’s three-inch golden french fry standard developed, could be understood as one example of the offshoot coming from “the interplay between humans and nature” (DiNovella 42). DiNovella spells out the symbiosis of humans and nature in the development of nature’s diversity: “We would not have edible potatoes if it weren’t for human intervention. Wild potatoes are too toxic and bitter to eat. Through selective breeding and chance, humans have cultivated a wide variety of potatoes” (42). The Russet Burbank potato was produced out of the in-between space, an unpredictable exteriority of humans “and” nature. In Yumi’s words, the Russet Burbank potato is the result of “[c]enturies of cross-pollination, human-migration, plant mutation, and a little bit of backyard luck” (4). And this idea of giving nature’s randomness its full play through the interplay of humans and nature is further elaborated in All Over Creation through the logic of seed-dissemination, which implies a(n) (agri-)cultural logic that allows the promiscuous propagation of new types, given the fact that one never knows what would grow from an open-pollinated seed. In a memorable passage, one of “the Seeds of Resistance” claims that seeds are like “language,” or like “software” (123): “When you plant the pea, it’s like downloading software. The pea unstuffs and decompresses into a complex set of instructions powered by the sun. This program allows the plant to create its own food, which makes it grow” and interact with
other species, generating further ecological abundance (124). Seeds as such are not only where nature preserves its memories of survival and its genetic varieties but also where nature has in store its virtuality—its inexhaustible potential of propagating diversity. In fact, if seeds are like language, agribusiness, of which cloning and genetic modification technology is a part, could be compared to human science’s intervention into language, yet this time not as much to facilitate nature’s promiscuous living chances (as in the case of Momoko and her seeds) as to control its syntax and semantics. Both agriculture and agribusiness entail human interventions in nature. However, while agriculture cultivates and enhances nature’s potential to generate differences and propagate multiplicities, agribusiness rids nature of its poetic ability; it subjects nature’s metaphoric and metonymic potential to a market-oriented and capitalist driven monoculture. The result of replacing “agriculture” with “agribusiness,” of “poets” with “engineers,” and the domination of corporate mega-powers over our foods and poems is the general demise of biodiversity.

Certainly, my point of concern in this article is not confined to agriculture. Implicit in the analogy between seeds and language is the symbolic relationship between nature and culture. Agribusiness not simply undermines nature’s proliferating fertility but also plunges farmers into higher risk of economy and life. As shall be seen, despite the fact that Russet Burbank has been recognized as “the Wizard of Horticulture” who “invented hundreds of plants” (All Over Creation 177), the potato bearing his name, when appropriated by agribusiness, became the type reproduced in large-scale potato monoculture. A quintessential product of life-begetting agriculture, the Russet Burbank potato ended up being a symbol of death. As All Over Creation records, while the potato boom in the 1970s due to the rapid growth of global fast-food market and the exploding demand for French fries bring in money for spudmen like Lloyd, the competition between potato farmers to mass produce Burbank’s original chunk is responsible for the disappearance of other types of potato, the rise of potato monoculture, the incursion of insects, and the intervention of large corporations into potato farming. Indeed, when the competition becomes keen and prices are down, only high yields can make a profit. To ensure high yields, chemical inputs, weed killers, and mechanized farming become indispensable, which soon brings about individual farmers’ dependence on agribusiness-chemical corporations, the contamination of land and water, the demise of other floral species, and the high infertility rate among potato farmers. All these ultimately drive farmers into the planting of Bt potatoes,10 which then

10 “Bt” refers to “Bacillus thuringiensis,” the soil bacterium instilled into potatoes to make
accounts for the death of harmless insects such as Monarch butterflies and fosters the GM (Genetic Modification) technological economy that thrives on “the new Terminator technologies” (266)—the implantation of a self-destruct mechanism into each copy-righted Bt spud. All these hold farmers in deeper thrall to global capitalist tyranny. Enjoying monetary gain in the 1970s, Lloyd for a time takes pride in his being a monoculturalist and considers the large-scale farming of Burbanks as a sign of blooming life. “Look,” he points “the vast tumbling mountain of tubers” to Yumi, “They’re alive. Living and breathing”; and he explains “how cloning worked and how every potato was capable of creating endless offspring out of chunks of its living flesh” (112). What Lloyd remains unaware of when making statements like this is that his neighbor and Yumi’s childhood friend Cassie Quinn will grow up infertile because of the chemical insecticides used on the potato farm. Nor is he aware that what he takes as the sign of thriving life is at a deeper level a spell of death: the mass-production of the Burbanks leads not only to the demise of other vegetation but also to the deeper stratifications of the global economic structure as well as the exacerbated problems of women’s uterus cancer and infertility.11

Thus far I have focused on the character of Momoko and the nonorganic logic of “And” she exemplifies versus the potato monoculture. What has not been explored carefully is how these biopolitical concerns are related to Asian American ethno-politics. One question arises: if the mass production of one specific type of potato brings about the demise of nature’s multiplying possibility, what would come along with the institutional replication and commercial consumption of an ethnic identity and culture? Being one of the rhizomic branches sprawling from the life of Momoko and her seeds, Yumi’s story—especially her experiences on the U.S. west coast and Hawaii that span the first 44 pages of All Over Creation—offers glimpses to the predominant modes of Asian cultural dissemination in the U.S., modes that include the historical emergence and institutional development of Asian American studies in the 1970s and 1980s and the rise of the global market for oriental exoticism.

Understandably, the experience of being “a random seedling” or an “accidental fruit” in Idaho gives rise to Yumi’s unstable sense of self and a lack of safety—her prevalent fear of being “uprooted” from the place she inhabits (4). After potato plants develop their own insecticide that could kill the Colorado potato beetle, one of the most damaging insect pests of potatoes.

11 For discussions on the interconnected politics of food and gender, in particular on the issue of reproductive justice in All Over Creation, please see Stein.
a love affair with her school history teacher and an abortion, Yumi runs away from her home in 1974, at the age of fourteen, moving first to California, then Oregon and Texas, and ultimately to Hawaii, to be immersed in what she claims to be “a real Pan-Asian scene” (38). In a way that contrasts with what she has experienced in Idaho, in California and Hawaii Yumi appears to achieve a better sense of belonging as she soon catches up with the rising institutional interest in Asian American cultures. At the University of California at Berkeley she is awarded a prize for a paper entitled “The Exiled Self: Fragmentation of Identity in Asian-American Literature” and graduates in 1983 “with honors in English and Asian Studies” (39, 40). In Hawaii she pursues a graduate degree at the University of Hawaii and completes, in 1987, a master’s thesis bearing the title “Fading Blossoms, Falling Leaves: Visions of Transience and Instability in the Literature of the Asian-American Diaspora” (42). She ends up working as an adjunct instructor at a number of institutions around Hawaii, including the University of Hawaii.

Yumi’s rise on the educational ladder coincides with the history of Asian American studies which enjoyed rapid growth and wide institutionalization in the 1970s and 1980s in the U.S. academy. This experience of engaging with Asian American studies, however, does not necessarily endow Yumi with the critical power or self-reflexivity on issues of race and ethnicity. Albeit implicitly, All Over Creation conveys an ironic view on the political effectiveness of institutionalized Asian American studies. Not only is Yumi able to secure only an adjunct teaching position with her degree, but she also compares adjunct teaching to low-tiered seasonal labor work. Describing herself as “the professional equivalent of the migrant Mexican farm laborers hired during harvest” (172), in one letter to her parents Yumi even cites her first husband Paul, a sansei teaching Plant Sciences, to comment on the similarity between adjunct teaching and potato farming: like “any economy of scale,” adjunct teaching and farming potatoes impose similar requirements: “standardize your product, increase your volume, work the margins, and make sure your courses are cosmetically flawless” (43).

Yumi’s story implies that Asian American studies as an institutionalized discipline does not automatically generate power of cultural negotiation. Living in a world in which ethnic cultures and identities are gaining increasing commercial value, Yumi may find teaching courses like “Japanese Poetry in Translation” a convenient way to ride on the global trend in ethnic cultural consumption and make a living out of it. The fact that Yumi does not only teach but also work as a part-time online realtor under the nickname “Yummy Fuller,” a name deriving from the frequent mispronunciation of “Yumi,” testifies further to her awareness of a
burgeoning market for oriental exoticism and her attempt to cater to it: Yumi as “Yummy Fuller” sells not only pieces of Hawaiian land designated as “paradise” but also a “delicious” image of cultural exoticism, which is vividly conveyed by the name “Yummy,” as well as by the photographic image of a woman “with long dark hair” and “wearing a crown of flowers” on her website (33).

Yumi’s story on the U.S. west coast and Hawaii as such bears witness to the intersection of at least two conspicuous modes of Asian cultural dissemination in the world. The first mode denotes that Asian American studies, while in the process of being institutionalized and gaining more visibility in academic sites, has risked losing its activist spirit—its life-giving power of rebellion—that underscored its emergence in the 1960s. The way Yumi describes her Master’s thesis—that it is about “the way images of nature are used as metaphors for cultural dissolution” (42), sarcastically captures a pessimistic view toward Asian American culture within the academy. The second mode, rendered visible by Yumi’s self-masquerade as “Yummy,” is further manifested by the circulation of Asian cultural bits and pieces as commodified fetishes pursued by transnational capitalists. Besides the oriental exoticism touted on Yumi’s real-estate website, All Over Creation also features Duncan, the junior partner of the multinational public relation corporate Duncan & Wiley, as a collector of Asia-Pacific cultural objects. For him, the act of collecting exotic cultural objects goes hand in hand with his company’s project of overseas expansion. For example, a recent buying off of a prominent Japanese firm is signaled by Duncan’s drinking green tea from a ceramic bowl. A business trip back from Maui sees him devour seaweeds and avocados. The inclusion of a statue of Kali, the Hindu Goddess of destruction, into his collection further betokens his setting up a corporate base in Delhi. In fact, the headquarters of his company located in Washington D.C. offers yoga courses, has each individual office feng-shuied, and provides an Eastern diet not simply because of his personal fascination with the Eastern cultures but also because of his awareness that his company’s future “lies in the Third World” (277). People like Duncan may contribute to the increased market value of certain Asian cultural icons, but this leads only to the commodification of specific cultural customs and objects, instead

12 Ozeki’s writing casts into relief Asian American studies’ self-reflecting efforts on the field’s transformation from being closely associated with mass movements in the 1960s to constituting a solid presence in the university across the U.S. As Mark Chiang points out, “during the 1990s, tensions began to develop in the field, tensions between theory and practice, between political work and intellectual work, and between the community and the academy” (1). For details, see Chiang’s The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies.
of enacting real cultural exchanges or cultivating ethno-diversity.

Yumi’s story on the west coast and Hawaii thus connotes bleak prospects for Asian (American) ethno-politics. However, that Ozeki has this part of the story retold at a fast pace in the first 44 pages of her 420-page-long novel reminds us that the institutionalization of Asian American studies and the commodification of Asian cultures are at most branching lines of, or more precisely preludes to, the larger and far more complicated narrative introduced by *All Over Creation*, of which the stories of shadowy figures like Momoko constitute important, though usually neglected, parts. A closer reading of *All Over Creation* also reveals that even Yumi’s life extends beyond her participation in Asian American studies or her complicity with the global orientalist consumption.

Specifically, being one of the seeds Momoko disseminates into the world, Yumi is always more than “Yummy.” Yumi once explains that her name, if pronounced correctly, sounds like “you-me” articulated at a fast speed (27). Not accidentally, Yumi serves in the novel as a Deleuzian “And”—a linking point of various plot lines. Her complicated life trajectories allow her to conjoin different geographical locations and people of various ethnic, cultural, and class backgrounds: she runs away from Idaho’s potato monoculture, participates but is never completely assimilated by the academic or global Asian (American) category, marries three times (the first time with a Japanese American, the second time with a Caucasian white, and the third time with a Hawaiian native), and gives birth to three crossbred children before moving back to Idaho and finally joining force with “the Seeds of Resistance” in the project of seed-dissemination. Yumi is frequently designated as “a bad seed” (79, 190, 201) in *All Over Creation*, which bespeaks her betrayal of any structural commonality. Like Momoko, she moves across the margins of Asian American identificatory terrains.

Previously, through an analysis of Momoko’s experiences and characterization, I have pointed out how Ozeki attempts to retrieve Japanese war brides from the margins of Asian American or American nationalist politics. Here, I want to add that, by bringing to the fore the life stories of characters such as Momoko and Yumi, Ozeki also partakes in a reflection on the nature and potential of Asian American politics. Indeed, the validity of “Asian American” as an identity category has been an issue of concern in the history of Asian American studies. Even during the pan-ethnic nationalist period, when the *Aiiiiieeeeeel!* editors advocated a unique Asian American sensibility for the consolidation and empowerment of the community of Asian origins, the “real” and “fake” debate, or more precisely the debate deriving from the conflicting agendas of “Chinatown Cowboys” and “Warrior Women,”
already testified to the inherent contradictions of “Asian American” as one ethno-political group. In the 1990s, the increasingly diversified composition of Asian America, due largely to the new arrivals from South and Southeast Asia and the increasing number of the Asia-born immigrants after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, caused even more critical attention to be directed to the heterogeneous constitution of Asian America. In “Assaying the Gold: Or, Contesting the Ground of Asian American Literature,” Shirley Geok-Lin Lim casts into relief the growing anxiety about the effectiveness of “Asian American” as a label in addressing the hybrid concerns and shifting goals of Asian American politics. According to Lim, “[t]he rubric ‘Asian American literature,’ first made common through the 1970s anthologies, is both exceedingly contemporary, a newly invented epistemological tool, and already collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions” (162). And this impending collapse of “Asian American literature” as a conceptual framework, despite its being a recent invention, is due primarily to the even faster development of Asian American cultures in their real-life concreteness: “[t]he evolution of Asian American cultures, not a homogeneous entity but heterogeneous in national and cultural origin, is faster than can be or has been conveyed through cultural analysis . . .” (Lim 162).

Being aware that the changes of real-life cultures are speedier and more unpredictable than categorical constructions and adaptations, Asian American critics have been making efforts to salvage “Asian American” from degenerating into a fixed identity of regression and repression. In “Centers without Margins: Responses to Centrism in Asian American Literature,” Stephen H. Sumida, for example, employs the spatial metaphor of a permanently enlarging cosmos to describe the ever expanding Asian American cultures, wherein “Asian America” serves as gravitational center that fosters and correlates the “ever-expanding,” yet “energetically contiguous” and mutually interacting, constituents of the cosmos (808). Other critics appeal to the arrow of time as another conceptual model to

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14 Sumida actually casts his idea of Asian America as a self-enlarging and perpetually inclusive category into a vivid image of rising and radiating raisin bread without a hardening “crust or surface”—an image exhibiting strong organismic vitalism: “I thought then of a radiance: a center that radiates ripples, light, waves, energy, a cosmos. Actually, I thought of raisin bread, which was an analogy I once saw applied to illustrate what the Big Bang Theory might look like: the universe ever-expanding but still energetically contiguous, like raisin bread rising, all atoms connected and interacting—but without a crust or surface” (808).
project an Asian American unity into a perpetually deferred future. This second model is described by Susan Koshy in “The Fiction of Asian American Literature” as “a strategic deferral”—to place Asian American configuration in “the highly unstable temporality of the ‘about-to-be,’ its meanings continuously reinvented after the arrival of new groups of immigrants and the enactment of legislative changes” (315). Differing from Sumida’s spatial model, strategic deferral suspends the definition of “Asian America” toward a “not-yet-arrived” future. It nonetheless shares with Sumida’s spatial model the desire to endow the identificatory label “Asian American” with a pluralistic ideal of inclusiveness—an organismic self-actualization in the cosmos or the future. “Asian American” here is imagined as a “pluralistic idiom of inclusion” despite the escalating differences and contradictions within itself (Koshy 316).

As an attempt to depart from this vision of organismic pluralism, Kandice Chuh in Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique introduces a poststructuralist-inflected critical view to rid the label “Asian American” of its referential depth. Repudiating any stable identificatory substance attached to “Asian American,” Chuh proposes an “a priori meaninglessness of ‘Asian American,’ the absence of an identity anterior to naming” (149). According to Chuh, if “Asian American” in the 1960s and the 1970s was invented strategically for summoning up the power of people of diverse Asian ancestries to fight against racism, “the practice of strategic anti-essentialism” is now necessary for “Asian American” to be imagined beyond the confinement of any narrowly defined nationalism and culturalism (149). Her way of restoring a life-begetting power to “Asian American” is to appeal to the term’s literariness, its operation as a signifier “in difference from itself” (8; emphasis in original). As she elaborates: “Asian American” as a critical term launches an ongoing process of “becoming and undoing”—“‘Asian American’ is/names racism and resistance, citizenship and its denial, subjectivity and subjection” (8). Here, “Asian American” is no longer “subject-driven” but works as a critical category, a signifier of self-deconstruction, a term that not only can resist racism and other forms of sociopolitical injustice but can also spawn racial, ethnic, and cultural differences within itself.

Chuh’s appeal to its “a priori meaninglessness” frees “Asian American” from any stable identificatory substance; it contributes to the nonorganic imagination of “Asian America” proposed in this article. However, the overall rejection of any material referent of “Asian American” may incur problems. Christopher Lee, for

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15 Koshy takes Frank Chin, Elaine H. Kim, and Shirley Geok-Lin Lim as examples in her discussion of the temporal deferral strategy.
example, points out in his reading of Chuh that “[t]he problem with blanket refusals of referentiality . . . is that they posit a rigid opposition between referentiality, understood as a reifying operation, on the one hand and a completely open-ended notion of critique on the other” (28). There is probably no need for a category to be completely free from referential points to obtain the power of open-ended critique. The fact that there are people who identify themselves with, or are designated as, Asian Americans, and that “Asian American” has been a recognized minority category with historical and political consequences further strengthens the idea that “Asian American” as an identity category possesses socio-political materiality.

Here, to respond to this debate on the material referentiality of “Asian American,” I propose to tease from the politics of seed-dissemination introduced by All Over Creation a life-begetting “subjectless” Asian American discourse that is not predicated on the deconstruction of Asian American subjective existence. All Over Creation does not rid “Asian American” of its materiality; it instead brings us to the margins of Asian American transnational and interracial migrancy to explore an Asian Americanness that is grounded on the ongoing and shifting experiences of concrete lives. The idea that Asian American characters such as Momoko and Yumi are like seeds disseminated to the margins of Asian American geographical and identificatory configurations to live in proximity with racial/cultural others suggests that “Asian American” could be less a category of hereditary permanence than an avenue for one to generate or become others. Instead of serving as a premise or a precondition of Asian American politics, “being subjectless” here bespeaks an inevitable consequence of open-ended becoming as “Asian American identity” is deployed by Ozeki as a point of transit—a ghostly conduit that does not operate toward self-empowerment or categorical consolidation but fosters contingences and contaminations through the conjunction of divergent existences such as—but not limited to—Asia and America.

This being said, one may argue that by developing Alzheimer’s and becoming amnesic, Momoko turns into a genuinely “subjectless” figure. Amnesia does not undermine Momoko’s life-giving force; instead, All Over Creation dramatizes through Momoko’s amnesia a “new groundlessness” on which all categories, names, and labels are cast into flux (176). In one revealing episode, Ozeki plays on

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16 Lee quotes from Iyko Day to clarify this point: “We must acknowledge that there are real-life referents of the term ‘Asian American,’ which include its hard-won roles as a state-recognized minority category for civil rights monitoring and its more negative existence in U.S. society as an undifferentiated ‘foreign’ population subject to racial hostilities” (qtd. in Lee 28).
Momoko’s “demented logic” by casting Momoko’s living room into a space of displaced labels: the letter signs prepared by Lloyd to remind Momoko of the name of every object in the living room are moved around by Yumi’s kids so that “[t]he living room wall now said BEDROOM. The chair had turned into the CEILING. The Teapot was a REFRIGERATOR” (117). While Geek, one of “the seeds of Resistance,” might claim that “in this day and age, without a label, how can you tell?” (414), Momoko’s living room of misplaced labels in effect opens up a play on the chances of signifying multiplications brought about by the nomadic linkages and random connections of words and their referents.

Not surprisingly, when Momoko decides to move from Idaho to Hawaii, she does not take with her the collection of seeds. Momoko chooses to give all the seeds away, consenting to the plan of “the Seeds of Resistance” to disseminate her seeds via the network of the internet. She speaks out her logic to her dying husband: “Keeping is not safe. Keeping is danger. Only safe way is letting go. Giving everything away. Freely” (358). Instead of holding the seeds under her name—hence passing on a fixed label, she prefers to have the memories and possibilities inscribed in the seeds to find their own names and landings. Through her consent to give away her seeds, Momoko also transforms her local and personal efforts of seed-cultivation into a taskforce that links various groups of people across different geographical sites: Yumi will run the websites of seeds designed by “the Seeds of Resistance” from Pahoa, Hawaii; Yumi’s childhood neighbor Cassie will distribute the seeds from Liberty Falls, Idaho; and “the Seeds of Resistance” get on their way to continue their anti-agribusiness and anti-GM technology movement across North America. Toward the end of All Over Creation, “the Seeds of Resistance” participate in the anti-WTO protest in Seattle in 1999. Through the complex interlinks between Idaho, Hawaii, and the Washington State, what starts as a minor local effort of a shadowy Asian American figure has translated into a mobile global cultural intervention.

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