

MOLLUSCA: STORIES

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## ABSTRACT

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*Mollusca*, a short story collection, traces the life story of Korean American protagonist and translator Carter Chen as she develops a consciousness of how she fits into the world. The stories echo and reveal a long aftermath of her parents' departure from their native Korea. Carter, often told she does not fit into Korean culture, finds herself as "other" in her family and marriage. Per Gayatri Spivak's description of translation as the "most intimate act of reading," Carter reads to translate and narrate scenes from her own culture and life. In a self-defining act, Carter borrows the image of a mollusk – a creature split between shell and flesh – from her translation of poems by contemporary Korean poet Moon Chung-hee, to frame an ambivalence to her body. Throughout *Mollusca*, Carter's broader acts of translation, such as trying to understand Korean culture vis-à-vis her relationships with her ex-spouse and parents, are fashioned as an awareness, shell or language document to signal the process of a body holding to account its experience and history. *Mollusca* amounts to a coming of age and consciousness chronicle that posits translation as a creative and vital writing practice.

The creative work in this dissertation is suppressed in the UH institutional repository, Kahualike, [kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu](http://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu). Inquiries about the creative work should be made to Jee Young Vera Lee.

## INTRODUCTION

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### *Overview: My Development as a Creative Writer*

*Mollusca* explores Carter Chen's relationships as they develop along the overlapping contours of Carter's Korean American identity and her proficiency and fluency in Korean cultural codes, such as language. In *Mollusca*, Carter's Korean American identity is complicated and enhanced by her refusal to abide by Korean cultural norms that valorize set familial patterns.

I began writing *Mollusca* when I wrote "Just North of Santa Fe." At the heart of the story is Carter's betrayal of X, her then-boyfriend. When the story was published, my then-husband said the story was not my story because the true-life events that inspired it had taken place in Santa Fe, where we had lived with his sister. If my story disappeared into his treatment of my story, I would feel betrayed. My disappointment at him bore a striking similarity to Carter's disappointment in having her life decentered by X's family and their story, and so I phrased a guiding question about why I wanted to write stories.

For nearly a decade after "Just North of Santa Fe" was published, I wrote poetry, distilling images and fracturing lyric lines to test the limits of emotional coherence. I made a generous loan from poetics in the tradition of Ezra Pound's Imagism, or simply, the direct treatment of a "thing." I leaned heavily on words from the Imagist H.D. In *Notes on Thought and Vision*, she writes about an "over-mind" where images collect to be available to one's consciousness: "That over-mind seems a cap, like water, transparent, fluid yet with definite body, contained in a definite space...Into that over-mind, thoughts pass and are visible like fish swimming under clear water" (18-19). H.D. made available to me a vivid image of a consciousness that collects more images.

During the eventual estrangement that was my marriage, I sought solace in reading Emily Dickinson's poems in Korean. I immersed myself in a language that I'd grown up with but couldn't read well or speak fluently. While I translated Dickinson's poems from Korean back into English, I relied on a safety net of Dickinson's originals. Hence my translation practice began as a quest into something both elusive and familiar. By the time I began to translate in earnest and produced English translations of Moon Chung-hee's poetry, I found my translation practice quite generative. Each of my "finished" versions of Moon's poems left an aftermath of processing notes, an excess of possibilities – namely images – that I could work into other poems, even narratives.

During that period in my life, I reread and recognized the limitation of Carter's roles as girlfriend, daughter, and would-be sister, in "Just North of Santa Fe." Carter's unhappiness, as well as her betrayal of X, were intertwined with X's expectations per his understanding of being Korean and loyal to his family. X became more rigidly loyal and protective of his family just as Carter sharpened her complaint and refused his family's affection. Carter exempted or "othered" herself from X and X's family in the same way that X "othered" Carter because she could not abide by his familial and cultural expectations. The early stories in *Mollusca* document the evolution of this relationship dynamic. In "Adequacy," Carter's translation of Korean poetry works directly contra X's assessment of Carter as not Korean enough. Throughout the collection, I continued to portray Carter's grievance against pro forma relationships. I divorced my Korean husband.

The collection read like confession then. I modeled Carter's refuge in language and translation after my refuge in language and translation. If I regretted my reliance on autobiographical strokes, Rita Felski's "On Confession" freed me from the autobiography versus fiction binary. Felski argues that though confession "giv[es] appearance to authentic self-expression" (84), it has, by and large, the paradoxical effect of "distancing" the reader. I latched onto this paradox. Even if I rooted my stories in my life experiences, I would use autobiographical details with confidence.

Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Storyteller," secured my trust in storytelling as a mode of transfiguring personal memory. Benjamin writes that storytelling "does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again" (91). "Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. Storytellers tend to begin their story with the presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned to follow" (92). I took Benjamin to mean that *of course* my reader would enter my stories, much as I had, through experiences from my past, which I shaped into narratives about moving through my personal history.

Elements of my writing practice – my engagement with H.D.'s "over-mind," a condition when "thoughts pass and are visible like fish swimming under clear water" (18-19); my eagerness to document experience in language, refreshed by my translation practice; my freedom to write from my personal life without fear of exposure – wanted expression in imagery, a return to the historical basis for my work. To compose stories for *Mollusca*, I experimented with how much poetry and image a story (or a story's reader) would tolerate. In "Writing Short Stories," Flannery O'Connor writes that the "story [genre] manage[s] to operate at another level of experience by letting [a] wooden leg accumulate meaning"; the wooden leg "has its place on the literal level of the story, but it operates in depth as well as on the surface. It increases the story in every direction" (99). I did not want to reduce any story to a literal story about writing or translating poetry. Rather I was faced with the rigorous challenge of reconciling images with narrative.

Throughout *Mollusca*, I considered Carter's "over-mind" as a function of an outer layer of consciousness (shell) that invariably signals the process of its own production (flesh). In "Tours des Babel," Jacques Derrida describes translation practice as "two adjoined fragments ... produc[ing] each other at the edge of the same limit" (191). In *Mollusca*, Carter's method of translation would

present discrete elements configured and energized on the edge of each other. I would elaborate the image of shell and flesh (the relationship translated and original) as a material statement of writing process (or awareness). This is to say that Carter's shell would be invariably made of flesh, secretions, or of herself. A document made of such material would signal how Carter's present tense is inseparable from her past self.

In stories, such as "Ratio and "All About Mary," Carter's recognition of her present condition as inseparable from her past condition is a source of frustration as well as self-acceptance. Carter's effort to move forward repeatedly draws her family out in her memory. This obligation to family, which Carter has ostensibly resisted by estranging herself from her family, recurs and shapes an inevitable homecoming, albeit according to Carter's terms of returning home as a changed person.

In "Mollusk," a pivotal story in the collection, Carter borrows the snail-wife image from her translation of Moon Chung-hee's "Room Where I Cry Alone," and faces that she is a wife with a bruised body who wants to isolate to a roll of fat around her waist and control it by "lur[ing], as onto a chopstick, the coil of pain." I elaborated on the image of the mollusk, as well as remarkable members of the phylum *mollusca*, such as the snail and oyster, to mark a central organizing principle.

In "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin writes that "[w]hile content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content" (75). In "Tours des Babel," Derrida quotes and elaborates Benjamin's image of translation: "The first figure which comes in here is that of the core and the shell, the fruit and the skin . . ." (192). In *Mollusca*, I followed this legacy and image of translation as accretion, and traced "fruit and its skin" and "core and shell" to make a pattern of perpetual growth, a meditation and reconciliation between an inner pattern of thinking and memory mining, and an outward gesture, act or conversation. Carter's translation practice appears not just as a matter of translating "lines" but as a metaphor for the production of consciousness or awareness. My collection's thesis expanded: The

shell, Carter's over-mind, would be the document called *Mollusca*, signaling my process of writing the stories.

In translation studies, inadequacy takes on shades of the fidelity discourse that render and measure a translated work faithful or unfaithful to the original, according to historical and ever shifting measures and metrics (Venuti 4-5). "Just North of Santa Fe" establishes betrayal as a theme for later stories in *Mollusca*. In "Mollusk," "Pearl," and "Sanctuary," Carter's emerging translation practice verges toward the "unfaithful," subjective, and inventive in different ways. The central source of tension between Carter and X is that they interpret Korean culture differently. X plays his role in Korean culture as a matter of obligation and devotion; Carter refuses the cultural and familial code. X and his family make Carter "other"; Carter bristles against pro forma expectations, especially for love.

Gayatri Spivak's notion of translation as the "most intimate act of reading" (313) became a profound influence in my development and understanding of Carter's character. Carter's work as a translator of contemporary Korean poetry sensitizes her to how language is used to mediate intimacy, relationships and a self in flux. As Carter reads cultural codes, i.e., patriarchal norms, she distances herself vis-à-vis a gendered or "other" view. Perhaps Judith Butler qualifies the condition best when she writes, "'Sex' is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the "one" becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility" (368). If Carter is othered because she is "unintelligible" within the domain of Korean "cultural intelligibility," she "others" others in return. My work necessarily phrases Carter's reading as a function of gender, and my stories narrate, translate, and document how Carter "reads the scene" of her life and culture. I portray the challenge of how a woman reads, or refuses to read and translate, inscribed codes of being a Korean/American woman. The re-examination or reconstitution of "norms," so to speak, took me

in a number of directions. I contoured my work as a complicated legacy of female consciousness, notably passed down through mother to daughter, and made a retrospective sweep of my experience, poetics, and creative writing with influences to secure this writing.

*Genre: Form and Content*

My short story collection focuses on Carter's evolving character and identity per her relationships and growing awareness of race, gender, and language. As the stories develop and build on one another, Carter's personal relationships raise questions about agents of beauty, love, friendship, and betrayal. Intimacy is constantly at stake and under pressure within relationships. The stories, set in familial and un/charitable settings, pose questions about how relationships are internalized and externalized, and how language is used to distance or make intimate one person to another.

The collection follows a chronological arc and hinges on Carter's character development, albeit scattered and inconsistent. Chronology lends the collection a sense of history and future, and Carter frequently mines her memory for a refuge from her current circumstances. Carter's family is her foundation. Even if her familial relationships undergo change and disruption, they provide a reliable baseline for Carter's ambivalence and inconsistencies, her perception and outcomes. Memory is an important theme; spirits occupy Carter's consciousness and suggest questions about memorialization, protective identities or shells, and even *memento mori*. As Carter moves forward in her life, her sense of history deepens. In "Adequacy," Carter initiates her translation practice. Every story after "Adequacy" offers evidence of Carter's tendency to document her experience. In the broadest sense, *Mollusca* – or the relationship of shell to process and flesh – gets at how a person carries around and is attached to a past, history, and story that is necessarily over and yet made out of a living body.

The collection is presented as “Ratio,” “Remote Couple I,” “Just North of Santa Fe,” “Remote Couple II,” “Adequacy,” “How to Use a Moon Door,” “Mollusk,” “Pearl,” “Sanctuary,” “All About Mary,” and “Translator’s Note.” The collection includes two appendices: “Appendix A,” “My Mother’s Cemetery,” an essay I wrote about translating poetry with my mother’s help; and “Appendix B,” Moon Chung-hee’s poems (“Moon,” “Room Where I Cry Alone,” “School of Trees,” “Earthworm and Plantain,” and “A Poet’s Bed”) in *bangul* and in their entirety, accompanied by my translations.

“Ratio” begins with Carter making a cast of her mother’s torso for an art class. The fate of the plaster cast speaks volumes about the conflicted relationship Carter has with her mother. Carter is ambivalent about memorializing her mother with a cast, especially versus her mother’s delight at having the cast made. Carter documents and measures her mother’s beauty, and Carter’s preoccupation with beauty influences the way she interacts with Alex, her drug user boyfriend, who tries to convince her that dropping acid enhances perception. Carter is ambivalent about the relationship but feels sympathy for Alex: He cannot perceive the beauty she sees. By the time Carter visits Seoul and befriends Eva, who is beautiful like her mother, she questions the integrity of beauty against a backdrop of Seoul, which itself has morphed per its standards of beauty. Carter falls ill in Seoul and when she returns to the States, sees Eva and Alex as lacking insight because they seek visual aids.

“Remote Couple I” takes place in Maseru, Lesotho, and portrays a cold intimacy that sets in between Carter and Dr. and Mrs. K— with whom she stays for a month. The K—s are heavy handed in their dogmatic assertions about aristocratic behavior, and live in Maseru by way of a rigidly defined social hierarchy among Koreans. The curated domestic focus of their apartment reflects the K —’s elitist preferences. Carter’s rebellious nature is confirmed, she thinks, by the candid rapport she shares with Yong, who comes from a desperate family of migrant workers in Maseru. The story explores what Carter can “translate” or learn from Koreans who are not part of her family, or who are beyond her

understanding or sympathy. Even if Carter is attracted to Yong's intelligence and irreverence, she cannot help him in his world.

"Just North of Santa Fe" portrays Carter's betrayal of her then-boyfriend X soon after the couple graduates from college. Carter's betrayal of X is set against a backdrop of X's sister Helen's need to be part of Carter's relationship with X, a configuration implied by the Korean cultural expectation that a woman be subsumed by her husband's family. Carter bristles against this pro forma relationship and expectation. Carter's eventual betrayal of X is not justified by her ambivalence toward conventions of household and familiar pressures located in Helen's neediness and X's expectations. The story traces how Carter's early relationship with X is externalized from itself given the expectations of his family.

"Remote Couple II," like "Just North of Santa Fe," takes place in New Mexico at Helen's residence in a growing compound of adobe dwellings north of Santa Fe. Carter and X's relationship grows strained with Carter's continued refusal to accept Helen's affection. When X and Carter are around Eric and HJ, H's neighbors and the "remote couple" of the title, they imagine their relationship is intact. Eric seeks to improve both himself and his medical practice by learning Spanish and indulges in a friendship-turned-affair with Angelica, his Spanish teacher. Carter and X accompany Eric to Mexico City to meet Angelica's family. Mexico City might offer a space of development and revelation. While Carter wants to be forgiven, X refuses to forgive her.

"Adequacy" takes place years into X and Carter's marriage. Carter's translation practice is measured against her behavior or acceptance of X's relationship with his mother, who has recently moved to their town. Carter dismisses X's role as his mother's caretaker as typically Korean, and X uses Carter's earlier betrayal to justify his disapproval for her character and ethics. Carter underestimates X's loyalty to his family; Carter's conflict with her mother-in-law only reinforces X's protection of his mother. Deemed lacking by X, even as she seeks to translate and understand the Korean poetry, Carter no longer believes in X.

In “How to Use a Moon Door,” two years after X and Carter have divorced, Carter wants to expose an abuse in collaboration: Carter trusts a professor/ mentor working in Korean translation, who “borrows” from her poetry translations to refine and advance his own professional interests. Carter evaluates the integrity of her own English, questioning what it means to be a legitimate purveyor of Korean sensibility in translation. The professor makes use of a lame leg as disability, and the disability works as a subject rhyme for Carter’s English as a second language, or what she considers her relative lack of polish in the English language.

In “Mollusk,” Carter, impressed by Moon Chung-hee’s poem “Room Where I Cry Alone” and its allusion to a snail-wife persona from Korean folklore, borrows the snail image to situate her body in space. When Carter trains for a marathon with her friend Faye, she remembers being bullied by X. Carter has converted X’s repeated rants about money into bodily pain, which she wants to extract by running. Carter’s translation of Moon’s image recalls how “every translation [is an] incalculable equivalence, an impossible but incessantly alleged correspondence between the pound of flesh and money” (Derrida 373). In “What Is “Relevant” Translation?” Derrida argues that translation is at its “very heart...[an] obligation and debt” (373). At the heart of “Mollusk” is Carter’s continued contract with X, which she wants to reshape, despite no longer being married to X. Carter understands that her body and present condition are inseparable from her past.

In “Pearl,” Carter falls in love with Otto Sarr, an assistant professor of Korean Language and Literature. Otto has lived and studied in Korea for years and occupies the distance between Carter and her mother tongue and culture. Though he is not Korean, Otto is arguably more Korean than Carter. In particular, Carter recognizes when and how Otto’s English sounds like a second or borrowed language, and has difficulty reading his character. His refusal to call her by her adopted or Korean name unnerves her confidence in using language to secure intimacy. Carter memorizes Otto’s words because she wants

language to perform in ways that Otto cannot; the “pearl,” ostensibly the creative language of the mollusk, proves elusive.

“Sanctuary,” a companion story to “Pearl,” begins with Carter’s memory of X’s near-death experience during a family vacation to Kaua‘i. X’s status as a figment of her imagination influences her perspective in Seoul, where Carter is headed to find Otto during his research year. In Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, a touchstone in the story, suicide is both staged and real. The film’s approach to the sublime, Kant’s “encounter between an ‘I’ and that which has the capacity to annihilate it completely” (Battersby 1), is evoked in how Carter imagines that her relationship with Otto has dire consequences. Carter considers visiting Korea a version of tossing aside versions of herself; she documents these feelings in notes, which Otto disparages. Carter distinguishes Otto from Korea, a retrospective act of not assuming that Korea is a destructive force in her life.

“All About Mary” chronicles the ever-evolving relationship between Carter and her sister Mary. Carter visits Mary after returning to the States from Korea. While close during their formative years in Pennsylvania, the sisters have grown apart. Their differences sharpened when Carter divorced X and disappointed her parents. Ever the diplomat and mediator, the happily married Mary grates on Carter’s nerves as a standard bearer for familial loyalty and deference. Mary valorizes their parents’ immigration and Korean War narratives in ways that an irreverent Carter cannot abide. “All About Mary” examines shared memories from the sisters’ early adulthood, namely correspondence about their parents’ entry into the United States. The parents, self-conscious speakers of English, and their antics, especially those involving food, endear their daughters to them.

“Translator’s Note” is a take on the genre of translator’s notes, footnotes that often explicate foreign phrases to supplement and elucidate a reader’s understanding of a translated text. “Translator’s Note” refers to the questionable support Carter receives from an abusive librarian, who taunts Carter’s efforts to gain a proficiency in *hangul*, and a Korean housewife, who enlists Carter to help improve her English.

The story pressures the assumption of cultural cohesion among Korean women. Intimacy in these settings assumes that rude behavior falls under the shared aspiration of cultural progress, or at least progress for one's culture in mainstream perception. Carter questions what, if anything, she willfully understands or misunderstands about Korean/American women.

“Appendix A,” an essay titled “My Mother’s Cemetery,” brings together many threads from the stories. I wrote the piece to help me better understand what work the stories could do. The essay takes formal risks by incorporating lines of poetry into narrative. I cite my translation of Emily Dickinson’s poems from Korean back into English, and document an early foray into translation, a practice I shared with my mother. The piece describes my evolving relationship with translation as an aspect of my relationship with my mother and so traces a legacy of female consciousness in language. After we read Dickinson’s poems together, my mother and I translated poems by Moon Chung-hee together, an experience inflected with my mother’s loss of her own mother per the Korean War. After writing the essay, I began to understand how much recovering a mother tongue in *Mollusca* had to do with recovering my mother. I revised my stories, with an eye toward writing as the privilege of my relationship with a mother tongue.

#### *Influence: Writers, Literary Movements and Traditions*

I situate my short story collection within the traditions and legacy of Asian American literary production. The influence is comprised of works of fiction and poetry (e.g., Chang-Rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*, Suji Kwok Kim’s *Notes from a Divided Country*, and Myung Mi Kim’s *Penury*). I draw from contemporary work that enlarges the canon of immigrant narrative and address the long aftermath of war, in particular, within Asian American immigrant perspectives. A central theme of *Mollusca* is the way memory appears and behaves in language.

I hold a deep regard for Krys Lee's *Drifting House*, stories that describe and document the Korean War at a remove. *Mollusca* responds to *Drifting House's* suggestion of a lightly occupied and impermanent residence on earth. Rather than cite the Korean War narratives of the immigrant parent generation, Lee abstracts her characters' Korean War identification in ways that are subtle; hence, the house is "drifting" and portable. The legacy of Korean War narration and identification, usually a metonym for Korean American identity, fades and is sublimated. Lee presents a chronology, anchored in the Korean War, that is simultaneously linear (story after story) and circular (later stories that refer to events in earlier stories), and so suspends chronology or time lapse, as well as character development, throughout her stories per the repeated – and endless – legacy of Korea as homeland.

Lee's method evokes the possibility of white space to experiment with discontinuous character. In poems, white margins constitute part of the ritual of entering the poem or spaces between lines (Share, "Poetics"). Nor do white spaces necessarily signal a statement about chronology, affect, or cohesion. In this spirit, I employed the short story form or interlinked story genre (cycle of stories) to vacate and/or abide by the responsibility of explaining lapses in chronology. Dis/continuity models disruption in Carter's character. The freedom of breaks (white spaces) between stories supported my freedom to normalize chronological lapses in narrative exposition over the arc of my short story collection.

In *Lucy*, Jamaica Kincaid roots her protagonist's development in a place other than home and writes Lucy's naiveté as a source of fresh perception. Lucy, an au pair in the United States, views her employers as culturally other. Her surprise at the sentimental meaning attached to daffodils, for instance, helps refresh the reader's perspective on daffodils (30). Lucy learns about her employers' culture, and her connection with the West Indies and with her mother deepens. Kincaid's story of Lucy's coming to consciousness provided me with a format for understanding the fluctuations of

homesickness. Throughout the stories of *Mollusca*, Carter's various travels set in motion an elaborate sense of home as a distance from her family.

I paid particular attention to work by Mai Der Vang and Ocean Vuong. Vuong's poem "Telemachus" from *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, quotes Homer's *Odyssey* as cultural reference, and recasts Odysseus' return from war return as his father's non-return from the Vietnam War: "the bullet hole in his back, brimming / with seawater" (7). Telemachus, Vuong as Odysseus' son, can only recover a dead father. Der Vang's "Meditation of the Lioness" distills "[v]iolets ...hatching volcanoes// Then child, you are cultivated" (37); *Afterland* similarly resonates with the "aftermath of war." Images from these narrative poems helped determine and scaffold Carter's distance from – as well as her unsentimental view toward – her parents' post-war immigration and survival.

I was inspired by Yiyun Li's story "Love in the Marketplace." Li's protagonist San San, a promise keeper, abides by social contracts to a fault. By the end of the story, a beggar refuses San San's money unless she cuts him, so she pays to cut him. The question Li poses about honoring a social contract in the face of self/destruction helped me frame a question about Carter's limitations and integrity per a cultural contract that stakes self-sacrifice as an ennobling practice.

I consider/ed Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE* a foundational work of Asian American literature. It has had a profound influence on my work. *DICTEE* explores Korean American identity by interrogating its means of production, namely language. Cha undoes the assumption of English as a language of representation. *Hangul* only appears in an image on the frontispiece of the collection, though it has clearly been internalized by Cha in her narration. Cha centralizes the language lesson as a metaphor for indoctrination and also as an opportunity for subversion. I read Don Mee Choi's refractory poetics as an allusion to Cha's refractory or subversive poetics. In *Hardly War*, Choi repeatedly pairs passages of *hangul* with the phrase, "I refuse to translate" (10). Just as Maria Tymoczko writes that "translators have been and can be agents of significant social change" (227),

Choi's mis-translation pivots on refusal. Choi pressures the assumption of translation the first place. I followed the possibilities of Choi and Cha's experimentation and made a pattern of evasion in *Mollusca*. If Carter "reads her own scene," part of her character is shaped by her refusal to read cultural codes that might be obvious to others.

*DICTEE* fractures into the many genres – autobiography, testament, historical monograph, prose/poetry, *translation*, and narrative – resulting in a linear book that is structured by discontinuity. If Cha's work behaves as an accretion of genre forms, Cha casts Korean American identity itself as a kind of experiment in form. Cha's experiment of layered and fractured narrative formats a question of how realistic (or effective) separating genre from genre is. And in particular, Cha's method of juxtaposing prose, poetry, and citations from historical archives destabilizes the notion of memory: "[T]hrough disembodied yet multiple voices, borrowed citations, and caption-less photographs.... acts of recollection...are frequently indistinguishable from acts of collection" (Cheng 119). In other words, Cha cites visual and epistolary archives to secure historical and public points of reference and refute them per her perpetual sense of "otherness." Likewise, throughout *Mollusca*, I explored Carter's character and loyalties as a way to question a character's coherence and responsibility to self as history.

While the structure of narrative written to include meta-narrative is common enough in fiction (e.g., Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*), I also took particular inspiration from a central tension in Lydia Davis' novel, *The End of the Story*: Could Davis unravel the elements of the story to end the story? Davis' narrator unpacks and rewrites elements of a story she tells herself about a breakup. The unraveling of elements paradoxically continues the story's intensity and the love/r lost haunts the retelling of the end of the love affair. Davis writes, "This seemed to be the end of the story, and for a while it was also the end of the novel... Then, although it was still the end of the story, I put it at the beginning of the novel, as if I needed to tell the end first in order

to go on and tell the rest” (11). My stories work at unraveling memory as a function of consciousness and identity. That is, memory – per Davis and in my writing – eludes capture or rest.

### *Aesthetics*

In *Mollusca*, I explored my devotion to poetry and poetics, and so my stories behave as palimpsests, relying on substrates of poetry and poetics that forged my – with Carter’s – consciousness as a writer and translator.

My work makes use of a stream of consciousness modality, presenting episodes of Carter’s thought processes and self-conscious narrative (after Virginia Woolf). In contemporary works, such as those by Deborah Levy and Rachel Cusk, the seam between fiction and non-fiction is blurred. Cusk’s work posits the disappearance of a protagonist in context of reportage, made of equally weighted, if personal, narratives: “a radical experiment in passivity... to respond to the chatty, descriptive tradition of the naturalistic English novel with ... silence” (Schwartz). If the tone of Carter’s voice can seem “confessional,” my reading of Cusk’s work suggested that confessional chats might be so perfunctory as to verge on being fictional narratives.

Levy writes that to answer the question of whether she is a writer, she answers thus:

When a female writer walks a female character in to the centre of her literary enquiry (or a forest) and this character starts to project shadow and light all over the place, she will have to find a language that is in part to do with learning how to become a subject rather than a delusion, and in part to do with unknotting the ways in which she has been put together by the societal system in the first place. (26)

Levy’s words resonate with Butler’s approach to “cultural intelligibility” per female roles, namely those of writers. From Levy and Cusk’s styles and approaches, I worked on writing entries into my stories that would, as Benjamin wrote, keep intact “traces of the storyteller cling[ing]to the story the

way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (92). I accepted that entering a story was both a conscious decision and a decision of consciousness.

Last, in “The Bath,” Yoko Ogawa’s translator wryly notes, “‘What did he say?’ one of them asked, apparently too excited to wait for me to speak of my own accord. ‘He is admiring that old china and says it is indeed very fine,’ I said, translating a sentence no one had said” (14).

Translation, as Ogawa’s narrator posits, would become for Carter – as for me – a creative act.

### *Theoretical Influences*

My research for the short story collection work was somewhat recursive. I attended to the possibilities of evasion of first-person perspective by considering the way Jonathan Culler’s complex discussion of the “I” or subjectivity in poetics. In *Theory of Lyric*, Culler writes, “The statement-subject is not a personal I but a linguistic function” (105); the lyric “is a reality statement even though this statement has no function in the context of reality” (106). Since the statement-subject is an enunciation and not a person, “the concept of subjectivity will be eliminated from the theory of the lyric” (116). Given the “statement-subject” with no function in reality, I kept Carter’s “I” at a distance; the “she” of the stories would not be an autobiographical inscription. Rather, she would occur within Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s fluid continuum of real author, implied author, narrator, narratee, implied reader, and real reader (87). In essence, Rimmon-Kenan’s spectrum allowed a first- and third-person prism of Culler’s “I.” Carter admits a mode of self-narration – a “she” – during a hike in Nepal in the story “Adequacy.”

I layered a consideration of first and third person perspectives with aspects of translation studies. Jacques Derrida opens “Tours des Babel” with “‘Babel,’ first a proper name”; and offers that Babel “tells of the need for figuration, for myth, for tropes, for twists and turns” (165). While I beg off a discussion of “irreducible multiplicity of tongues” here, I read Derrida’s need of “myth,”

or “twists and turns” per “Babel” as license for storytelling. In *Mollusca*, the name – its implied association with identity – turned out to be a narrative opportunity: Carter’s family arrives in the US from Korea during the Carter era. When years later they become American citizens, Carter adopts the first name “Carter” rather than Amy or Rosalyn, to honor, if reluctantly, her family’s arrival in the States. Carter’s refusal of a more conventional, even more feminine name echoes her greater, perhaps deeper, refusal to use her Korean name publicly. The stories in *Mollusca* mirror Carter’s ambivalence about her name in plots and conditions that signal intimacy and distancing from others and herself. Carter’s decision not to use her Korean name reveals key aspects of her character and speaks to larger forces that nudge toward an assimilation of character and consciousness that Carter in/directly bucks by refusing to have her Korean name used, spoken aloud, and mispronounced. Carter renames herself, arguably fracturing her identity.

Susan Bassnett, in an analysis about the flexibility of flexible Russian naming systems, argues that “[t]he use of names in Russian can denote shifts in points of view” (127). Multiple names per character express not only multiple perspectives accorded to a character’s vision but also multiple personae per the character’s performed identity per name/s used. Bassnett elaborates “that the translator must consider the function of the naming system rather than the system itself” (127), a “naming system” implies a social or cultural practice that distinguishes a persona that exceeds the meaning of the name in itself. Carter occupies first and third person perspectives simultaneously and the cultural context of “Carter” in *Mollusca* is both the source of tension and solace for the making of Carter’s character.

I pursued ideas about identity and the “I” with a keen awareness of Dorothy Wang’s critical essay collection *Thinking Its Presence*. Wang describes the diminution of ethnic writing per the *PMLA*’s treatment of “identity” literature. Wang underscores that because “the racialized poet, subject, and person is often apprehended in terms of the bodily, the material, and the political, her

[work] is invariably...posited in opposition to the abstract, the intellectual, the literary” (22); therefore, the “racialized poet” only presents contra a lyric-derived avant-garde poetry. In the critical reception of Asian American poetry, content would limit experiment in form. I posed this diminutive reading of “ethnic literature” as a challenge for my collection, as experiment, to address.

I was and am deeply interested in how the reading of Asian American literature as a category is not limited to “ethnic” topics or content. I addressed the question of the amount of knowledge of Korean culture I could presume or needed to supply both to Carter and my readers. “Translator’s Note,” in particular, pressures Carter’s assumptions about her identity. Nor did I take for granted that narrative alone would imply the passage of time or the evolution of character. Rather, throughout the collection, I phrased questions about character, whether over time or through compassion, in relation to conventions of cohesion and coherence in the short story form.

### *Conclusion*

To embed Carter’s translation practice and story in Spivak’s notion of translation as the “most intimate act of reading” (313) is to admit Carter’s estrangement from her family and culture. Following A.K. Ramanujan’s argument “translation is symbolic ...mapping a structure of relations onto another plane or another symbolic system” (157), I posited how and when translation (i.e., Carter’s reading of the scene) became less a matter of privacy or accuracy, and more a vital, creative act.

My purpose in producing this dissertation was to compose short stories that inscribed love and intimacy within one’s identity. I explored a Korean American female subjectivity and found a deep legacy of refusal with interiority, and awareness within creativity. I developed a character within history, nuanced by domesticity and interiority, to inspire a deeper understanding of human desire and relationships.

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