

# “The Nebulous Shape of Narrative”: A History of Trauma and Vyvyane Loh’s *Breaking the Tongue*

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## ABSTRACT

From the opening scene where the protagonist comes to the disorienting realization that he is being tortured, it is clear that Vyvyane Loh’s debut novel *Breaking the Tongue* is deeply concerned with torture, and in this paper I contend that torture structures and refracts the multivocality and multiplicity of the nonlinear narratives that comprise the text in ways that imagine its traumatizing effects, including positioning the reader inescapably as part of the historical tragedy of the Sook Ching Massacre in particular and colonialism in general even decades after the fact. I argue that this focus on torture is meant not only to centralize protagonist Claude Lim’s experiences to effect a certain commentary on Singaporean nationality and nation-building, including a narrative of being chosen that refracts and plays upon a sense of both traumatic history and working through trauma, inextricably entangled with decolonization and the Sook Ching Massacre, but also to mimic, mime, and otherwise enact the subsequent traumatic effects of torture and thereby positions the reader paradoxically as a victim of, witness to, and perpetrator of torture as well. In this paper, I will focus mainly on the character of Claude and the Sook Ching Massacre as it is represented in the novel, and how the novel intertwines anxieties about colonial legacies of deculturalization with the trauma of war, specifically the singling out of Chinese persons qua Chinese drawing upon pertinent concepts on trauma from Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra.

**KEYWORDS:** Vyvyane Loh, *Breaking the Tongue*, Sook Ching Massacre, Singaporean national identity, chosenness, Chineseness, trauma history

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Vyvyane Loh's *Breaking the Tongue* commences with a disorienting alliteration of "[f]loat, fly, flame up" that confers sensory dimensions to the "sensation of rising" (21) which alludes to Claude Lim's out-of-body experience as a victim of torture. Next is a definition of sublimation,<sup>1</sup> and then the description turns to the "solid matter below, the huddled shape with its one arm splayed, elbow bent at an impossible *obtuse* angle" (21). The switch from a nebulous airiness to a concrete materiality of "solid matter" functions as a zoom-effect, zeroing in on the huddled and beaten shape. The contrast between the haziness of the opening description and the brutal physicality of torture lends the novel a cinematographic feel: from an unfocused view of the upper reaches of the room, no clear identifying details, suggesting a hazy out-of-focus shot, to an abrupt panning down and extreme close-up of the beaten form of Claude Lim. The sudden recognition that "that's Claude" after first finding this bruised face to be "unfamiliar" (22) is also a movement from a kind of disinterested bird's-eye-view to a direct address to the reader: "You look at yourself, your broken arm, your bloody face, the caved-in ribs, and you almost feel sorry" (22). But this recognition and direct address of the reader do not switch the perspective to the first person or even limited third person. Rather, there is an absolute separation made clear when the question is posed "[W]hat is your part in all this?" and "What do they want with *him*?" (22; emphasis in orig.). The person being tortured is "Claude the Body"; yet, the direct address of the reader through "you" at once conflates the reader with, while differentiating the reader from, Claude the Body. Moreover, in questioning what is "your part in all this," the direct address positions the

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<sup>1</sup> In *Rethinking Chineseness: Translational Sinophone Identities in the Nanyang Literary World*, E. K. Tan analyzes the introduction of the scientific term in which Loh replaces the gaseous state with "the liquid state in the form of water, which is a state that does not belong in the process" of sublimation so that "water carries the significant purpose of bringing the protagonist back to consciousness in order for the interrogators to proceed with their questioning" (57). Tan argues that "the liquid state, which is omitted in the process of sublimation, is a metaphorical catalyst for the novel's narrative development, as well as the identity construction of both the novel and the main character" (57). He concludes that "[t]he structure of the novel, hence, is symptomatic of the process of psychoanalytical sublimation, a transference of libidinal drives through processes of abjection, into socially generative attempts in aesthetic production—in the case of *Breaking the Tongue*, a literary one" (103). In this case, I think that my focus on the way in which Loh utilizes torture as topic, theme, and narrative arrangement dovetails with his contention; my stance is complementary rather than contradictory, and vice versa. I am interested in the distorting and twisting effects and affect of the novel, while Tan is using the metaphor of sublimation to understand the protagonist's journey towards constructing a Sinophone identity.

reader as a witness, separate from “him” that is the body, yet still inextricably intertwined with Claude Lim vis-à-vis Claude the Body.<sup>2</sup>

From this opening scene, it is clear that Loh’s novel is deeply concerned with torture, and I contend that torture structures and refracts the multivocality and multiplicity of the nonlinear<sup>3</sup> narratives that comprise *Breaking the Tongue* in ways that imagine its traumatizing effects, including positioning the reader inescapably as part of the historical tragedy of the Sook Ching (肅清)<sup>4</sup> Massacre in particular and colonialism in general even decades after the fact.<sup>5</sup> Etymologically, torture derives from the Late Latin *torquere*: “to twist, turn, wind, wring, distort” (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). In the context of its linguistic roots of twisting and distorting, torture is by definition “the act of causing severe physical pain as a form of punishment or as a way to force someone to do or say something,” and/or “the infliction of intense pain . . . to punish, coerce, or afford sadistic pleasure” (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*). According to Article 1 of the United Nations Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT),

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Tan argues similarly that “[y]ou’ is not an actual participant but is caught between Claude the Body and the omnipresent narrator” so that this addressee “is almost Claude, but not really” (57–58). Moreover, as Sally McWilliams indicates in “Intervening in Trauma: Bodies, Violence, and Interpretive Possibilities in Vyvyan Loh’s *Breaking the Tongue*,” the use of “[y]ou’ turns the story outward towards the reader, thereby straining to collapse the space between victim and reader, the space between torture and safety” (149). I explore further implications of the direct address to the reader in light of Loh’s use of torture as leitmotif in *Breaking the Tongue*.

<sup>3</sup> McWilliams points out that

Nonlinearity destabilizes our understanding of the discourses and practices of state-sponsored domination as it allows the intrusion of insidious trauma into the site of event trauma. Such narration becomes a politically resistant act as it thwarts the hierarchical discourse of progress and the writing of history. The shifts in narrative points of view in the early chapters of *Breaking the Tongue*, likewise, reinforce the feminist challenge to conventional representations of authority and discourses of power. (148)

I agree with her position, but my focus is not only on how the nonlinearity destabilizes the reader’s understanding of the text but also how it narratologically mimics, performs, or otherwise engages the reader to experience Claude’s torture.

<sup>4</sup> Pinyin: sùqīng; meaning: purge through cleansing.

<sup>5</sup> In “Rethinking Torture’s Dark Chamber,” Stephanie Athey similarly contends that “[t]hrough these scenes that torture the tongue—in the Haw Par theme park, in dreams, and in Claude’s torture cell—Loh suggests torture undergirds the Chinese didactic tradition, the British colonial enterprise, and Japanese conquest. She connects the linguistic and physical violence of the domestic realm with that of the state prison cell” (19). Athey’s argument is interesting, but too sweeping in my opinion. How can torture be the foundation for the Chinese didactic tradition, the British colonial enterprise, and Japanese conquest? While it is true of the last, I think it is debatable for the first two, especially as the scenes from Haw Par theme park are hellish imaginations of punishment, not actual punishments overseen by educational institutions or institutionalized by the Chinese state.

. . . “torture” means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions. (“What We Do / Torture Rehabilitation”)

Here, it is clear that torture is not merely the infliction of pain, physical and/or mental, but it is also a systematic process, often with the assent, tacit or explicit, of state authorities. In effect, as a technique of the state, as Elaine Scarry points out in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* torture “comes to be described—not only by regimes that torture but sometimes by people who stand outside those regimes—as a form of *information-gathering* or (in its even more remarkable formulation) *intelligence gathering*” (12). However, as Scarry goes on to argue, such disingenuous statements belie the fact that under torture victims will say anything. Indeed, many reports on torture have come to the conclusion that worthwhile intelligence cannot be obtained in this manner; anything said under the harrowing effects of systematic physical and psychological trauma is suspect. What then does it mean to claim that torture is not only a thematic and narratological focus for the novel but that it also effects and renders the multiple narratives of *Breaking the Tongue*?

Here, I argue that this focus on torture centralizes Claude’s experiences to perform a certain commentary on Singaporean nationality and nation-building, including a narrative of *being chosen* that prismatically distorts and plays upon a sense of both traumatic history and working through trauma. Part of this distortion lies in what I call diasporic mis/remembering. Diasporic mis/remembering refers to how migrants and those living in the diaspora may mis/remember the culture and history of “home,” however that is defined. Moreover, the weaving together of chosenness, Singaporean nationalism, and postcolonialism is precisely premised upon not only the entanglement of

traumatic history and working through trauma with the Sook Ching Massacre, but also with the ways in which this entanglement also mimics, mimes, and otherwise enacts the subsequent traumatic effects of torture and thereby positions the reader paradoxically as a victim of, witness to, and perpetrator of torture as well. Hence, the novel enacts a dialectic of trauma where, as Judith Herman argues in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, “[w]itnesses as well as victims are subject” (2) since, as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub notes in *Testimony*, “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (57). Torture, as Herman, Felman and Laub note, is not contained within the interaction of the torturer and the tortured; rather, in order to work through the experience of torture, the tortured invariably give testimony to their experiences, and by doing so bring in the listener-witness as “participant and co-owner” of the trauma.

In this way, the reader is brought into Claude’s torture as “participant and co-owner” through the narrative schema. The structure of the narrative mimics the disorientation and fragmentation of memory and self that torture causes; the reader is witness to and partially experiences trauma through the “torturous” narrative, its achronological and dizzying jumps in time, abrupt changes in character point of view augured by different torture sessions, and switches in geographical location. The distorting and vertiginous layering of multiple narratives, together with their accompanying lacunae resulting from the nonlinearity and unreliability that frame each layer, suggests and stages a break in history for the Chinese in Singapore.<sup>6</sup> Singapore historically was part of Malaya, which has a long history of being colonized, including by a runaway prince from Palembang, a narrative thread Loh weaves into her novel, but it was most recently colonized by the British in the eighteenth century. The Japanese occupation of Singapore and other parts of Malaya in World War II signaled the end of direct British colonial control, and British relinquishment after World War II with the proposed Malayan Union,

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<sup>6</sup> In “Histories of the Present: Reading Contemporary Singapore Novels between the Local and the Global,” Philip Holden posits that Loh’s “text is concerned with memory work and the retrieval of histories which blur the distinction between public and private” so that it “dramatizes not just history itself but the process through which history is written, the narrativisation of the everyday.” I concur with Holden’s analysis, and this paper seeks to investigate Loh’s “dramatization of history” in its representation of the Sook Ching Massacre and diasporic mis/remembrance.

established in 1946, was quickly dissolved and replaced by the Federation of Malaya. But existing and continuous tensions regarding the ethnic Chinese population and a state of emergency in relation to Communist guerrilla groups eventually led to Singapore leaving (or being expelled from) the Federation in 1965, and it formed its own government as the only island nation-state as the Republic of Singapore. This complex history is further problematized in the novel through its focus on torture. I posit that in its “dramatization” of history, *Breaking the Tongue* catoptrically reflects and reimagines what the Sook Ching Massacre may comprise, in the words of Cathy Caruth, not just history but specifically a “history of trauma” (60) for the Chinese *qua* Chinese in Singapore, including an oblique commentary on the distorting and torturous effect of colonialism.

Some questions that arise are: *whose* history is at stake in the novel? *What kind* of history? *Breaking the Tongue* is chiefly concerned with Singaporean Chinese history, which has come to dominate the national narrative and imagination through a confluence of historical “accidents” such as the demographical numerical superiority of the ethnic Chinese and other factors. However, while the title (as the novel circuitously explains in rather gruesome terms through Claude’s recurring nightmare of having his tongue amputated, symbolic of his disquiet about deculturalization) and the protagonist’s identity conflict both reference Singaporean Chinese history, this is history that intersects with British colonialism and Japanese occupation. Indeed, one could argue that Singaporean Chinese history is rooted in those colonialisms. Due to the constraints of this paper, I will focus mainly on the character of Claude Lim, the protagonist, and the Sook Ching Massacre as it is represented in the novel. I am chiefly concerned with how the novel intertwines anxieties about colonial legacies of deculturalization with the trauma of war, specifically the singling out of Chinese persons *qua* Chinese, and the ways in which the novel deploys this intersection of deculturalization and torture with colonialism and war to problematically engage with the pain of deculturalization and the narrative of deculturalization as pain.

## **I. History of Chosenness**

In *Breaking the Tongue*, the narrative begins *in media res* with the torture of protagonist Claude Lim. In a series of nonlinear flashbacks, shifts in characters’ points of view, and splices of Singaporean history and mythology

such as the founding myth of the runaway prince from Palembang, Claude’s childhood of identity conflict as an Anglophone Chinese, or *Peranakan*, is revealed, along with glimpses into his mother’s serial adultery, his father’s pompous obliviousness to it, and various windows into other characters’ lives. Central is Han Ling-li, who Claude meets after the fall of Singapore and impresses him with her ferocious spirit and unwavering belief in Chinese nationalism (despite the irony of that belief system being the narrative pinpoints). The overall trajectory follows Claude’s torture to his inexplicable release and his slow recovery. However, Ling-li’s fate is unclear, and trying to unravel this mystery is the center of the novel’s climax.

In the historical context of the novel, beyond bare facts, a lot of the events and details about the Sook Ching Massacre cannot be concretely verified, in part because of the deliberate destruction of records and documents by Japanese officials when defeat was imminent near the end of the war. On 15 February 1942, British forces surrendered to the Japanese at the Old Ford Factory in Singapore. The Japanese occupied Singapore and the area today known as Malaysia from approximately 1941 to 1945, when World War II ended. During their occupation of these conquered lands, the Japanese committed many atrocities, including the Sook Ching Massacre, or “purge through purification” as Choon Hon Foong and Jane Thum Soon Kun explain in *Eternal Vigilance: The Price of Freedom* (110). According to Lee Geok Boi’s *The Syonan Years*, the Japanese term for the Sook Ching was “*dai kensho*” “meaning ‘great inspection’” (105). This “great inspection” of Singapore led to 5,000 deaths according to Lt-Col. Sugita Ichiji, chair of a Tokyo war-time inquiry, 6,000 deaths according to the Kempeitai (Japanese military police) reports, or 40,000 deaths according to the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce as declared in the post-war claims for reparations (Lee Geok Boi 110).

Besides that these disparate numbers demonstrate quite clearly that this is a history that cannot be known completely, they also showcase quite starkly the kinds of competing narratives that surface in history and historiography. Even the layperson, with no specialized knowledge of the Sook Ching Massacre, can hazard a clear theory as to why these accounts differ so drastically. Each side has its own political agenda and interests, and those aspects surface in the kinds of disparities and even contradictions among the histories recorded and told. Yet, as Frank Ankersmit points out in

“Historiography and Postmodernism,” “[h]istorical interpretations of the past first become recognizable, [when] they first acquire their identity, through the contrast with other interpretations; they are what they are only on the basis of what they are not” (142). There is a careful excision of history that makes history possible, or at least allows history to be intelligible. In his essay, Ankersmit refers to the field of historiography and how one interpretation of history is inadequate to understanding it, so that, referencing the work of Hayden White, “all historiography . . . [is] fundamentally ironic” (qtd. in Ankersmit 143): historians study the writing of and write history but those histories are discussed in the plural precisely because no history is or can possibly be complete.

Here, I am not intervening in debates about the philosophy of history, especially since at no point does Loh claim that her novel is anything other than fiction. However, as White points out in “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory,” both history and literature depend upon narrative, and this correspondence “means that what distinguishes ‘historical’ from ‘fictional’ stories is first and foremost their *contents*, rather than their *form*” (2). He observes that the use of narrative in history is “a simulacrum of the structure and processes of real events” (3). While most of White’s scholarship focuses on the nineteenth century, his analyses of history and narrative in general terms are useful to discussing the ways in which *Breaking the Tongue* both draws upon the discursive elements of narrative and also upends them, not necessarily to give an “alternative” history or imply an alternative philosophy of history, but rather to exemplify the slippage between fiction and history.

For Loh’s *Breaking the Tongue*, Claude’s trauma plays upon and with this fundamental irony of history, as evidenced in the kind of mythology implied about the Sook Ching Massacre and in Loh’s narrative use of it. Here, I mean the ways in which this “purge” of the Chinese in Singapore obtains a status in the history of Singapore as Singapore, that it functions as a kind of foundational myth for Singapore as Singapore. In other words, Claude’s identity crisis about being Chinese in British-controlled Singapore is seemingly resolved through the Japanese hypostatization of this ethnic-racialization via torture. This hypostatization demonstrates a kind of diasporic mis/remembrance since singling out British Chinese for their deculturalized status as being inimical to the stability of the Japanese occupation of



Singapore and Malaya clashes with any perceived ties to Chinese nationalism. But what does it mean to link these colonialisms, histories, and identities? In *Unclaimed Experiences* Caruth argues in her analysis of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* that the text is Freud's "attempt to explain the Nazi persecution of the Jews" (12) which theorizes the history of Jews *qua* Jews as founded in "the sense of *being chosen by God*" through "the passing on of the monotheistic religion" (67; emphasis in orig.). In a complicated and seemingly fictionalized account,<sup>7</sup> Freud argues that beyond the exodus from Egypt, as Caruth notes, "what constitutes the essence of [Jewish] history is the repression, and return, of the deeds of Moses" (14) such as his murder which allowed for Judaism to assimilate or subsume his Egyptian monotheistic religion. Thus, the irony of "being chosen," according to Freud, is rooted in a departure (the literal emigration from Egypt) that is also a return (the assimilation of a waning Egyptian monotheistic religion), overlaid by and founded upon trauma and its necessary repression. Just as Jewish history begins with "*being chosen*" with all the ironic and murderous implications in which the mythos paradoxically both obscures and is rooted, so too does *Breaking the Tongue* reflect and refract a certain mythos about being chosen: "The Sook Ching—the Purge through Purification—was reserved for the Chinese" (Loh 442). For Freud, "chosenness" is religious ("chosen by God"). For Claude Lim, "chosenness" is a literal torture that ironically solidifies his previously-uncertain ethnic-racial identity (the Sook Ching is "reserved for the Chinese"). Here, what I am most interested in exploring is the *metaphor* of "chosenness" from Caruth's reading of Freud and its implications for reading *Breaking the Tongue*.

As a metaphor of reading, "chosenness" is both mytho-historical and fraught with violence. What is at stake in the paradox of "being chosen" for the Jews according to Freud is, as Caruth pinpoints, how "[t]he history of chosenness, as the history of survival, thus takes the form of an unending confrontation with the returning violence of the past" (69). It is in essence Freud's theory of the repetition compulsion taken to the macro level. Moreover, the discursive and cultural violence of othering implicit in "chosenness" is often accompanied by (state-authored) physical violence. For Loh's novel, this violence implicit in "chosenness" is recursively imagined as when the Japanese chief interrogator tells Claude the Body that "we are only

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<sup>7</sup> See Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* for further details.

trying to understand your kind. How you could stand to be slaves of Western pigs, why you've accepted their language" (128). Here, Loh suggests that Claude Lim is singled out for being an Anglophone Chinese, that the deculturalization of the Chinese is ironically at the heart of the violence aimed at them.

During the Japanese occupation of Singapore and Malaya, the Japanese military enacted an operation to neutralize any remaining opposition to their conquest, but the rather arbitrary selection processes tend to indicate and are read as revealing a kind of tribal antagonism on the part of the Japanese towards the Chinese. This implied ethno-racism draws on the documented horrors of the Nanjing Massacre which seemed to delineate the template for interactions between Japanese occupiers and the Chinese in conquered territories during World War II. In *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore*, Kevin Blackburn and Karl Hack document that "[o]n 18 February 1942, therefore, the commander of the twenty-fifth Army in Malaya, Lieutenant General Tomoyuki Yamashita, gave the order for *genju shobun* (severe punishment) of the Chinese population" (137). Previous "'*soto*' (mopping-up) operations" in mainland China provided the context so that "Yamashita's subordinates knew *genju shobun* to require *shukusei* (purging or cleansing)" (136). From the Japanese *shukusei*, these operations are "rendered *sook ching*" (136). Here, the official military discourse itself confers a sense of "being chosen," that the Japanese authorities were literally singling out the Chinese for being Chinese.

Essentially, in the novel the Sook Ching Massacre is intertwined with the psycho-social trauma of deculturalization that Claude Lim, as an Anglophone Chinese in Singapore, experiences and works through, macabrely, vis-à-vis the massacre itself. But this rationale behind the *soto* operations of the ferreting out and neutralization of possible Chinese spies in the wake of Japanese occupation contradicts any interrogation of Anglophone and Anglophile Chinese since they would not be likely to be strongly, or at all, connected to mainland China. Rather, Sinophone Chinese, linguistically and culturally more apt to maintain ties to the mainland, were more likely to align themselves with China. The novel seems to "forget" or mis/remember this line of reasoning. This mis/remembering mirrors the ambivalent nature of being chosen in Freud's terms. As Caruth points out, Freud's emphasis on chosenness is also about an undetermined (perhaps indeterminable) futurity:

. . . the incomprehensible fact of *being chosen for* a future that remains, in its promise, yet to be understood. Chosenness is thus not simply a fact of the past but the experience of being shot into a future that is not entirely one's own. The belated experience of trauma in Jewish monotheism suggests that history is not only the passing on of a crisis but also the passing on of a survival that can only be possessed within a history larger than any single individual or any single generation. (71)

This futurity that Freud theorizes arguably refers to a kind of fossilization of ethnicity for the Jewish people as Jews. As a metaphor for *Breaking the Tongue*, the oblique futurity inherent to chosenness seems to correspond to how the Sook Ching Massacre is "the passing on of a crisis but also the passing on of a survival." In this way, Loh's novel taps into the idea that Dominick LaCapra theorizes in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* as "founding traumas—traumas that paradoxically become the valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity of an individual or a group" (23). As such, *Breaking the Tongue* refracts and imagines not only the traumas of a world war entangled in imperialism and therefore with concomitant postcolonial reverberations reaching into the present, but also concerns and anxieties regarding nation, national identity, and ethnicity that are often restructured and/or (re)defined by extreme violence.

Indeed, Singapore's national narrative incorporates this primordially violent identity politics, particularly following its growing economic rise in the 1990s. Most of the narratives about the Japanese military operations in Malaya and Singapore arguably underwent, according to Blackburn and Hack in *War Memory and the Making of Modern Malaysia and Singapore*, "a 50-year 'Memory Suppression' of the occupation by the Malayan (and from 1963, Malaysian) state" (5) because of competing interests, such as Singapore's reliance on Japanese post-war reparations. The situation only changed as recently as 1992 when "Singapore then led the way towards a more overt harnessing of war memory, by emphasising how all races had started to draw together in the war, due to their suffering together" (6). As Blackburn and Hack argue, "[t]he state's unifying efforts arose in response to a Chinese desire to erect a memorial to the—overwhelmingly Chinese—victims of the Japanese massacre on the island of February 1942: the 'sook ching'" but "[t]he state deflected this Chinese project into a national one" (9). Indeed, as

mentioned previously, Loh describes her novel as “about a search for a national identity” when “the country was just emerging out of British colonial rule” and so “[was struggling] with this issue of national identity and trying to forge a sense of unity among various ethnic groups and religious groups” (Birnbaum). Thus, the representation of the Sook Ching Massacre in *Breaking the Tongue* reflects and refocuses some of the nation-building narratives which seize upon this historical trauma to unify its citizens whether as victims, survivors, witnesses, and/or resisters. More broadly, chosenness is not just a metaphor for reading the novel but also for the dominant national narrative which, as Blackburn and Hack point out, “deflected this Chinese project into a national one,” whereby the trauma of the Sook Ching Massacre becomes a shorthand for the suffering of all citizens, not just the Chinese ethnic group.

## II. De/culturalized Violence and the Violence of De/culturalization

Loh not only commences the novel with Claude’s torture but also uses it as a node such that the physical, mental, and emotional trauma itself acts as a kind of historical and psychical catalyst for the multiple narratives which constitute *Breaking the Tongue*. In this manner, the narrative structure in/forms the unifying force of the Sook Ching Massacre. Here, the solidus indicates that the narrative represents and reflects some of the national imaginary about the Sook Ching Massacre, offering *information*, but it also works to *form* this unifying force, to construct a sense of unity. Part of doing so is to render the reader complicit at the very least as a kind of material witness to the lives of the Lim family, their associates, and assorted passersby.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the messy overlaps and muddled links indicate the polysemic nature of not only trauma and history but also the processes of

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<sup>8</sup> Tan argues that “the split between Claude the Body and ‘you’ is inevitable, caused by the trauma of war,” and that “the fragmentation of Claude the Protagonist is a mind and body split with Claude the Body as the physical embodiment of the latter and the voice of the narrator as the embodiment of the former” (58). As such, “the narrative in *Breaking the Tongue* functions as a talking cure for the protagonist, Claude Lim” (58). In this light, Tan contends that Claude’s lucid dreaming where he takes control of his recurring nightmare of having his tongue amputated by faceless torturers combined with “Claude’s arrival at a consciousness of creating a different language or linguistic system” results in “the production of the therapeutic journey he embarks on to seek knowledge and self-empowerment through the recuperation of personal and collective memory of Sinophone Malaya” (102). Tan offers a compelling interpretation of Loh’s novel, but I hope to uncover some of the lacunae involved in the multivocality, nonlinearity, and unreliability of *Breaking the Tongue* that I think Tan’s drawing upon under the umbrella of her multiple narrative structure of “a talking cure” precludes.

working through. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra defines "[w]orking through trauma [as] involv[ing] the effort to articulate or rearticulate affect and representation in a manner that may never transcend, but may to some viable extent counteract, a reenactment, or acting out, of that disabling dissociation" (42). For Claude Lim, his working through his trauma is limited only to the immediate aftermath; the novel does not extend into discussing the various traumatic responses that any victim of trauma undergoes, and that often recur throughout a traumatized person's life.<sup>9</sup> The novel only traces Claude's physical and psychological healing to the point that he has the emotional and mental wherewithal to inquire about Ling-li and to dream a closure to his trauma and to her (imagined?) one but not any further into the future. Potentially, this limited view of Claude's working through may speak to the diasporic writer's own working through of her ethnic affiliations and identity formation. In other words, the limitations of the novel reflect the diasporic writer's own limitations; she cannot imagine the present and future of her home nation since she is living outside of it. But these are concerns beyond the scope of both the novel and this paper.

Here, I want to tease out how the reader is witness to and partially complicit in both Claude's torture and his limited working through his trauma, and thus in a way is part of the unifying narrativization of Singaporean (Chinese) history that the novel's structure threads together. Claude the Body is divorced incompletely from the "you" which seemingly observes and ties together the multiple narratives in *Breaking the Tongue*. On one level, this apparently dissociative split is one that Sally McWilliams in "Intervening in Trauma: Bodies, Violence, and Interpretive Possibilities in Loh's *Breaking the Tongue*" calls a "distanciation between body and self [that] becomes the site for humanity to reassert itself" (149). As McWilliams puts it, "Loh's text invokes this humanity-saving gesture as Claude's tortured material self is transformed into a narrative under his control about 'Claude the Body'" (149). Moreover, McWilliams' reading complements how, in Caruth's formulation, trauma is "understanding of history as survival" (67). However, I would assert that the multivocality of *Breaking the Tongue* is neither singular nor directly

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<sup>9</sup> As Herman points out in *Trauma and Recovery*, "[t]raumatic symptoms have a tendency to become disconnected from their source and to take on a life of their own" (34) because "[t]he traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep" (37).

under Claude's control. Rather, the "humanity-saving" accident of the split between mind and body leads to multiple narratives from perspectives that Claude cannot logically or possibly know, yet through or because of his physical brutalization serving as a narrative node, the novel proffers stories from the point of view of his Anglophile father Humphrey, his serial-adulterous mother Cynthia, the Chinese nationalist Han Ling-li, the Orientalist English expatriate Jack Winthrop, the Japanophile traitor Patrick Heenan, and even the Fifth Columnist "paid for every name she hands in" (Loh 91) but who remains nameless throughout the novel. This structure suggests a grim kind of pun about Claude Lim's place in the novel: Claude is a *Lim/limb* of Singapore and Singaporean history, which is itself comprised of these multiple voices, perspectives, lacunae, and startling bridges, and the reader is drawn into the "body" of this history through this *limb*.

In this manner, Loh aligns the torture of Claude the Body as not only a node for the novel's multivocality and fragmentation but also as an analogy for a radical break in the history of Singapore. This radical break is not such because it is about social reform; rather, it is a break away from the histories of the disparate groups that comprise Singaporean society, one that even homogenizes "Chinese" and flattens various dialectical, migration, and political differences in order to create a sense of unity and national identity. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth details how Freud indicates that in his "rethinking of Jewish beginnings, then, the future is no longer continuous with the past but is united with it through a profound discontinuity" (14). Here, I think that Caruth means that Freud is referring to the paradoxical nexus formed out of trauma and violence: a beginning that is also an end, and vice versa. Where "[t]he exodus from Egypt, which shapes the meaning of the Jewish past, is a departure that is both a radical break and the establishment of a history" (14), for *Breaking the Tongue* it is the exodus from the torture cell that is both the radical break and the establishment of (Chinese) Singapore's history as a nation.

The break and establishment of Singaporean nationhood is predicated upon a myth of Chineseness that serves as a recurring motif in Loh's novel. The opening epigram of *Breaking the Tongue* cites *Keeping My Mandarin Alive: Lee Kuan Yew's Language Learning Experience*, a personal memoir about the former prime minister's own struggles with learning the languages associated with his ethnic identity in Singapore (namely, Mandarin and

Hokkien) as an adult. The preface of the memoir avers that this is not a book of language theory or Lee's thoughts on language policy (vii-viii). According to Lee,

A person who gets deculturalised—and I nearly was, so I know this danger—loses his self-confidence. He suffers from a sense of deprivation. For optimum performance a man must know himself and the world. He must know where he stands. I may speak the English language better than the Chinese language because I learnt English early in life. But I will never be an Englishman in a thousand generations and I have not got the Western value system inside; mine is an Eastern value system. Nevertheless, I use Western concepts, Western words because I understand them. But I also have a different system in my mind. (qtd. in Loh 17)

Lee's sentiments about ethnicity and cultural belonging conflate race, language, and primordial identity, revealing the dominant (yet still hotly contested) discourse regarding such in Singapore. With the end of Japanese occupation, and the decolonization of Malaysia as well as the eventual establishment of Singapore as an independent republic, there was a great drive on the part of the Singaporean People's Action Party (PAP) to emphasize reculturalization. In a speech given at the opening of the seminar on "Education and Nation-Building" in 1966, Lee Kuan Yew acknowledged that while "the common medium is English" in Singapore, he warned against the "sterilising effects of a completely English-type education" (*Lee Kuan Yew* 29). From the early days of nation-building in Singapore to as recently as 1984 in a speech given at the opening of "The Speak Mandarin Campaign," Lee and his party members have continually argued for the necessity of accepting, teaching, and learning Mandarin as the mother tongue of Chinese Singaporeans.

Before addressing how this trope of deculturalization is addressed in the novel, I want to first respond to how these sentiments squash historical circumstances, differences in dialects, and conflicting historical perspectives. In *Identity and Ethnic Relations in Southeast Asia*, Tong Chee Kiong points out that "[l]inguistically, the early Chinese immigrant population in Singapore was very fragmented by the various dialect groups," a situation further

buttressed by how “[t]he use of dialects continued in the Chinese schools, most of which were run by the different clan associations” (59). Chineseness historically was not monolithic and uniform (and is still not). Kiong documents that a sea-change in this linguistic-cultural landscape occurred in modern times, when, “[a]fter the 1920s, there was a shift towards the use of Mandarin due to increasing Chinese nationalism and the increasing supply of teachers from China” so that “[b]y the 1930s, most of the Chinese schools [had] adopted the use of Mandarin” (59). Tan argues that it was only contact with Western imperial powers in the nineteenth century that there became a corresponding need to secure a Chinese national identity, leading to a “myth of consanguinity” (12). Furthermore, the association of Chinese identity with fluency in Mandarin Chinese ignores the arbitrariness of how “Mandarin beat out Cantonese by one vote to become the official Chinese language” (Tan 19) in China, yet as Kiong documents from his Singaporean informants, there is a strong sentiment in modern times that, as one informant put it, “English-educated Chinese in Singapore are less Chinese” (qtd. in Kiong 66) than those who are Chinese-language fluent, as though Chineseness can be quantified. Ultimately, as Lai Ah Eng points out in *Meanings of Multiethnicity: A Case-study of Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Singapore*, “[t]he first and official reason for the promotion of Mandarin as the mother tongue of the Chinese is to unite them linguistically as they speak a variety of regional dialects” (142).

In addition to the inherent controversies and difficulties for just the Chinese community in particular regarding the official Mandarin language policy enumerated above, Loh’s rather uncritical framing of her narrative via an epigram from Lee’s memoirs also demonstrates a trend of Sinicizing Singapore as a nation that obscures the reality of its diversity not just in terms of ethnic heritage but also its linguistic ecology. In “Bilingualism and National Identity: A Singapore Case Study,” Chiew Seen-Kong observes that “Singapore is a multilingual and multidialectical society” which the 1957 population census shows to comprise eleven mother tongues spoken by its ethnic Chinese population, seven mother tongues by the Malays, nine mother tongues by the Indians and Pakistanis, with a remaining eight-plus languages listed for other ethnic groups (234). Chiew notes that, according to 1960s’ census data, “Singapore has as yet no language which is spoken by more than two-thirds of each of the three largest communities” but that “among school



children, English is the only language taught to all" (237). That there is an "asymmetrical bilingualism" in that "bilingualism in English-stream schools in Singapore means unequal exposure time for the first language—English—and the second languages"—Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil (Chiew 239). Moreover, "[b]ilingualism in Mandarin-, Malay-, and Tamil-stream schools is also asymmetrical" where "exposure time of the other tongues is undoubtedly less in bilingual Mandarin- and other vernacular-stream schools" so that, "on the average, proficiency in Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil is lower than before" (240). These results are contrary to the articulated aims of the bilingual policy, and this contradiction points to how, as Chiew concludes, "Mandarin is the medium for the transmission for both Asian and Singaporean values and norms, while English transmits scientific norms contrary to primary relationships such as the family and certain religious domains, and transmits also both Western and Southeast Asian cultures" leading to "the evolution of a Singaporean identity" (245).

Yet despite how Singaporean identity does not arise from a single dialect, much less a single ethnicity, the novel gruesomely metaphorizes an attempt to quantify or rather "map" Chineseness in Claude's torture, an externalization of de/culturalization as pain. Claude the Body's "chosenness" is macabrely brought into hyper-focus when his torturers begin "the dangerous game of mapping out the Body with knives," "cut[ting] rivers and roads in its skin" for the purposes of "educat[ing] our young friend," to "teach him something" (Loh 187). The torture is explained as "[a] brief history of the Japanese liberation of Malaya" (188) so that each cut mimics the geography of conquest. McWilliams comments that this is "one of the most chilling scenes in the novel" where "the Japanese interrogator uses Claude's face as the surface on which to inscribe the cartography of the Japanese invasion of the Malay peninsula" (149). I would add that an interesting but somewhat oblique point is the way that this scene grotesquely underscores Claude's position as a substitute for Singapore, that Claude's torture at the hands of the Japanese and the Japanese invasion of Singapore are one and the same. He embodies the Chineseness that the Japanese are working to eliminate, but the working in turn brutally maps it on his body. As such, it implies a paradoxical highlighting of Claude's ethnicity while simultaneously violently carving it (out?) and flattening ethnic differences among the residents of Singapore that works to group them together as one unit, one nation. Tan points out that

“[t]he physical gesture of engraving invasion strategies on the body is mapped out specifically by the verbal narration of the dates and activities of the troops in the topography of Malaya, narration that materializes the impact of a historical event on the individual” (82). He argues that “[t]he sudden collapse of political and geographical boundaries directly leads to the collapse of the individual experience and collective representation of the unified political sphere of Malaya” (82).

I agree that this particular act of torture “materializes the impact of a historical event on the individual” but it is not until Claude is tortured that he, and therefore the reader, can make that connection. As such, de/culturalization as pain is not just about Claude as a Chinese Singaporean but also involves the reader as witness to this intersection of culture, colonization, and violence. Moreover, it is not just the collapse of previous political and geographical boundaries resulting in the collapse of individual experience and collective representation that is at stake in this scene. Rather, it is precisely in how Loh uses the torture of Claude the Body to collapse personal histories and narratives into a contradictorily disaggregate whole that the metaphor of Claude as *Lim/limb* of Singapore is evident: from Claude the Body at the individual level as a *limb* to the Sook Ching at the political-military level (perhaps a torso?), and ultimately leveraged into the construction of the nation-state as a whole. Textually, it is through the “sook ching” operation of selection and the processes of “cleansing” that these narratives surface.

Here, I want to turn to the cultural and physical violences that not only overlap but seem to be in symbiosis in the novel. The chief torturer of Claude the Body explains that “we come as liberators, but first we must liberate your minds and the sick attitudes you’ve imbibed from your former rulers” (Loh 128). Putting aside the irony of “liberation” involving imprisonment and torture, the monologue takes as read the cultural and linguistic oppression of the Singaporeans by the British. As Frantz Fanon posits in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “[t]o speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (17-18). The “weight of a civilization” in this instance thus includes “sick attitudes” indirectly referencing the racial hegemony and cultural imperialism of British colonialism in Malaya and Singapore. Yet, the torture of Claude the Body seemingly functions as a kind of mortification of the flesh meant to “purge”

and "cleanse" him, to divest him of "the weight of a civilization" imposed upon him by (British) colonization, but it is done within the structure of yet another (Japanese) colonialism. This depiction implies that culture is both symbolic and physical violence or torture, and that torture is also a cultural violence. Or perhaps that interpellation involves socio-cultural violence that is frequently enforced or bounded by physical violence since it is Claude's identity as an Anglophone Chinese that leads to his selection and subsequent trauma.

Moreover, Loh makes clear that this nightmare of contradictions and traumas of de/culturalization is literally recurring for Claude as seen in his repeated dreams from boyhood of having his tongue amputated.<sup>10</sup> When Claude goes to the Haw Par Villa with Grandma Siok and tours the Ten Courts of Hell, he comes across a scene of punishment where "a man [is] struggling in the grip of two others who are in the process of tearing out his tongue" (Loh 60). The "unexpected sheer familiarity" of the scene causes him to feel that he is "coming apart" and "he loosens his hold on the world and falls" (60). This scene is imbued with a sense of the uncanny with the "unexpected familiarity." In "The 'Uncanny,'" Freud writes that this term refers to "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (220). The terror that drives the uncanny arises in how confrontations with the uncanny "stir[s] those vestiges of animistic mental activity within us and bring[s] them to expression," those fears, anxieties, and/or secrets that were only repressed "but which [have] nevertheless come to light" (240-41). In this case, Claude obviously comes face to face with either his anxiety about symbolic speechlessness, fear of physical assault leading to actual speechlessness, worries about cultural identity and language, or some combination of all three.

Rather than the violence of de/culturalization, these recurring nightmares suggest de/culturalization as pain. Loh demonstrates the former most vividly

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<sup>10</sup> Athey interprets this dream as indicating "the influence of these languages [Thai, Malay, Tagalog, Hindi, Chinese], suggested by the scissors from China in his dream, would cut him off from that English tongue and therefore his very self," and yet "[p]erversely, Claude, in his Eurasian body, can never be good enough at English, his first and only language" (19). Athey mistakes the Lim family's Anglophilia for being Eurasian when Cynthia, Claude's mother, has a pivotal disappointing romance with an Englishman ten years her senior that leads directly to her equally disappointing marriage to Humphrey who despite having, as Cynthia notes, "the [right] accent, the right job, the right contacts . . . he is still so Chinese himself" (137). Moreover, there is some confusion in Athey's analysis about the symbolic meaning of Claude's fear of having his tongue amputated.

and gruesomely through Claude's torture at the hands of the Japanese occupiers, and now the latter through how Claude envisions and narrates the pain of his identity confusion. Tan argues that "[t]his encounter with the abject contributes to Claude's first realization that what he believes to be his identity has failed to offer him the stability, knowledge, and confidence he needs to think for himself" leading to "an intolerable sensation of dissolution within the physical being of Claude the Boy," where "it breaks down meanings and representations that are more extreme than a simple brush with the uncanny" (77). I agree that a simple encounter with the uncanny does not reasonably induce such an extreme reaction, but I would contend that the moment is not just about the pains of de/culturalization but also about the narrative of de/culturalization as pain. The arbitrary nature of associating phenotypical "signifiers" with the "signified" ethnicity underscores a kind of racial melancholia,<sup>11</sup> a persistent introjection of loss (figured here as the triptych of "race," language, and identity). There is a kind of painful and traumatic *méconnaissance* at work in such confluences of phenotypical characteristics, ethnicity, and national belonging, and that disturbing perhaps even agonizing process is highlighted in Claude's atypical and violent reaction. I agree that culture and language are tied inextricably together, but I think that to link ethnicity-race to that matrix is merely reaffirming racial hegemony rather than critiquing and dismantling it. In other words, here, to link ethnicity-race to culture and language is to try to quantify Chineseness.

As such, I posit that the novel not only imagines Claude's conflict about his ethnic and linguistic heritage through his recurring nightmare of having his tongue amputated, but that the subconscious manifestation of this conflict is also gruesomely refracted into the torture of Claude the Body. The conflation of these aspects through the torture imagines the Sook Ching Massacre as pivotal to a narrative of being Singaporean Chinese. For instance, the split-self narrator infers that "[i]t is this that his Japanese interrogators can't stand": "Claude the Body speaks English as a first language" (Loh 28). The grisly carving of his face as "[t]he knife travels" his "[n]ose, cheeks, mouth" (201) at once recalls Claude's nightmares as well as Ling-li's story of General Yue Fei, what she claims "[e]very Chinese knows" (36), whose mother "carv[ed] in his flesh . . . [,] branding him with words . . . [,] scarring him with her sure calligraphy: 精忠報國" (36). The proverb "[t]he [u]ltimate

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<sup>11</sup> See Anne Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race*.

[I]oyalty [i]s to [s]erve [y]our [c]ountry" (36) is thus grotesquely reimagined as a horrific wounding and scarring of Claude, ironically marking him as Chinese when "sook ching" means "purging" or "cleansing" (of the Chinese from Singapore).

### III. Story of a Wound

Beyond the pains of de/culturalization dramatized through Claude's torture, there is the story of survival that setting the Sook Ching Massacre as a pivotal break in history necessitates; without survivors, there is no history, no *story*. In a rather incongruous epiphany, Claude realizes "[y]ears later, at the unearthing of a mass grave in Bedok" (Loh 446) that "his own interrogation, though bestial, had saved him" (447) from such a fate. This is a rather brutal and egoistic simplification that revises and imbues meaning to acts of violence meant not only to degrade but also dismantle Claude's sense of self. But this rewriting of the past signals the paradox of trauma, of the haunting question, as Caruth succinctly distills, "[w]hat does it mean to survive?" (60; emphasis in orig.). One of the most famous stories of survival of the Sook Ching Massacre is Lee Kuan Yew's own narrative of accidental salvation. In *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*, Lee recalls the completely arbitrary nature of his own unexpected survival. When he registered as required during the Sook Ching, he remembers that the center's exit points "were manned by the *Kempeitai*" and he tried initially to check out through one point only to be waved "to join a group of young Chinese" (56). Feeling that doing so was "ominous," Lee instead "asked for permission to return to the cubicle to collect [his] belongings" (56) and took that opportunity to hide for another day and a half; afterwards, he tried again to exit through the same point, and the second time he was allowed through. Lee candidly characterizes his survival as capricious and even casual (56), definitely without clear rhyme or reason. Here, his true account not only lends weight to Blackburn and Hack's historiographic analysis of the Sook Ching, but it also presents a parallel between the actuality and Loh's fictional reimagining. Neither Lee nor Claude can impute their survival to some larger working, but Claude's attempt to do so may be related to his working through his traumatic experiences.

I realize that in saying that Claude's survival of the Sook Ching is not narrativized with some larger purpose, I seem to contradict the narratological

trajectory of *Breaking the Tongue* (a beginning, middle and end), but I mean that I interpret the narrative schema of the novel as manifesting the lacunae and fundamental irony of history (or histories). McWilliams infers Claude's survival as allowing for a "[c]rossing [of] temporal and gendered material boundaries," or the "importance of witnessing . . . in the face of militaristic terror" (154). She posits that this witnessing "situates Ling-li, the acknowledged victim who is tortured, raped, and killed, as the controlling intelligence who dictates the terms of memory production" (154). However, to read the story this way means that the reader has forgotten that just as Claude cannot know all the stories, from the unnamed Japanese collaborator-spy, to his own mother's serial adultery, he also cannot know what happened to Ling-li; moreover, Loh deliberately complicates any straightforward interpretation of witnessing or remembering by placing this climactic moment within a recurring dream. At one point, early in the unfolding of the novel's multivocality and multiplicity, Claude the Body questions "[i]s it possible to see so much, to be an entire people all at once . . . [and if it is] possible to bear such knowledge" (Loh 39); the novel then explains that "these revelations and half-dreams that have been lived out by others and the Body . . . [are] [h]istory: the Detour . . . [with] you, its author" (43). Tan contends that "[d]riven by the irrational nature of war, instead of seeking refuge in what he formerly believed to be his identity, Claude begins to construct his own story" so that "[h]istory, in Claude's personal narrative, is a detour that is necessary for him to arrive at the destination he desires—not the subject of the construction" (100). Different from both McWilliams and Tan, I think that the uncertainty of these histories, these *stories*, how they are all essentially "fictions, versions, variations" (Loh 43), are about the lacunae necessarily in the shadows of and even allowing for the construction of history as well as those spaces and schisms that define trauma. As such, these "fictions, versions, variations" reinforce Ankersmit's point about the fundamental irony of history and historiography as being in conflict and not completely knowable.

Here, the lacunae are the negative spaces between what can be known and what is unknowable, what is told and how it is told, all of which are made more apparent and brutal by the violences done to Claude (and presumably Ling-li). I focus on Claude's account because the reader is never given Ling-li's. Rather, what happens to Ling-li is all imagined, narratologically circumscribed within Claude's lucid dreaming. Claude's dream of Ling-li can

be read as his attempt to gloss the events of his torture, her death, and his release/survival. I agree with Tan that "by disrupting the structure of the dream, Claude breaks down its dynamics as a product of condensation and displacement" (95). The difficulty of remembering, of having to remember, of surviving, of narrating survival, is typographically dramatized through the use of untranslated Chinese characters in Claude's dream of Ling-li. This scene is a metaphoric and narratological break where the dream enters into the "reality" of the novel through Claude's lucid dreaming and breaks away from previous patterns of linguistic meditations where each Chinese character is carefully explained. Claude's Sinophone identity is most prominent in its dialectical relation to his torture at the hands of the Japanese military, as exemplified in the meditation on the Chinese character "忍" as "[k]nife over heart . . . received from Ling-li in earlier days" (Loh 227). The ideogram "become[s] a talisman" for both Claude the Body and "you," and "[t]he Body clings to it . . . and so do you . . . [because] [w]ith that one word, you almost believe in hope" (227). In this sense, the novel gestures toward a climactic Sinophone "triumph" with the dream sequence and its fluent use of Chinese, but I think this is less about triumph or victory than about the trauma of being chosen. This recounting of Ling-li's gang rape and death is working through Claude's earlier disavowals of (or at least internal conflicts about) being Chinese.

The critics variously interpret the dream sequence as reaffirming Chineseness, a demonstration of counter-hegemony, or the representation of the depths of human capacity for evil, but these interpretations also miss an interesting disjunction in the dream: the diasporic mis/remembers of Chinese. Holden argues that the use of Chinese is "[t]he triumphalism of Claude's acquisition of a purified Chinese identity" but Tan contends that the lack of glossing points to how "Claude's lack of knowledge of the Chinese language must have also hindered Ling-li's attempt to communicate with him in Mandarin about her suffering and emotions at that time" (98). In contrast, McWilliams reads the bilingual, polyphonic moment as a counter-narrative resisting Japanese colonialism and "giv[ing] visual and linguistic evidence to the jarring, separate reality of Han Ling-li's experience of rape" (156). Athey concludes that, "[i]llegible to English readers who do not also read Chinese, the sequence both depicts and obscures the scene of torture" so that "[f]or most readers, the dark chamber is revealed and concealed at the same time"

(20). She argues, similarly to McWilliams, that “the scene extends the possibility of understanding yet deliberately refuses it at the same time” such that “[t]ranslation and comprehension are indefinitely postponed” (20). Yet, while translation is withdrawn, those superficially familiar with written Chinese will notice an anachronism in Ling-li and Claude’s use of it. The scene blends both simplified and traditional Chinese characters, a type of errata that occurs from time to time throughout the novel. The simplified writing system for Chinese was not introduced until the 1950s in China, decades after the time period in which *Breaking the Tongue* is set. On one hand, this typographic mixture could be simply interpreted as Loh’s own lack of familiarity with the Chinese language; on the other hand, it can be read as a performance of diaspora, of diasporic identity, an inevitable hybridization resulting from migration, adaptation, incomplete assimilation, etc. The gaps in what is known, what can be known, are thus shown to be ever-present in language and time as well as in moments of historical trauma.

Furthermore, the question lingers: why is Ling-li’s unknown (unknowable) fate so central to the plot, or made so central to Claude’s character development? I have touched upon why I am uninterested in the dream as any kind of counter-narrative from Ling-li’s perspective precisely because it is *not* from Ling-li’s perspective. However, this is the question at the heart of the differing and divergent interpretations of Claude’s dream of Ling-li’s death among Tan, McWilliams, Athey, and Holden. Here, I want to return to Caruth’s discussion of Freud to complicate and nuance the earlier postulation that Claude’s lucid dream is a working through of trauma. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth references Freud’s summary of the story of Tancred and Clorinda where Tancred “unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight” and afterwards displaces his grief by slashing the trees of “a strange magic forest” only to have “blood [stream] from the cut and the voice of Clorinda . . . complaining that he has wounded his beloved again” (qtd. in Caruth 2). As a central figure for Freud’s theory of trauma, the tale evocatively represents “the way that the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” but Caruth points out that this story also highlights the “*voice that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound*” (2; emphasis in orig.). Ultimately, the story of Tancred and Clorinda demonstrates that trauma



"is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). Caruth concludes that the parable teaches us that "the speaking wound constitutes . . . not only a parable of trauma and of its uncanny repetition but, more generally, a parable of psychoanalytic theory itself as it listens to a voice that it cannot fully know but to which it nonetheless bears witness" (9).

Simply put, Freudian psychoanalysis of trauma is about listening, bearing witness, and "speaking" the trauma, but such speech is about a truth that cannot be fully known or understood; the wound itself calls out, a catachresis that underscores the aporia at the heart of both trauma and history. I think that Claude's lucid dream of Ling-li is not only about history as trauma and the irony of history, but also his working through his anxieties and fears about his ethnic identity, about the pain of de/culturalization and de/culturalization as pain. Here, I disagree with Holden's characterization of the climatic scene's deployment of Chinese and English because the narrative itself concludes with Claude in a garbled verbal state; there is no sudden, trauma-induced acquisition of fluency in Chinese. Moreover, the novel utilizes both traditional and simplified versions of written Chinese in an anachronistic mish-mash that sometimes contradicts the various linguistic meditations on the writing of some Chinese characters. I think that McWilliams' interpretation hits closer to the mark than Holden's reading, but the ventriloquistic quality of having Claude speak for Ling-li does not lend itself strongly to a feminist interpretation. Even though the dream is narrativized as the turning point, where the threads of Ling-li and Jack Winchester's respective disappearances are seemingly explained, the context of its dream state not only refracts Freud and Lacan's own theories on the relations of dreaming and waking to trauma,<sup>12</sup> but it also segues into the

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<sup>12</sup> In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth discusses Freud's recounting of a dream where the son of the dreamer presciently asks his father about burning, only for the dreamer to awaken and discover that the house really was on fire (93). Caruth summarizes that according to Freud the dream was a form of "wish-fulfillment, in spite of its direct representation of the child's unwished-for death" (94). Thus, in this light, "the dream, as a delay, reveals the ineradicable gap between the reality of a death and the desire that cannot overcome it except in the fiction of a dream" (95). But Lacan reinterprets the dream as that which "*wakes the sleeper*, and it is in this paradoxical awakening—an awakening not to, but against, the very wishes of consciousness—that the dreamer confronts the reality of a death from which he cannot turn away" and so the dream is "no longer a function of sleep, but rather a function of awakening" (94; emphasis in orig.). As Caruth distills, "[i]f Freud asks, [*what does it mean to sleep?*] Lacan discovers at the heart of this question another one, perhaps even more urgent: *What does it mean to awaken?*" (94; emphasis in orig.). I think that Caruth's summary of Freud and Lacan's discussions of dreaming and waking seem uniquely relevant to the

denouement of Claude's own recurring nightmares of mutilation. Here, LaCapra's point that "[t]rauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered" (41) is instructive. For Loh's novel, as mentioned earlier, the narrative commences with torture, and torture itself seems to structure the narrative. Claude's brutalization is recursive in a kind of jagged *mise en abîme*: his actual torture at the hands of the occupying Japanese forces, his nightmares about amputation, his confrontation with the uncanny—all of which spools out in a winding, multivocal history (or histories). Each jagged piece of his trauma serves to reflect or even perform a disruption "that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence" that conversely lead to narratives about his father, his mother, their associates, and even other parties unrelated to the Lim family but involved in the fall of Singapore.

Here, Loh entangles Claude's attempt at closure for the traumas of de/culturalization through a juxtaposition, contrast, and alignment of the two recurring dream scenarios. As Caruth notes, drawing on Freud and Lacan, "[i]t is the experience of *waking into consciousness* that, peculiarly, is identified with the reliving of the trauma" because "[w]hat is enigmatically suggested . . . is that the trauma consists not only in having confronted death but in *having survived, precisely, without knowing it*" so that "[w]hat one returns to in the flashback is not the incomprehensibility of one's near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one's own survival" (64; emphasis in orig.). While it is a repeated dream rather than a flashback, the dreams allow Claude to lucidly confront and work through not only the violences done to him but also the "enigma" of his survival. LaCapra argues that "[t]rauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel" so that "[w]orking through trauma involves the effort to articulate or rearticulate affect and representation in a manner that may never transcend, but may to some viable extent counteract, a reenactment, or acting out, of that disabling dissociation" (42). Thus, Claude's lucid dream serves as a "reenactment, or acting out" that displaces his torture upon the dream-figure

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representations of trauma in Loh's *Breaking the Tongue* since Claude's lucid dream and his recurring nightmare of amputation are so central to the narratives and plot, but I can only make note of them here since these ideas are beyond the scope of this paper.

of Ling-li, and her dreamed demand that he bears witness to her deathly assault is his "disorienting" and "numbing" representation of "what one cannot represent," here figured as unglossed and untranslated Chinese text. Indeed, the "humanity-saving" dissociation of Claude from Claude the Body from the very beginning of the novel makes clear that Claude is figuratively and psychically splintered by trauma.

In displacing his trauma and dreaming a closure to it by "witnessing" Ling-li's death, Claude thus arms himself with a self-reflexive awareness and agency that he takes into resolving his recurring nightmare of mutilation. Claude notes that in the sequence of the persistent nightmare, "[t]his is the last time in the dream they are holding you down" (Loh 487) ostensibly to rip out "your" tongue. However, "there is something superhuman in your strength tonight . . . [and] [y]ou shake them off" and take the knife, "sawing . . . the knife blade tearing through tongue muscle unevenly to free yourself" (487-88).<sup>13</sup> Here, the anomalous use of the second-person perspective brings together the fractured and disarticulated self that earlier seemingly safeguarded Claude from the horrors of his brutalization. This in conjunction with the juxtaposition and comparison to Claude's dream of Ling-li functions to wind together Claude, Claude-the-Body, and you-the-reader, reflexively (or reflectively) gesturing towards the ways that torture inflects the novel. Tan argues that "[t]he novel prophesies in the beginning that Claude the Body, 'you,' and Claude the Protagonist will eventually unite" (99) so that this self-mutilation "is Claude's attempt to construct a metaphor for his personal transformation from being a subject to others into being a subject to himself" (101).

I agree that there is a degree of synthesization at work in the second-person "you," whereas previously all descriptions of Claude's recurring nightmare were in third person. When the reader-narrator is asked "[w]hat have you learned," the answer is "[t]hat Ling-li is not dead, not really" not as long as "you . . . out-write death" which "will require another language" (Loh

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<sup>13</sup> Holden reads this dream of self-amputation as "undercutting" the triumphalism of Claude's "purified Chinese identity." He argues that "Loh's novel thus reiterates, rather than challenges: rather than providing a genealogy of the present, it accepts hegemonic constructions of the present, and history's place within the present, at face value" by following the paradigms of Singapore's "CMIO (Chinese Malay Indian Other) model" where "each Singaporean citizen follows his or her father's race at birth" and "[r]ace, printed on each citizen's identity cards, determines the 'mother tongue' language taken at school, the ethnic self-help organisation to which salary deductions are credited, and even allocation of public housing."

489). Tan concludes that Claude has arrived “at a consciousness of creating a different language or linguistic system” (102). I don’t think that the novel culminates in a triumphant creation of a different language or linguistic system; indeed, in the dream “[y]ou test your speech” and find only “[n]onsense syllables, the building blocks of new speech” (Loh 488). There is only the *potential* for a new language, but one that denies the past, that imagines “[p]ure instruments” symbolized by the appearance of Claude’s clarinet in the dream, allowing him to “[venture] past words” (488). Moreover, I don’t see any conflict between my proposition that the novel refracts and imagines torture as not only motif but also a structuring device with Tan’s assertion that it serves as a “talking cure” for Claude. Rather, I think the two points are complementary since, as LaCapra has argued, “mourning might be seen as a form of working through, and melancholia as a form of acting out” (65) where the former “brings the possibility of engaging trauma an achieving a reinvestment in, or recathexis of, life which allows one to begin again” (66). In that sense, the torture as central concern and pattern is reflexive of a talking cure, of “engaging trauma” in order to obtain some sort of imagined or refracted “reinvestment in life,” and vice versa.

#### IV. In Each Other’s Histories

*Breaking the Tongue* concludes gruesomely with Claude’s lucid dream of his tongue being amputated, but this time “[t]here is no terror, no panic” (Loh 487-88) since “[y]ou shake [the ones holding you down] off, flexing your muscles, but hardly using your full power” to “slide the knife in” (487) and sever the tongue himself. This act is “to free yourself” since “[t]here is no further use for the tongue” (488). Claude takes control of his nightmare, and the self-amputation of his tongue is transmuted from representing his internal conflict between Sinophone and Anglophone identities to an absolute refusal of the latter where the Anglophone tongue must be discarded so that he has only the “[p]ure instruments” of the “human voice” (488).

This terrible scene of dismemberment seems to be abstractly glossed by a final meditation on Chinese opera, about the characters of Qing Yi, Hua Dan, Lao Dan, and Dao Ma Dan. Holden points out this “final scene of the novel . . . refers to *jingju*, or Beijing opera, not the dialect operas (frequently generically known by the Malay word *wayang*) central to Singapore’s social history.” His observation underscores the diasporic mis/remembering that

proliferates in the novel. Moreover, he argues that the novel depicts "Claude's Grandmother Siok, rather implausibly fully literate in both Chinese and English, [as] quot[ing] his aphorisms from Sunzi's *Art of War*, while Ling-li makes frequent reference to the patriotism of the Song dynasty general Yue Fei and the inscription of the words '精忠報國.'" For instance, while Sunzi's treatise on strategy is famous, it was not canonical reading in Sinophone societies at the end of the 19th century, so it is incongruous that Grandma Siok constantly quotes it. In addition, simplified Chinese characters were developed in the 1950s, after the civil war in China; they would not have been in use during World War II or earlier. Thus, I contend that the ending emphasizes not only performance in its allusion to opera, but also that these moments of intertextuality inhere Caruth's idea "that history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's trauma" (24) so that "survival that can only be possessed within a history larger than any single individual or any single generation" (71). Holden claims that the novel "is presented to the reader primarily as a Chinese American" rather than postcolonial through these "errata." In contrast, Tan considers this blending of cultural and linguistic texts as "reclaim[ing] a sense of belonging to the homeland by destabilizing the notion of 'Chineseness'" (3). Moreover, while in some ways such "mistakes" do support Tan's position that the novel destabilizes a monolithic notion of "Chineseness," I think that Holden's contention situates Loh's blending of historical and cultural anachronisms as too specifically Chinese American. Thus, I agree with Tan insofar as I consider these elements as indicative of a diasporic mis/remembrance.

This diasporic mis/remembrance weaves together not only bits and pieces of Chineseness, stretching across time and space, but also itself performs Claude's trauma and his working through it. As LaCapra posits,

[m]ourning involves a different inflection of performativity: a relation to the past which involves recognizing its difference from the present—simultaneously remembering and taking leave of or actively forgetting it, thereby allowing for critical judgment and a reinvestment in life, notably social and civic life with its demands, responsibilities, and norms requiring respectful recognition and consideration for others. (70)

LaCapra's points about performativity and the aporia involved in mourning as a vehicle of healing trauma underscore the lacunae and subsequent paradoxical responses that the novel itself mirrors and visualizes through its manifold and recursive depictions of torture. Claude's "talking cure" is necessarily winding, circuitous, and indirect not only because trauma disarticulates the self, but also because articulating the "story of the wound" is itself vexed by how, as Scarry observes, "[p]hysical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). Indeed, one could argue that Claude's dreamed self-mutilation and pre-verbal state echo this sense of "sounds and cries" that humans make in reaction to overwhelming pain. Ultimately, Claude's "superhuman" control of his recurring nightmare at the last does not only serve as a denouement but also invoke images of both torture and having survived it through one's own will.

This survival and working through are most obvious firstly in the second-person direct address to the reader that also functions to establish a narrator-reader confluence, and secondly in the actual scene of self-determined and self-enacted amputation. The novel concludes that "[y]ou will require another language" in order "to out-write death" (Loh 489). Here, the novel underscores both the limits of language as well as its potential. The story is not really over as long as "you"-reader and "you"-narrator have access to "[p]ure instruments" that "venture past words" (488).

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