

On Listening to the Un-Said: Julia Cho's *Durango* and Asian Americanist Critique

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In Julia Cho's 2006 family drama titled *Durango*, first son Isaac Lee embarrasses his father Boo-Seng by failing to call on Boo-Seng's friend (and fellow Korean immigrant) while visiting Honolulu for a medical school admissions interview. Without instructing him outright, Boo-Seng mentions his friend and suggests that Isaac arrange a visit. Unbeknownst to Isaac, Boo-Seng has arranged the medical school interview by calling in a favor with this friend, now a medical school professor at the University of Hawaii, thus ensuring Isaac's admission. But Isaac has no ambition to be a doctor and so he not only does not call Boo-Seng's friend, he skips the interview altogether. Upon his return from Honolulu, though, Isaac lies to Boo-Seng, assuring him that the interview went well. When he later admits to having inadvertently snubbed Boo-Seng's friend, his father is enraged. Isaac defends himself by accusing Boo-seng of indirection. "Why didn't you [] say: *You Have To Call Him*. Don't make it sound like it's an option if it's not." "Are you so stupid that you can't understand what I mean?" Boo-Seng shoots back. "The most basic thing," he seethes in disgust, "and you can't even do what's right."¹⁾ Father and son have different ideas of what is "right," and how to accomplish it: Korean immigrant father Boo-Seng assumes Isaac will understand his familial obligation without being explicitly instructed, and American-born Isaac expects his father to express his wishes verbally and directly. And this is only the beginning—despite the obvious bonds of affection and loyalty that hold it together, the Lee family is full of secrets, shame, buried resentment, and pregnant silences. The gap in world views between father and son, between an unstated (but nonetheless over determined) network of social relations and obligations, and a world that is equally freighted with cultural assumptions but peopled by independent agents who openly declare their interests and desires, lies at the heart of this play. What can or cannot be said aloud, what is or is not heard and understood in the resulting silence, differs for each character; moreover, this gap translates into a corresponding "gap" for audiences, some of whom see *Durango* as a universal story about parents and children, while others see a detailed articulation of gender- and ethnic-specific relations, a portrait of Korean American immigrant family life and social dynamics.

¹⁾ Julia Cho, "Durango" (unpublished script, 2006), 25.

References to *Durango* are drawn from the unpublished script of the 2006 Public Theatre version. (The play was subsequently published by Dramatists Play Service in 2007.)

This was made clear at a post-performance discussion during the play's New York City run at the Public Theatre in 2006.²⁾ When asked for her inspiration or objective in writing this play, Cho responded that she set out to write a play with male characters—specifically Korean American fathers and sons. Much of her previous work, especially *99 Histories*³⁾ and *Bfe*,⁴⁾ focused on Korean- or Asian American female characters. With *Durango* Cho attempted to create a play that centered on male characters and relationships, one that was as complex and compelling as female-centered plays for which she is (deservedly) known. She set out to write a play about Korean American men and the father-son dynamics specific to them, and to locate the action in the desert Southwest of the United States, the region where she and her family lived for much of Cho's childhood. While one might take issue with the premise that there is an "authentic" version of Korean American masculinity or father-son relationship to represent, it did not seem to me that Cho was insisting on such an essentialization. As I understood her, Cho was suggesting that there was an interesting story to tell about families, specifically fathers and sons, and that her project was to explore that dyad as embodied by Korean American male characters and their ways of relating to one another.

Audience reaction was generally positive⁵⁾ but characterized by repeated assurances to Cho that her play's subject matter was not, in fact, Korean American men or Asian American families; rather, they suggested that the play was "universal" and "authentic," not as representations of Korean American families but as more generic father-son (or in the case of one audience member, father-daughter) relationships. Several audience members testified to the degree to which they identified with the characters (especially the sons). None of these audience members identified themselves as Asian or Korean American; all appeared to be white (though none identified themselves racially or ethnically). These respondents seemed to offer these comments in order to disabuse Cho of the idea that her play was "limited" to Korean American men, and they did so in ways that were, it seemed, intended as complimentary—as if to suggest that Cho's claim of cultural specificity was somehow understood to be self-deprecating or diminishing, an admission of the shortcomings of the play or its author. If anything, the only point of critique raised during the session was the one moment in the play that was resistant to such universalizing interpretations—a recorded telephone message in Korean that remains untranslated. Despite the fact that the contents of the telephone message were irrelevant (but could be surmised—the message, it may be

²⁾ *Durango* premiered at the Long Wharf Theater in New Haven Connecticut in September 2006. Immediately following the completion of this run, the production transferred to The Public Theatre in New York City, where it opened in November 2006.

³⁾ Julia Cho, *99 Histories* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2005) (premiered 2004).

⁴⁾ Julia Cho, *Bfe* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2006) (premiered 2005).

⁵⁾ Of course, this is to be expected—those choosing to stay after the play were more likely than not admirers of the play, and not a random or representative cross-section of all audience members.

assumed, is from the friend in Hawaii calling to ask about Isaac's no-show⁶⁾), one audience member suggested that Cho provide a translation—despite the fact that the intended listener, Boo-Seng, presumably would not need one.

In fairness, there is ample basis for audiences to identify with *Durango* on a “universalist” basis (rather than as an “Asian American” play): it was written (and was performed under Chay Yew's direction) largely in a realist mode; its setting in the American Southwest (the action takes place between Arizona and Colorado) is far from the typical urban “ethnic enclave” locale of much Asian American drama; and with rare (though, as I argue below, significant) exceptions the characters speak contemporary, conversational American English. *Durango* is largely a “road” story in which Boo-Seng and his two sons set out from their home in Arizona for Durango, Colorado (a popular vacation destination in the Rocky Mountains) and spend most of the play sitting in the family car, traveling the highways of the desert Southwest—a setting more likely to recall Sam Shepard's landscapes than David Henry Hwang's. Boo-Seng has instigated this family trip to Durango (over Isaac's vociferous objections), a place he has long dreamed of visiting—not with his family, but with his childhood friend (and possibly former lover), the unnamed medical school professor with whom he had long since lost touch. Boo-Seng hides from his sons the occasion for both the trip (he has just been laid off at age 56 and thus has plenty of free time) and his choice of destination (his prior plans made with a former lover), simply insisting “you need to see more of where we living.”⁷⁾

Boo-Seng's reticence is matched by that of his sons: in addition to Isaac's missed medical school interview, younger son Jimmy harbors even deeper secrets. A gifted swimmer (about which Boo-Seng is obsessive), Jimmy has quit the high school swim team after an awkward encounter with an older male teammate. Jimmy represses his homoerotic desires (and his homophobic fear and self-loathing), instead filling his sketchbook with nude drawings (“figure studies”) and fantasizing about the “Red Angel,” his blond, beautiful, superhero creation. Their mother, who died of cancer when Jimmy was an infant, looms over and between the Lee men, who mourn her privately but rarely share their grief with each other. In short, *Durango* has the makings of a classic American family drama: buried secrets, fathers and sons struggling for mastery against the desolate backdrop of the American desert—road trip as metaphor in a poignant coming-of-age story of sexuality and self-discovery. Perhaps for these reasons, Anita Gates of *The New York Times* concludes (in her review of the Long Wharf production) “[t]here is a universality to the cautionary message of ‘Durango’.”⁸⁾

⁶⁾ The origin of this call is confirmed in the unpublished script's stage directions: “*It's the voice of an older man, speaking in Korean. It is Boo-seng's old friend in Hawaii*” (Cho, “Durango,” 93).

⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁾ Anita Gates, “Traveling With Despair as a Constant Companion,” *The New York Times*, September 23, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/23/nyregion/nyregionspecial2/24cthea.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=%22julia%20cho%22%20durango&st=cse (accessed 12 January 2009).

Nevertheless, if *Durango* is in some sense a “universal” (or typically “American”) coming-of-age and/or father-son story, in another it tells a very *specific* story of failure, alienation, and estrangement: Isaac’s Honolulu debacle is finally revealed, but many more of the Lees’ secrets remain undisclosed: by the end of the play the sons still do not know about Boo-Seng’s layoff, or his former lover and his relation to Boo-Seng’s unhappy marriage to their mother; and Jimmy’s own sexual ambivalence is even more repressed than before, despite Isaac’s vindictive attempt “out” him to their father. Instead, Jimmy silences Isaac with a violence that surprises them both, later destroying his sketchbook and, he hopes, the desires it documents. The intended objective of the trip, a ride on the famous mountain top train at Durango, never happens and they return home to take up once again their heteronormative, middle-American (or perhaps, as I argue below, model minoritarian) familial roles. “I’ll call the school tomorrow, okay, Dad?” offers Isaac weakly, but far from a reconciliatory gesture, it clearly signals his resignation and failure to follow through on his desire to assert his independence. “Maybe I’ll be a doctor,” Jimmy tells Boo-Seng, “Is that what you want?” Each Lee retreats in silence to his respective space, defeated and alienated from the others.⁹⁾

I want to offer an Asian Americanist reading of *Durango*, and to suggest that doing so may enable us to see and hear the project of subject-making in new, different, or multiple ways. Here I am invoking Kandice Chuh’s formulation of Asian Americanist critique as “subjectless”: “as a conceptual tool,” she writes, subjectlessness “points to the need to manufacture ‘Asian American’ situationally.”¹⁰⁾ A problematic (but nonetheless politically efficacious) conglomeration, “Asian American” identity has long been the positivist focus of Asian American studies—describing, illuminating, and staking a representational claim to it—on the one hand; and a site of racist oppression and exclusion, on the other. Chuh proposes an Asian Americanist practice of “subjectless” critique, one whose aim is not to identify a coherent, *authentic* Asian American object of study but rather “to create the *conceptual space* to prioritize difference by foregrounding the discursive constructedness of subjectivity...by reminding us that a ‘subject’ only becomes recognizable and can act as such by conforming to certain regulatory matrices” (emphasis added).¹¹⁾ Might we see the very silences, withheld secrets, failures and denials that structure *Durango* as clearing precisely that sort of *conceptual space*? In other words, I am not aiming to prove that *Durango* is *really* about Korean Americans or Asian Americans (as a corrective to those audience members who saw the play as “universal”); I do, however, want to propose an Asian Americanist reading of the play wherein the specific ethnic and immigration histories of its characters do more than

⁹⁾ Cho, “Durango,” 92.

¹⁰⁾ Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003)

¹¹⁾ *Ibid.*, 9.

simply provide them with particular names and faces.¹²⁾ Seen from a certain perspective, those histories arguably influence not only how the characters speak to each other, but the very forms their relationships take—what they do not say as much as what they do say—and the fact that these characters do not articulate (in words) this aspect of their relationships does not mean that it is not profoundly relevant. Indeed, what remains unsaid may be as meaningful (from an Asian Americanist perspective) as what is said; what an audience does or does not hear in those silences is another matter.

Cho describes Boo-Seng Lee (in the character list) as “a fifty-six-year-old *Korean* man” (emphasis added)¹³⁾ and references in the play establish that he and his wife emigrated from South Korea.¹⁴⁾ It is not the simple fact of Boo-Seng’s origins that constitutes grounds for an Asian Americanist reading, however; that non-Asian American audiences identified with these characters and saw the story as “universal” suggests that they were able to view biographical details as ways of fleshing out the characters, and otherwise superfluous. Indeed, it is not geography per se that defines Boo-Seng (or his children); his experience as an immigrant of a particular sort, however, might be seen as foundational. Most obviously, Boo-Seng’s experience as an immigrant (and an audience’s apprehension of him as such) is shaped linguistically: while his sons speak with the slangy, American-accented English typical of U.S.-born youth, Boo-Seng is the only Lee onstage who speaks non-native English and who (under Yew’s direction, at least) speaks with a pronounced Korean accent.¹⁵⁾ This accent does more than simply *identify* Boo-Seng as non-native to a listening audience; as the play unfolds, we see that this *conversational gap* (between Boo-Seng and U.S.-born English speakers, including his sons) produces material effects: “there are some areas where you’re a bit...less effective,” Boo-Seng recalls being told by his manager, Bob, as Bob is laying him off.¹⁶⁾ “Team building [...] *communication skills*” (emphasis added).¹⁷⁾ Of course,

¹²⁾ In other words, my larger aim is to suggest that works like *Durango* may offer multiple readings for disparate audiences, rather than to *disprove* the “universalist” interpretation of the Public Theater audience. To the extent my goal is to *challenge* that reading, it is merely to challenge its singularity — the impulse cited above to *discourage* Cho from situating the play as Korean American *in favor of* a single, universalist interpretation.

¹³⁾ Cho, “Durango,” 2.

¹⁴⁾ Although it is never specified, we may surmise that the Lees immigrated from *South* Korea given the (post-partition) timing of their arrival in the United States.

¹⁵⁾ Cho also creates Mrs. Lee (voiced by Isaac, Jimmy, and Boo-Seng in separate monologues) with specific linguistic traits that similarly mark her relation to immigration. But since “her” monologues are performed through the other characters and she does not appear onstage these monologues are best understood as establishing particular linguistic identifications and relations of and between Isaac, Jimmy, and Boo-Seng.

¹⁶⁾ Cho’s character list specifies that Bob is “a white man in in his late twenties, early thirties” (Cho, “Durango,” 2).

¹⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, 30–31.

“communication skills” may refer to much more than *English* fluency—and indeed, as he demonstrates throughout the play, Boo-Seng speaks English more than adequately. In the language of corporate human resources, “communication skills” can also denote the subtle intangibles of *cultural* fluency (amongst other things) that often translate into ways of speaking.

This gap in “communication skills” structures Boo-Seng’s familial relationships as well. Manifesting in seemingly innocuous exchanges, such as Boo-Seng’s asking Jimmy for pronunciation tips,¹⁸⁾ Boo-Seng’s English language disadvantage produces complicated and conflicted power relations within the family. During one of their arguments, Boo-Seng reminds Isaac of a betrayal that occurred many years ago, during a “Bring Your Family to Work Day,” when he caught Isaac joking with his co-workers:

BOO-SENG: I introduce you to my co-workers and then I turn around and what do I hear? They’re saying, *Hey, Isaac, how you understand your father? His English is so bad!* And you laugh and say, *I know. But lucky for me, I am fluent in bad Asian accents.*

ISAAC: I didn’t—it was the first thing that popped into my head—

BOO-SENG: You laugh at me so my co-workers will like you?¹⁹⁾

A disruption of traditional parental authority, such linguistic reversals are common to families whose immigration status, like the Lees’, stratifies by generation. Boo-Seng is humiliated by Isaac not simply because he makes fun of his father, but because in the logic of this workplace he apparently has grounds to do so. Isaac and Jimmy, like many second-generation children, move through American culture with an ease and assumed privilege not available to their “foreign”-accent-marked parents—a fact that may subordinate parents to children in public and subvert parental authority in private. The bond Boo-Seng once shared with his friend (the medical school professor) might thus be seen as all the more intimate and cherished: a fellow Korean male immigrant, he and Boo-Seng belong to a community demarcated by language, gender, and perhaps sexuality, one in which Boo-Seng is on equal footing. The untranslated phone message, in this reading, reminds us of the depth of his estrangement from his sons (and from the non-Korean-speaking audience), as well the richness of a life that might have been.

What “might have been,” moreover, might be imagined productively in the context of a Korean immigrant class (of which Boo-Seng would be a member), a wave of post-1965

¹⁸⁾ “BOO-SENG: Good sign. What is word for that? Good sign?

JIMMY: Lucky?

BOO-SENG: No...*Aus-pi-shss.*

JIMMY: (*Correcting him*) *Auspicious.*

BOO-SENG: *Aus-pi-shuss.*” (Ibid., 23)

¹⁹⁾ Ibid., 78.

immigration that brought men like Boo-Seng and his friend (as well as women like Mrs. Lee) to the United States.²⁰⁾ “Back where I come from,” Boo-Seng tells Jerry, the security guard waiting to escort him from his workplace when the play opens, “lot of my old friends, they are quite successful now...One is the owner of his own company, big company. Another is very high in the government, you know, close to president. Another is president of university.”

JERRY: Must be quite a reunion when you guys get together.

BOO-SENG: No, I haven't seen them in long time.

JERRY: Why not?

BOO-SENG: I haven't gone back in over twenty years.

JERRY: Not even once?

BOO-SENG: Here is my home.²¹⁾

Those who, like Boo-Seng and his wife, immigrated in the 1970s or 1980s watched from U.S. shores as South Korea underwent tremendous economic and social re-development, while many of them (like Boo-Seng) struggled here under the burdens of nativist prejudice, racism, linguistic disadvantages, and other factors that contributed to a professional “glass ceiling” that continues to hover over many immigrants. The comparative success enjoyed by his cohort that stayed in South Korea conceivably contributes to his sense of personal failure (in being laid off), to the imperative to conform to social norms of heteropatriarchy, and to his intense investment in his sons' professional and educational successes. The performativity of Boo-Seng's language (Korean, Korean-accented-English, or withheld altogether), then, might gesture toward a history of immigration regulation, heteronormativity, and patriarchy that could inform our construction of this character and his relationship with his native-born sons.

Likewise, when heard in the context of that history the Lee sons' speech—both verbalized and withheld—suggests not (stable) gendered, ethnic *identities* but processes of subject *formation*. In that light, Isaac's description of Honolulu as “the promised land” because “you can get kimchi at the corner store” in Hawai'i signals more than simple tourist enchantment, and more than a sentimental recognition of ethnic *identity*. The Lee sons don't spend time talking about it, but in the interstices of their speech one can hear their keen awareness of their minoritarian status in American culture and a longing for community. It is

²⁰⁾ The 1965 amendment to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Act (Title 8, Chapter 12) under Public Law 89-236 radically re-organized the categories under which people were allowed to immigrate to the United States. One aspect of this revision was to create categories of immigrants (defined by professional and/or educational status) that were not subject to the per-country quota otherwise imposed; thus proportionally large numbers of immigrants were admitted with college and advanced degrees, or to seek such educational opportunities in the U.S.

²¹⁾ Cho, “Durango,” 5.

not accidental that Jimmy fantasizes his Red Angel as *blond* (Cho's character list describes him as "a beautiful, blond, young sun god"²²): "My superhero's going to be normal. He's not going to be, you know, like us," he tells Isaac. "I just don't want him to be limited." "Look in a mirror," Isaac responds dryly, "What do you think you are?"²³ Neither can name what is *abnormal* about them, but Isaac knows it when he sees it, knows what will be *missing* if and when Jimmy can bear to look.

Jimmy's Red Angel is an object of desire *and* identification: his fantasy epic tells a story that seems to fulfill Jimmy's own desire for power and transcendence (the Red Angel becomes a superhero after sprouting enormous wings that enable him to swoop down and save families in peril) but imagined as the naked, beautiful, *white* boy (as specified in Cho's list of characters) on Jimmy's swim team he is also an object of sexual attraction. Isaac's preference for Magneto (from the *X-Men* comic book series created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby), too, resonates in the space of the unsaid: "Two words: the Holocaust. He's the best fuckin' villain ever, and you know why? Because...[m]aybe, if the world hadn't fucked him over so much, he mighta been someone—done something— good."²⁴ A survivor of the death camp at Auschwitz (in Marvel Comics orthodoxy²⁵) Magneto is, in the grand tradition of Stan Lee villains, psychologically complex, morally ambivalent, and inventive in his use of his superpower (telekinetic control over metal objects) and for these reasons, he is a favorite of many comic book enthusiasts; but Isaac is drawn to Magneto because he is shaped by *ethnic hatred*, and for what Magneto *might have* become/done/said (but didn't) as a result.

What is the longed-for unsaid for Isaac? "I just want him to be happy," Isaac tells Boo-Seng in their argument about Jimmy. "Don't you want him to be happy?"

BOO-SENG: Jimmy is happy.

ISAAC: How do you know? Have you asked him?

BOO-SENG: **I don't have to ask.**

ISAAC: Right, 'cause you know us *so* well. (emphasis in original)²⁶

Isaac's sarcasm conveys his frustration with Boo-Seng's refusal to ask—perhaps not just in this exchange, but ever—whether his children are happy or, for that matter, to ask anything at all about their well-being, feelings, or thoughts. The (stereotypical) Asian American patriarch Boo-Seng's relationship with his sons is far from that idealized in (equally stereotypical) representations of other "American" families. Theirs is not the dinner table of the Cleavers, or the Waltons, or even the polygamous Henricksons (of HBO Television's popular current

²² Ibid., 2.

²³ Ibid., 33.

²⁴ Ibid., 35.

²⁵ <http://www.marveldirectory.com/individuals/m/magneto.htm>

²⁶ Cho, "Durango," 77.

series drama *Big Love*). Adhering to the strict hierarchies of heteropatriarchy (as it is often associated with “traditional” Asian cultures), the Lee children follow their father’s orders—or keep silent. And just as, for Boo-Seng, it is (or should be) unnecessary to *tell* Isaac to call his friend in Honolulu, there is no need for Boo-Seng to inquire about Jimmy’s emotional state. From Boo-Seng’s perspective, Jimmy conforms to his expectations (swim-team champion, good grades) and therefore *must* be happy, assuming parental satisfaction is his child’s goal. But as we already know, Jimmy is deeply unhappy—with swimming, with his developing erotic imagination, and perhaps most of all, with the pressure to succeed applied by his father, and the concomitant withholding of affection. “He goes to every single one of your swim meets,” Isaac points out when Jimmy complains that their father never asks to spend time with them. “Yeah, and you know what he does?” Jimmy shoots back.

He comes, sits in the last row of the bleachers and he times me. And then he writes down all the times in this little book and after I swim, he comes and finds me, and tells me down to the last tenth of a second how far off I am from my personal record or the city record or whatever...It’s like he’s there to check up on me, not to support me. And definitely not to spend time with me.²⁷⁾

As noted above, Boo-Seng is painfully aware of the success of his childhood peers, those who stayed in Korea and prospered while he toiled uneasily and unappreciated in some middle-management position, only to be laid off for his poor communication skills. He places his hopes on his children instead: Isaac’s admission to medical school and, especially, Jimmy’s admission to a “*good* college” (unlike the state school Isaac attended) on the strength of a swimming scholarship. As children of immigrants often do, Jimmy bears the weight of his father’s thwarted aspirations, a driving force in the production of the “model minority” status to which Asian Americans have long been consigned. The focus on college admissions, in fact, might resonate for some audiences with the news magazine articles circulating in the 1980s that heralded the coming of an “Asian American Super Minority,” a group “Drive[n] to Excel” in its quest for “The Ultimate Assimilation,” i.e., college admissions.²⁸⁾ Articles such as these attributed Asian American (college) students’ success to strong family values, a prioritization of the value of education within such families, and submission to parental authority, or filial obedience. Jimmy’s fear of disclosure, and Isaac’s initial apprehension when Jimmy confesses to having homosexual desires, thus could be read as responses to the pressure Boo-Seng places on them to conform to such public perceptions: “That man’s got his hopes built on you. You’re his golden boy,” he tells Jimmy (thus channeling some vicarious “model minoritarian” pressure of his own), “you’re the swim

²⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁸⁾ “America’s Super Minority,” *Fortune*, November 24, 1986, 148-64; “The Drive to Excel,” *Newsweek on Campus*, April 1984, 4-13; “The Ultimate Assimilation,” *Newsweek*, November 24, 1986, 80.

champion who's going to get a full ride anywhere you want to go."²⁹⁾ Sadly (though perhaps perceptively), Isaac fears that Boo-Seng would not accept Jimmy's non-normative sexuality. "I don't even know if there is a Korean word for 'homosexual,' he says. "I don't know if Dad has even the slightest idea what that is." Regardless of whether Boo-Seng knows the Korean word for it, we know (as his sons do not) that he is familiar with the concept. Still, speaking it aloud to their father is simply out of the question; in this Korean *American* familial context, the word does not, cannot, exist.

Denying the possibility of that word constitutes the climax of the play. Attempting to enact a "typical" American family drama, one in which secrets are disclosed, histories are revealed, and relationships restored thereby, Isaac opts to "just throw it out there. I did not go to my interview," he finally confesses, expecting Jimmy to follow suit and air his own secrets as a way of loosening their father's hold on them.³⁰⁾ "Come on, Jimmy, don't you have something to share?" taunts Isaac, but Jimmy responds by hitting Isaac, hard enough to surprise him and knock him down. "I said, SHUT UP" he says menacingly, standing over Isaac's crumpled body.³¹⁾ And Isaac does—Jimmy's secret remains untold, and the family returns to Phoenix in apparent silence.

Perhaps we can listen to these (literal and figurative) silences in the play and hear that "conceptual space" to which Chuh directs our attention, and to hear the traces of those regulatory structures that produce Korean Americanness. But why, then, did the rest of the audience at the talkback fail to see/hear that space in the Public Theatre production? In *Infinitely Demanding*, Simon Critchley writes of "an ethical experience [] based on the exorbitant demand of infinite responsibility" and he argues that the task of the ethical subject is to acknowledge the impossibility of fully commensurate intersubjective understanding, and proposes "an ethics of *discomfort*, a hyperbolic ethics based on the internalization of an unfulfillable ethical demand" (emphasis added).³²⁾ Critchley's project is to theorize the contemporary ethical subject (via the theories of philosophers Alain Badiou, Knud Ejler Løgstrup, and Emmanuel Levinas). Drawing from the work of these thinkers, Critchley argues that the ethical subject is one characterized by *incommensurability* (because, in Levinasian terms, the "ethical subject is a subject defined by the experience of an internalized demand that it can never meet, a demand that exceeds it"³³⁾). In other words, I would suggest that the disparate responses to Cho's play point to the possibility for the production an *ethical* subject: that is, although the play's meanings, for different audience members, might seem to be definitive (hence some audience members' desire to *dissuade* Cho from asserting a Korean

²⁹⁾ Cho, "Durango," 65.

³⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, 85.

³¹⁾ *Ibid.*, 87.

³²⁾ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso Press, 2007), 11.

³³⁾ *Ibid.*, 10.

American interpretation, on the one hand, and my reading of the play as deeply implicated in ethnic specificity, on the other). And while this proliferation of possible interpretations might logically produce *discomfort*—is this play *really* about Korean Americans or not? —I want to suggest that it's by making productive use of these moments of discomfort, by unpacking them and perhaps even aestheticizing discomfotingly proximate difference, that we might be able to actually learn how to be (beside) each other. What Chuh's *conceptual space* opens up, in this analysis, is the possibility of multiple, perhaps even conflicting, ways of articulating Cho's characters and of animating their relationships. For if we are uncomfortable with the un-said, I think it is not because of what we *don't* hear in that silence, it's because of what *else* might become audible instead.