Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies
1 (2010) 61-69.

Interrogating Identity Construction: Bodies Versus Community in Cynthia Kadohata's *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*

By Nicole Myoshi Rabin

In an interview for the journal MELUS, Hsiu-chuan Lee claims that Cynthia Kadohata suggests her novel *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* does not directly take "any specific ethnicity as its central concern," nor deal explicitly with the "identity issue" (165, 179). Despite these assertions by the author, *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* is mainly taught at the university level in Asian American Literature courses. While Kadohata's novel has been established within the specific canon of Asian American Literature, her novel deals with issues that resonate among all racial groups. This essay considers the ways in which Kadohata creates an imagined future not wholly detached from issues of race and identity, but where the conceptualization of race-based identity is conceived by means of self-fashioning and self-signifying. In the novel's "futuristic" American society, concerns of class and the divides of wealth between the white "richtowns" and the multiracial majority may seem to be the central themes, but issues of race and issues of class become conflated in the novel, and Kadohata uses more subtle ways to discuss issues of racial difference. What Kadohata suggests through her novel *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* is not that racialized bodies cease to be of importance in American society, but that race as a critical factor in identity formation and categorization must be reframed by self-signification and social interactions within communities.

In American society, race has been an influential determinant of one's political rights, and most importantly, one's sense of identity (Omi and Winant 1). While American society has placed great emphasis on race as a category of social, political, and self classification, race is understood to be an unreliable marker of identity. According to Omi and Winant in their book, *Racial Formation in the United States*, race is "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (55). In this definition, race is a product of the "social conflicts" and "interests" that are constantly in flux and projected onto the bodies of the nation's citizens and subjects; where race then "functions as a norm" (Butler 1). In actuality, race, like sex, is "a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs...whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls" (Butler 1). Although race is an "unreliable marker" of identity, the "productive power" that it has gained from being reiterated as a norm has given race the "power to produce" difference as a means of control among the "bodies" of the nation's subjects.

Nicole Rabin is currently pursuing her PhD in English at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. She received her M.A. in English Literature from Clark University in Worcester, MA

ISSN: 2154-2171

Kadohata questions the meanings of race by giving the bodies in her novel different means of signification that subverts the current power structures of racial production. In this essay, I discuss the ways in which Kadohata produces individual bodies within the text that destabilize our current understandings of identity and communal bodies that suggest a new means of thinking about identity formation in American society. I will examine the ways in which Kadohata questions the authenticity of current physical racial markers used in formulating identities, how she locates the social conflicts on her characters' bodies in new ways, how the subjects are given a means for reclamation of their racialized or politicized bodies, and the alternative communal body that is offered in the text as a means for understanding identity formation. In the examination of these issues, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which this novel, which at first may seem to have no "specific ethnicity as its central concern," calls racial definitions to the foreground and questions its authority over identity.

Although the novel is set in the year 2052, *In the Heart of the Valley of Love* sets up the prevailing social conflicts for present American society. Kadohata says in the interview with Hsiu-chuan Lee, "When I started writing the book, I set the time of the story in the present, maybe in the 1980s or 1990s" (176). Since the novel was originally set in the present time and only later changed to the "not-so distant" future, it is easy to understand how some of the social and political conflicts of the current time are written into the text of the story. The only real importance of the time change is that it allowed the author to "feel free to say what [she'd] like to say" about the social and political issues of our time and perhaps indicate their threatening potential (176). In the novel there are both racial and class divisions which become conflated, and being non-white and poor become synonymous in the text (Nguyen 151). The social conflicts between the rich whites and everyone else in the novel are exacerbated by the physical distance of their communities, which can be seen in the narrator's positioning of the city: "All my deliveries followed the same route—downtown Los Angeles to richtown" (5). The whites of "richtown" are positioned in opposition, both physically and theoretically, to the rest of the multiracial Los Angeles. Through the enhanced disparities of class and the conflation of class with race as symbolized by the physical distance of these communities, Kadohata is able to set up our current social conflicts in this futuristic context.

Kadohata poignantly questions contemporary American society's use of common physical markers of race as a means for identification, as well as the authenticity of these markers. When describing her friend Lily's grandparent's generation, which is presumably close to the present day, Francie, the protagonist, states,

> The white girls had tried to enlarge their mouths with lipstick, emulating the naturally full lips of the black girls. The black girls had straightened their hair to emulate the naturally straight hair of the Asians. And the Asian girls wore shadow that rounded out their eyes. All of them looked quite silly. That had been a strange period of transition in America. (76)

Each race is given specific physical features that are used to determine the so-called race of the body. Here, the "full lips" are associated with blackness while in opposition, thin lips are then denoted white. The Asian racial marker becomes both "straight hair" and the un-"rounded" eyes. As each racially-typed girl

attempts to "emulate" the other racially-typed girls, the insignificance of these racial markers is made clear. Each girl can use tools such as "lipstick" or "shadow" to make themselves appear more or less Asian or white or black. By being able to change these racial markers, the race of the body becomes less determinate. Each "shadow" or "lipstick" application is used in playing a part of racial performance, helping the body appear more marked as one race or another. By being able to play the body as more Asian or less Asian, for example, the significance of the body as a racial identifier becomes more questionable. Kadohata uses this moment to demonstrate the instabilities of racial categorization as an indicator of identity when based on physical appearance and bodily significance.

Kadohata's indictment of current racial understanding goes further as Francie, the mixed race narrator, is marginalized by our current monoracial understanding of race as the determinant factor of identity. She says, "I enjoyed the feeling of the heat making my loose shorts billow around my yellow-brown legs—the yellow from my Japanese mother, the brown from my Chinese-black father" (22). Viet Thanh Nguyen suggests in *Race and Resistance* that Francie embodies "the novel's conception of nonwhite identity as being a mélange of different ethnic and racial backgrounds" (150). While the narrator does occupy the space of the raced majority within the novel, her value as a mixed race character does not end at being the embodiment of the "novel's conception" of a "nonwhite identity." Francie as a mixed-race subject maintains her position as marginalized in our current understanding of racial categorization. Keeping with the notion of the body, Kadohata locates Francie's indeterminacy in her yellow-brown skin, which is not easily identified as one race or another, until Francie herself declares where she "belongs." Knowing what races and ethnicities Francie belongs to serves a purpose beyond making her a mixture of incongruent elements of race and therefore some sort of representative of everything "nonwhite" as Nguyen suggests; her "parts" are named, and so while she may embody the majority within the text, she is still marginalized by our current understanding of race along monoracial lines. By making the protagonist a "mélange," Kadohata renders this multiracial character incapable of being assigned identity by physical racial markers and forces Francie to seek a different means by which she must forge an identity.

Since Kadohata understands the majority of current bodily racial markers to be insignificant and inauthentic, rather than relying on the socially produced "norms" of racial difference such as skin color, hair texture, eye color or shape, in the novel Kadohata locates the social conflicts on her characters' bodies in different ways, such as the skin disease of the black pearls. Due to "the fact that being nonwhite is also essentially being symbolically 'black' or oppressed in terms of race and class and potentially a member of those politically opposed to the richtowns and whites" (Nguyen 150), the skin disease of the black pearls becomes a way in which Kadohata projects social conflicts onto the bodies of her characters. Those people afflicted with the skin disease in the novel all belong to the multiracial and poor majority; as Francie says, "Both my parents had it" (10), as well as Max the Magician, and later Francie herself. Like skin color in our current society, these black pearls "mark the bodies of the nonwhite as political, as different, as poor and marginalized" (Nguyen 151). Francie states that while these markers of difference are not really harmful, they are "profoundly

disturbing" (12). Through her narrator, Kadohata is able to call into question the seemingly innocuous yet "disturbing" use of physical markers as a means of differentiating between bodies. While the black pearls may not overtly equal black skin, the "disturbing" use of bodily markers as a means of constructing difference and producing power inequalities is made clear.

While these pearls, like other racial markers, may be "harmless," Francie's reactions to them show how these markers and the social conflicts that they represent are "profoundly disturbing" and take their toll on the people oppressed because of them. When the black pearls first appear on Francie's skin she says, "The sight of [the pearl falling out of my skin] made me feel tired, too tired to reach down to pick up the pearl or examine my skin further. The disease was harmless, like acne, but I felt so tired" (16). Francie asserts the superficiality and benign nature of the skin condition by equating it to acne. Different from acne however, the black pearl goes beyond the simple irritation of the skin and affects Francie's motivation and energy; she becomes tired merely by seeing the physical marker. The effect that the pearl has on Francie develops further when she later states, "One day, I didn't make any deliveries at all. My muscles were already losing their tone...I had black pearls between my toes" (18). What started on her arm has now moved to "between her toes," physically inhibiting her movement and ability to complete her deliveries. As the oppression of the pearls moves across more and more of her skin, Francie's emotional weariness manifests itself into the very real and bodily incapability to move on her feet. What began as something seemingly "harmless" and superficial like acne has now become a hindrance on her daily activities and livelihood, demonstrating the reality of the marker as "profoundly disturbing." Through Francie's reactions, Kadohata puts at the forefront the disturbing effects of projecting social conflicts upon bodies and the detriment that racializing bodies has on those subjects who are rendered "other."

While projecting the social conflicts of race and class onto the subjects' bodies through the use of the black pearls, Kadohata also offers a means for reclamation of these bodies by the subjects themselves. Nguyen suggests this in his conclusion to *Race and Resistance* when he says, "the fact that there is nevertheless something lovely and valuable about pearls demonstrates their contradictory meaning for Francie and the other outcasts, that the pearls can be reclaimed or resignified" (151). While Nguyen goes on to discuss this reclamation through the "body politic" created from those physically marked by the pearls, there is also a personal reclamation of body that is indicated. The fact that these black markers are pearls, rather than rocks, does point to them having some sort of value, but where the true chance for reclamation comes is actually in one of Francie's friend's suggestions. At a house party with all her friends, Teddy says to Francie that, "You have to focus on not getting diseases, and then you don't get them. I myself take care of myself...And I don't have any skin disease. You have to focus on being healthy and you'll be healthy" (92). Perhaps Teddy's idea is a bit optimistic, or as Professor Betsy Huang states, "a willful blindness to the reality of such diseases" (Huang 6 Dec. 2007); but it does offer a contradictory perspective to the inevitability of getting a "disease" or of the negative effects produced by being marked. What Teddy alludes to is that there is a chance or a way in which the body does not have to be negatively marked as a racialized or oppressed other. Just as he "focuses" on specific things like health

as a means of obtaining it, so too can society "focus" on becoming "healthy" by moving away from concentrating on the negative effects of bodily marking as a means of oppression.

Kadohata projects the social conflicts of American society onto the individual bodies of her characters not just through the blatant use of the skin disease of the black pearls, but also through other skin conditions. Remaining concerned with skin and the body, Kadohata locates the social conflict of being poor and raced on Francie's body through the use of a scar. After getting in an accident, rather than getting the medical attention that she so desperately needs, Francie recalls that, "Since I didn't have health insurance...a doctor looked me over and then I waited while Auntie went home to get extra money, so she could pay for the surgery in advance" (29). Even as she lies in the hospital bleeding uncontrollably, her poverty prevents her from gaining access to proper health care. The power inequalities of social class and race are exemplified in this moment at the hospital, where a monetary transaction must occur before she is able to receive life-giving care. If she were of a higher social class and was able to afford health insurance, Francie would not have to "wait" or have her aunt "pay in advance" for any medical assistance. The scar that forms as a result of the accident then becomes a physical marker, not just of the accident itself, but of the social conflicts of race and class that have denied her access to proper health care.

Francie is able to render this scar and the social conflicts that it represents meaningless, reclaiming her body from the regulatory practice of constructing it as different. In a scene with Mark, her boyfriend, she says, "I felt as if he could see my scars through my sweater sleeve. I was torn between pulling up my sleeve and showing him, or pulling my arm away. I pulled up my sleeve" (41). Francie's shame of the physical scar on her arm is similar in effect to the negative feelings of weariness that were produced by looking at the black pearls. The shame causes her to feel as if other people "see" the marks of damage even through their protective layer of concealment, here the sweater. In this moment Francie can either "focus," as Teddy said, on being healthy or "focus" on the negative effects of shame produced by the oppression of the scar and all that it represents. As she actively pulls up her sleeve and reveals the scar to Mark, Francie reclaims her body from the "productive power" of difference that causes her feelings of shame. In the end, the scar and the arm are just as she "pictured it, not mattering at all" (42). Francie resignifies her scar and reclaims her body simply by pulling up her sleeve.

One of the most evident means of bodily reclamation in the text is tattooing, but tattooing also serves as a means of demarcating the body as different. Kadohata uses tattooing to show how bodies are given meaning from external sources rather than inherent biological ones, but this marker can be read in various ways. The tattoo is both a self-signifier and a signifier which others may interpret or misinterpret. Carl, the tattoo artist that Francie and Mark meet, says to them, "when someone comes to me and says he or she wants a face tattoo, I say they don't know whether they do or not....They don't know what it's like to be ugly in the eyes of the majority" (200-201). As the person may desire to give their body significance through the bodily marker of a tattoo, the marker may come to mean something else in "the eyes of the majority." It is "the majority" that has the interpretive power, whether it be the untattooed majority,

the white majority, or the counter-hegemonic majority, and determines the racial markers or markers of beauty standards within a specific group. Racial markers, like the tattoo, are established by the majority group and then bodies are interpreted against or in alignment with this model. These racial markers and bodies are not born with meaning, but are given meaning through the reiteration of racial norms from the "eyes of the majority."

What becomes significant about the interpretation of this specific physical marker, is not how the majority may [mis]interpret the marker's meaning, but that the subject chooses to mark themselves in such a way. Francie states that the people with face tattoos "always made me nervous because I felt they were obliterating themselves, but I knew they would say they were doing the opposite, bringing themselves out for everyone to see more clearly" (110). While Francie, who belongs at this point to the untattooed majority, interprets and interpellates the face tattoo as a mark of "obliteration" which obscures the self and causes it to disappear, this is a misinterpretation of the process of self-signification. She acknowledges that these people would claim the opposite of her interpretation and say that the mark does not remove the self from existence, but rather that it brings the self "out for everyone to see." The tattoo is a way in which the subject can "obliterate" the self from the significance that has been projected onto it by the majority and reconstruct the self as a signifier of one's own meaning.

This process of self-signification is much more tenuous than Francie may comprehend at the moment, but in the image she presents of the tattoo the complexities of this process can be understood. She says, "Mark had a flying crane on one of his arms, and before it had become a tattoo, it had gone through swelling, crusting, and shedding—bits of skin peeling off in translucent colored flakes" (110). Part of the "obliteration" of the self which takes place when attempting to self-signify, is the removal of those significances which have been projected onto the body from external forces, such as the social conflicts of poverty and race. The skin here serves as a metaphor for self-signification and reclamation of one's body; like the process which the physical skin undertakes through tattooing, so too does the self undertake this process when being reclaimed. There is a painful procedure of undoing which must be undertaken, like "swelling" and "crusting," in order for the "shedding" to take place and give way for the new meanings and significances being put on the body by the self.

After Francie has been tattooed, she too feels obliterated in a positive way. She says, "I felt very emotional. It was something about the permanence of the blue ring around my wrist, something about the pain, something about the plainness of shop and Carl's pride in his work." She continues with, "It's over, I'm free, and I have a tattoo" (130). For Francie it is not just about the physical tattoo, but it's the process and communal body built out of the process about which she is "very emotional." The actual tattoo is just a part of the communal process, like the "plainness of the shop" or "Carl's pride," which have culminated into giving her the feelings of freedom. In the end of the whole experience, she is "free" and also "has a tattoo;" these two aspects are not conflated, but are related to each other as if one could not have existed without the other. The tattoo has facilitated her freedom as she has been able to reclaim the meaning of her body through the communal process of self-inscription on her skin.

During Francie's most climatic point of reclamation of her body, the tattooing, Kadohata further develops the communal body as a different means for forming an identity. As she sits in the chair choosing to have another man mark her individual body with a symbol which has specific significance to her, she says:

> Mark took my right hand. It reminded me of the way the nurse had pressed my uninjured arm in the hospital when I'd been hurt. And it had the same effect, giving me a visceral feeling of comfort. There's something hypnotic about someone's touch when you're hurting. (129)

In this moment of self-marking, Francie is reminded of her injuries and of the relationship she has created with Mark. Rather than the arm signifying pain and shame as we had seen earlier when she debated showing Mark the scar, here it becomes a sign of connection to Mark and a relief of pain. As Mark holds her right arm it gives Francie a deep emotional connection to him, rather than the solitude of shame, creating a community between them. The arm is reclaimed once again through the actual physical marking of the tattoo, but the freedom of her identity also comes from the process of tattooing as she and Mark hold hands. The new meaning of her body and identity could not have been formed without the communal body formed from the comfort between her and Mark.

In the face of the potential threat of this devolving society, Kadohata suggests through Francie's own negotiation that meaning for identity can be shifted from the unstable individual body to be gained through experience within the communal body. Hsiu-chuan Lee states, in her interview with Cynthia Kadohata, "For those deprived of a traditional home, the communities on the road seem to offer a sense of home beyond their family experience...I have the feeling that families and communities are important in your works because they are sources of safety" (172). While Kadohata herself agrees with the notion of communities as sources of safety, the communities along with, and perhaps because of, the safety provide Francie with a means to find her identity. Just as in the moment of the tattooing, when Francie's scarred arm becomes a site of meaning for her relationship and emotional connectivity with Mark, the author suggests other moments where Francie's identity is forged out of the formation of communal bodies and experience, rather than the individual body or race.

Living with her aunt, Francie is unable to gain a sense of herself, but the City Room at her community college offers an example of a communal body in which Francie is granted access to negotiating her identity beyond physical markers. The City Room is the space where the many marginalized and physically marked characters come together, where her "otherness" is normalized. Francie, marginalized through both the social conflicts projected onto her body and her mixed-race subjectivity finds a community with, "Mark; his best friend, Lucas, a former gang member...Jewel...Joe...who'd never had a girlfriend and kept talking about sex all night; Bernard who...always seemed slightly guilty, as if her were lying to you; and Frank, a photographer with a skin condition" (36). Each of these characters is marginalized whether by race, sexual deviation, group affiliation, or poverty but in this room they are given space to come together and forge friendships and places by which they can now define

themselves. In the City Room as they eat and spend long hours together every Wednesday night, a familial community is born.

This importance of the communal body in developing one's identity is depicted more clearly through the story of the arroyo. Jewel's father tells the story of the arroyo to Mark and Francie one night. He says, "But the point is, it scared me to stand in that secluded place with my own father. I felt close to him, closer than ever, because I knew there was something important about that place" (103). Although Mark and Francie may not understand all the implications of the story in the moment of hearing it, and even the storyteller himself focuses more on the fear he felt, the story of the arroyo illustrates the bond between people and how identities are shaped out of interpersonal bonds. As Jewel's father recalls the moment, it is the feeling of being both physically and emotionally "close" to his own father and the mutual bond built from being together and "knowing there was something important about that place," that becomes essential to his own identity; Jewel's father shares this moment with strangers as a way of telling them about himself. In telling the story communities are formed; the storyteller forms a bond with his listeners and the listeners themselves form a community based on a common knowledge and understanding of the arroyo.

The community of the listeners, and the community of the City Room, come together to give Francie a sense of identity. She states, "And there, in the heart of the arroyo on a warm evening in June, was the last time the four of us [Mark, Francie, Jewel, and Lucas] were ever in the same place at the same time" (222). She later goes back to the arroyo to send Jewel the rings that they had found, but "the rings were gone and in their place was a slip of paper that said simply 'Jewel, July 2052'" (223). The physical location within the arroyo becomes significant to the listeners of Jewel's father's story in a way beyond just the story's meaning of it. The listeners of the story now have their own relationship to the place and to each other, as it becomes a place where they felt close for the last time. The place in the arroyo now holds meaning for these four friends and signifies the emotional connection that they have formed and their identities in relation to that. When Francie puts into the box another piece of paper that says, "Francie and Mark, In Love, August 2052" (224), the communal body becomes symbolically contained in the location of the arroyo. Francie's addition also demonstrates how her individual identity is connected to this community with Mark and Jewel and in their shared knowledge of this place. Francie later says, "Mark did not let go of my hand...Los Angeles was the only home either of us had ever known, and maybe this would be the only love we would ever know. For those reasons, I knew I would never leave Los Angeles. I could not" (225). Francie's identity has been forged out of what the arroyo means, out of Mark not letting go of her hand, and all the other connections she has made to Los Angeles. She feels that she "could not" leave the city because her identity is contingent upon all the experiences she has had in that place. Everything that she has "ever known" about herself, her "only love" and her "only home" created through her friendships, exists in this specific place. So that when she claims that she "could not" ever leave Los Angeles it is because what Los Angeles represents is everything that has given her identity meaning.

Kadohata grants her mixed race protagonist, Francie, ways in which she is allowed to reclaim her body from the social and political interests projected upon

it by those with productive power. In the novel, the individual bodies of the characters are differentiated through physical markers just as bodies within contemporary American society are differentiated through physical features that have been demarcated along racial lines. By giving Francie other bodily markers such as the black pearls, scars, or tattoos, Kadohata is able to make indictments against the use of physical markers as reliable and authentic indicators of identity. The importance of the body in determining one's identity remains illuminated here, but the double-entendre of the black pearls, the shifting meaning of the scars, and the self-inscribing power of the tattoos demonstrates the ways in which bodies can come to mean anything. Identity then can not be wholly based on these physical markers, when the identities they supposedly represent can be easily performed or the meanings they represent can shift so readily. Kadohata's suggestion of another way in which identity can be formulated moves away from the use of physical markers embodying types of social difference and is thus a more constructive approach. By showing how Francie forges her identity through the communal body, through her relationships to her friends and places, Kadohata grants the reader an alternative means of thinking about identity construction. Through a character like Francie, who cannot be neatly categorized racially but whose body has been marked by social conflicts nonetheless, Kadohata comments on the necessity of reframing identity formation away from physical markers toward a more comprehensive understanding in which identity can be created in contemporary American society.

Works Cited

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Huang, Betsy. *Fictions of Asian America*. Clark University. Joans Clark Hall, Worcester, MA. 6 Dec. 2007. Lecture. n.p.

Kadohata, Cynthia. *In the Heart of the Valley of Love.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1992. Print.

Lee, Hsiu-chuan. "Interview with Cynthia Kadohata." *MELUS*. 32.2 (Summer 2007):165-186. Print.

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. Conclusion. *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America.* New York: Oxford UP, 2002. 143-171.

Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s.* 2nd ed. Routledge: NewYork, 1994. Print.