

Sketches on a Blank Slate: Shawna Yang Ryan's Future-Oriented Memories of the Past



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All memory is individual, unreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds. Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings.
Susan Sontag (2003, p. 86)

Abstract This chapter has a threefold agenda. First, it aims at positioning Taiwanese American writer Shawna Yang Ryan and her literary work in the context of literary Taiwan, illustrating how identity policy, transpacific politics, and national desire intersect. Second, it demonstrates how the February 28, 1947 “impact event”—key to Ryan’s Taiwan-oriented novel *Green Island*—is charged with perceptual patterns that share at least three common features: a national trauma, a forced collective amnesia and, a history of betrayal. Third, it shows how *Green Island* employs family history to reanimate and interact with these cultural patterns by embracing and reconfiguring the traumatic experiences of the generation of witnesses/victims from a transgenerational and transnational perspective. Her ideology-oriented narrative not only formulates ethical concerns and builds a future-oriented historical consciousness, but it also creates a transpacific space from which the trans/formation of Taiwanese American identity can be negotiated against the background of trans/national history.

Keywords Shawna Yang Ryan · February 28 Incident · Green Island · National trauma · Family history

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1 Positioning the Writer and Her Work

1.1 Biographical Notes

The daughter to parents who met in Taiwan during the Vietnam War, Shawna Yang Ryan was born in 1976 and raised in Northern California as a second-generation Asian American. Her mother is from Taiwan with family history in China; her father is American with German ancestors. Apart from being the author of two novels and a number of short stories and essays, Ryan is also a scholar of creative writing, currently acting as the Director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa. Ryan is a well-established writer in literary circles of the west coast area and an activist of a growing and vibrant Taiwanese American community. She is one of the brains behind the website *Our Taiwanese American Story* (2017) dedicated to “connect[ing] Taiwanese Americans across generations through storytelling.” In addition, she is currently a board member of the *North America Taiwanese Professors’ Association* (2015), “an organization founded in 1980 in resistance to Taiwan’s repressive White Terror era policies.”

Her debut *Water Ghosts* was first published in 2007 under the title *Locke 1928* and re-published by Penguin Press two years later. The novel addresses a factual Chinese immigrant community, the town of Locke,¹ remediated as cross-cultural, interracial space, where Christian belief encounters Chinese folk religion, conservative morality contrasts the roaring twenties’ decadence, brothels and gambling halls console homesick Chinese bachelors. Based on historical facts like the infamous Chinese Exclusion Act (Lew-Williams, 2018), which banned Chinese women from migrating and joining their husbands in the United States, the novel reflects on American immigrant history through the lens of early Chinese diaspora and the narrative device of ghost-writing.² Her second book, *Green Island* (2016), published in the US and Taiwan simultaneously, chronicles Taiwan’s White Terror era with its mass arrests and killings under the Chiang Kai-shek dictatorship in the context of American Cold War ignorance and complicity. Spanning from the February 28 Incident in 1947 to the SARS crisis in 2003, the story unfolds across two countries and three generations through the prism of family history.

¹ Shortened to Locke in 1920, the story of Lockeport began as a swampland parcel in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, deeded to founder, George W. Locke in 1883. In 1912 three Chinese merchants started to erect the first buildings, including a shop/beer saloon, a gambling hall, and a hotel/restaurant (the main settings fictionalized in Ryan’s novel). After the Chinatown of nearby Walnut Grove was destroyed by a fire in 1915, many Chinese immigrants resettled and further developed Locke. In 1990, Locke has been designated a national historic landmark district and become part of the US National Park Service. See *Locke Foundation* (2004).

² For an elaborate reading of the novel as a “spectral representation of Chinese diaspora in the context of Chinese America”, see Wu (2012, p. 39).

1.2 *Multiple Belongings—The Author*

With Ryan's mixed-heritage provenance and her writing across cultures and geographies, the writer and her work perfectly illustrate the constructedness of the naturalized category of the nation-state. Zooming in on Taiwan and its people, however, the nation-state appears far from anything optional or blurred but as an extremely real and urgent imperative. Against the background of international de-recognition and constant military threat from across the Strait, national self-determination and sovereign control over its territorial space is but the island's Achilles heel. During an interview about her second book in 2016, Ryan accommodates this double-bind when she puts her writerly situatedness and the directionality of her literature in a nutshell: "Entrenched in a very American view of identity as revolving around race, sexuality and gender, I saw other ways identity could be shaped by shared struggle and also by enforced education. Taiwan taught me to think about national identity and helped me understand the ways communities can be formed beyond the limit of borders. ... I also began to admire what I see as a real vein of optimism and strength in Taiwan" (Farrelly, 2016).

Ryan's accentuation of different concepts of identity formation and a future-oriented worldview in post-authoritarian Taiwan as identificatory points of reference is telling. American identity politics of the last decades has after all facilitated the individual exploration of subjectivity, heterogeneity, hybridity, and diversity. Not least, politicized skirmish in academic discourse has pushed theories of differentiation partway to a degree of disintegration and cannibalizing common points of reference.³ While early immigrant diasporas at the beginning of the twentieth century had to relinquish their origins and histories for the sake of a common national project—the American Dream—by the turn of the millennium the pendulum had swung back. The myth of a common identity and the promise for a better future had largely been replaced by acknowledging diverse heritages and divided pasts. Furthermore, generating hyphenated identities that oscillate between diasporic, immigrant, or cosmopolitan identities, this past-oriented identity policy has been opened up for multiple belongings.

In contrast, transitional Taiwan, with its serial colonial pasts, at last enforced by martial law (1949–1987), has only recently emerged from Kuomintang (KMT)-dictated memory politics and Sino-centric identity that had been imposed by decades of coercion, indoctrination, and compliancy. A thorny, albeit existential, process of political, cultural, economic, and social transformation toward a consolidated, integrative, democratic collective identity gained momentum in the 1980s. Safeguarded by the institutionalization of civic values, this transition foregrounded the island's historical layers and state-endorsed cultural diversity in radical differentiation from the People's Republic of China (Lin, 2018). In the 1990s Taiwan had turned into an island of contending memories (Lin, 2018) and conflicting historical narratives

³ Mark Lilla (2016) is but one example of liberal academics who blame identity politics' "obsession with diversity" as catalyst for the rise of Trump and the American Right as well as the shift away from building solidarity and communality.

where bottom-up and top-down memory cultures went hand in glove to promote a Taiwan-centric subjectivity.

With the turn of the millennium, however, a complicated and existential process of securing national solidarity by overcoming past divisions through selective remembrance gained momentum. This is to say, Taiwan started consolidating an inclusive common civic vision by balancing collective remembering and collective forgetting, thereby agreeing on “founding events” of the past in order to build a sustainable future.⁴ For those living on the island, the success of creating a solid national identity and gaining political independence has existential implications. Taiwan’s sovereignty is just as crucial for second-generation Taiwanese Americans whose parents supposedly belonged to the swarm of Taiwanese students in the 1960 and 1970s who escaped the harsh political White Terror climate to pursue their American dream and/or their political ideals. Disidentification from Chinese American community requires the building and reinforcement of a Taiwanese American identity.

1.3 *Water Ghosts—Challenging the Nation-State*

In both her novels, *Water Ghosts* (2009) and *Green Island* (2016), Ryan tackles these various identificatory points of reference. Her debut confronts Chinese-American immigrant history through the lens of traumatic memory, displaying a repressed past claiming to be integrated into cultural memory. *Water Ghosts* formulates a feminist critique of ethno-history, which, Smith (1996) argues, is built by “the sense of collective belonging to a named community of common myths of origin and shared memories, associated with an historic homeland” (p. 583). Ryan is barely occupied with the legacy of a mythic past that haunts Chinese American immigrants—a dominant pattern associated with the novels of first-generation Chinese-American writers. Instead, she renarrates Chinese-American immigration history as a chapter of American history, thereby empowering the silenced and marginalized Chinese left-behind women “without pasts or stories” (Ryan, 2009, p. 58). Figuring as water ghosts, they cross the Pacific in order to join the Chinese settlement of Locke and seek revenge and redemption. Ryan’s active engagement with the past by way of creating a history-based cross-cultural ghost story not only endows the victims with agency but also counteracts the power of a mythologic Chinese past as it debunks its myth of homogeneity. Moreover, she addresses minority history that has been written out of national history per se: “There are ghosts up and down the Delta. . . . Ten thousand dead between here and Suisun alone. Ten thousand! Hell, the Locke house itself is built on an Indian burial ground” (Ryan, 2009, p. 67).⁵ *Water Ghosts* is

⁴ Since long cultural memory studies have been engaged with the balance of remembering and forgetting, a connection that goes back to Ernest Renan’s lecture “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” of 1882. See Renan (1992).

⁵ The delta swampland on which Locke was built had been home to Native American Miwok and Maidu tribes for hundreds of years. Tribal burial grounds still exist on the Locke parcel.

hardly “obsessed with China” but challenges dominant historiography by claiming space and significance for minority cultures in American history. By implication, the memory of a traumatic past of Chinese immigrants does not preclude memories of displaced Native American tribes; on the contrary, Chinese immigrant history cross-references other minority histories and enables different histories of violence. It co-exists in mutual recognition of each other’s historical trauma, or what Rothberg (2009) famously coined as “multidirectional” memory in contrast to “competitive” memory. In sum, Ryan’s feminist reading of Chinese-American/American history challenges the image of a homogenous American nation-state by giving agency to multiethnicity as she reframes “historical violence as a *struggle for a cause* rather than as a matter of victimization” (Rigney, 2018, p. 371).

1.4 Green Island—Pursuing the Nation-State

Ryan’s second book *Green Island* (2016) embarks on dealing with transnational Taiwanese-American history. Taking Taiwanese nativism as identificatory point of departure, it engages with Taiwan’s political challenges of the present by attempting to create a transpacific public sphere for the island’s entangled and, outside Taiwan, widely unacknowledged violent history, to confront a prevailing Sino-centric historiography and, last but not least, to illuminate the US’ neglect confronting compliant Cold War policy. *Green Island* engages with what “according to official history, had not happened ... did not exist ... was simply unspoken” (Ryan, 2016, p. 61) and reflects a process of political awakening and building historical consciousness by chronicling the female narrator’s path of life. The author’s nameless alter ego transforms from a naïve and nescient object of KMT state propaganda to a politically informed and distinct ethnic subject affiliated with two cultures and taking action on the basis of a “Taiwan-centric” localist agenda. Utilizing family history as site for mediating Taiwan’s traumatic history, *Green Island* actualizes a complex history for a transpacific community. It produces ethical reflections and mobilizes identity and memory work by inviting the reader to experience the emotional truth behind historical figures and facts and to identify with a unique and exclusive dystopian image of a past that requires action in the present and places trust in the future. Rooted in Taiwan’s nativist calling, *Green Island* triangulates three threads across 380 pages. By responding to contemporary Taiwan’s “memory imperative”, it not only addresses the US’ ignorance and denial to confront its complicity in Cold War policy but it also “puts Taiwan on the map” and, by implication, “rewrites China.” Although Ryan is grappling with a destructive, humiliating, and traumatic chapter of the twentieth century’s history, *Green Island* flags for a future-oriented world-view by reframing historical violence “as a matter of civic engagement rather than of paranoia” (Rigney, 2018, p. 371).

1.5 *Multiple belongings—The Literary Works*

While *Water Ghosts* mainly deals with local history, Ryan's second book *Green Island* addresses for the most part transnational history. In the US both of her novels received various prizes.⁶ In Taiwan, *Water Ghosts* received not much of an echo, all the while *Green Island* was met with warm appreciation and swiftly turned into a popular research topic for scholars and graduate students at English and Foreign Studies departments. Its role as an activating and memory-producing medium circulating globally is already given by the fact it is written in English but reinforced by its translation into Chinese and its transpacific directionality.

The thematic choice in *Water Ghosts*, together with the author's provenance, initially assigned Ryan's work to the field of Chinese/Asian-American literature, a venue launched by writers like Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, yet an ascription the author resolutely wards off (Hioe, 2016).⁷ Her chronicling a Taiwan-centric narrative confirmed her conscious shift away from a generalized pan-ethnic "Chinese diaspora" toward an ethnically and geographically specific assignment within the Asian-American bubble. This conveniently allows for canonization in Taiwan's literary history and participation in the project of *Writing Taiwan* (Wang & Rojas, 2007). As already stated in 2007 by the editors of the correspondent anthology, any attempt to ground the identity of Taiwan literature or its writers on "a single necessary and sufficient condition" (Rojas, 2007, p. 2) is, due to their inherent diversity, doomed to failure. Surely, *Green Island* is a welcome contribution to the ongoing process of continuously reconstituting Taiwan literature "through the act of *writing* itself" (Rojas, 2007, p. 4). This also dovetails perfectly well into the project of "worlding Taiwan" (Chiu, 2018) as it facilitates the recognition of Taiwan in the world by relinking Taiwan's history of victimization and reconciliation with global traumatic history and implicitly with its ethical framework based on human rights and civic values.

Although neither *Water Ghosts* nor *Green Island* is penned in Chinese, these works' situatedness resonates with what Shih (2010) identifies as the critical position of Sinophone communities: "When routes can be roots, multidirectional critiques are not only possible but imperative" (p. 46). In her Taiwan story *Green Island*, Ryan reverses Shih's premise by turning her place-based homeness (roots) into her mobile homeness (routes). Situating herself in Taiwan enables her to speak back to the US as well as to Taiwan and, by implication, to China. In a postcolonial gesture of "writing back to the center," *Green Island* chooses the KMT as its Janus-faced embodiment: as political-repressive agent of China that colonized people's land and bodies and as ally of the US that colonized and seduced people's minds and souls.

⁶ This includes the Association for Asian American Studies Best Book Award in Creative Writing (2018), an American Book Award (2017), the Elliot Cades Emerging Writer Award from the Hawai'i Literary Arts Council (2015), and the UC Davis Maurice Prize (2006).

⁷ In an interview with Hioe (2022) Ryan harshly disclaims the idea she is "another Amy Tan wannabe, white-washed Asian woman."

2 Resonating with the Foundational Myth

2.1 Impact Event

When martial law was lifted in 1987, Taiwan started its journey of transmuting from an authoritarian into a democratic society, a process in which public remembrance was as much about shaping the future as about recollecting the past. Collective memory work in general is informed by “the belief that future peace and stability depend crucially on finding ways of ‘coming to terms’ with past violence” (Rigney, 2012, p. 251) in order to create national solidarity. This, however, seems to be even more true for transitional societies. Due to its brutality but above all due to the political constellation at the time, it was the February 28 Incident⁸ and its bloody follow-up, the White Terror era, that turned into *the* “foundational myth” and became *the* “national trauma of Taiwan” with many individuals and interest groups claiming ownership to follow.⁹ Smith (2008), among others, has demonstrated how the incident was constructed into a symbolic mythology by later generations and made into a crucial historical event and contentious tool by the different political players, while Chang (2014) has traced how it gradually turned from a symbol for “Taiwan’s ethnic tension”, into “a symbol of tragic history and collective suffering”, before it became a “national holiday for remembrance and peace” (p. 233). As summed up by Hillenbrand (2005), “February 28th has come to acquire almost sacrosanct status as the foundational metaphor of Taiwanese consciousness (*yishi*), the originary myth of modern Taiwanese history, and the rallying cry of Taiwanese democracy” (p. 50). Since the February 28 Incident had been subjected to forced amnesia and locked into individual and familial memory for decades, it was charged with overwhelming emotional capital and predestined to turn into an “impact event” (Assmann, 2015, p. 52) that by definition generates monumental collective emotional energy. Impact events need to be channelled in cultural elaborations in order to be acknowledged in the first place and to secure their afterlife in cultural memory. This is to say they need “impact narratives” that revolve around these “historical occurrences that are perceived to spectacularly shatter the material and symbolic worlds we inhabit” (Fuchs, 2021, p. 10), but can never fully capture and converge with them. Such events trigger thus a plethora of impact narratives, which alter and stretch over the course of time and adapt to changing political, cultural, and economic circumstances.

⁸ Depending on its framing narrative and perspective, the denomination “February 28 Incident” is but one of the many signifiers for this event. Lin (2007) lists “Incident” (*shijian*), “Popular Uprising” (*minbian*), and “Revolution” (*geming*), as well as terms used in earlier government announcements such as “riot” (*baodong*), “political and military event” (*shibian*), “rebellion” (*panbian*), or “massacre” (*can'an*) (p. 10). Despite its implied euphemism, I will use the rather commonly employed term February 28 Incident throughout.

⁹ I abstain from retelling the events surrounding the incident as they are well known. For a balanced summary, see Smith (2008) for primary sources, and see the website *Memorial Foundation of 228* (二二八事件紀念基金會) (2017), a government established NGO “with the mission of keeping the memory of the 228 Massacre alive through education and cultural activities.”.

2.2 *Impact Narratives*

Green Island resonates with existing perceptual patterns of the February 28 Incident and their associated emotions, which were vital for enabling people to experience and speak about the event in the first place. The novel also displays how these patterns and emotions affect later generations by renarrating “the excess of the Real” (Fuchs, 2021, p. 1) in a trans-generational dimension.¹⁰ Choosing the February 28 Incident as *movens* for the story to unfold, *Green Island* is imbued with numerous perceptual figures inherent in prominent historical accounts of the event, which were key in the reconstruction of Taiwan as a distinct historical subject (Liao, 1993). One of the first publications that brought this chapter of Taiwan’s history into the American context and functioned as an eye-opener was Kerr’s *Formosa Betrayed* (1965), which gives a detailed witness-based account of the February 28 Incident but was met with rather modest public resonance at the time of its publication. The book came only to prominence in 2009 when film director Adam Kane utilized the material to produce a political thriller that was screened all over the US, including a special screening for Members of Congress.¹¹ Of great relevance also were Peng Ming-min’s *A Taste of Freedom: Memoirs of a Formosan Independence Leader* (1972),¹² a kind of manifesto for the overseas Taiwanese Independence Movement, as well as Su Beng’s anticolonial ethnonationalist narrative *Taiwan’s 400 Year History* (1986),¹³ rendering a blow-by-blow retelling of Nationalist atrocities inflicted on the Taiwanese. What characterizes these and similar publications apart from their linguistic accessibility, is the fact that they are based on individual witness accounts and personal testimonies that were disseminated and circulated as polemic pamphlets by the overseas resistance movement. They propagated detailed descriptions of the outrageous brutality afflicted on the Taiwanese under Chiang Kai-shek’s Janus-faced dictatorial regime of “Free China” when Taiwan was still under martial law. Long before memory culture became mainstream,¹⁴ these publications pointed out the February 28 Incident as historical origin for the political Fall of the KMT regime and the Birth of the Taiwanese nation. By conveying a notion of urgency, they strove

¹⁰ On different occasions Ryan has explained that physical, mental, and emotional immersion into the local settings and historical sites along with witness interviews and explorative reading are vital parts of her writing process. When writing *Water Ghosts*, she moved into the historical town of Locke for some months; for *Green Island* she spent a couple of years in Taiwan as a Fulbright Scholar (Tsai, 2016).

¹¹ The film differs in large parts from the book, yet is inspired by two factual events: the murder of Taiwanese American professor Chen Wen-chen by Taiwan Secret Police during his visit to Taiwan in 1981 and the assassination of Taiwanese American writer and journalist Henry Liu at his home in California by a KMT-sponsored criminal Triad in 1984.

¹² Peng was a noted activist for democracy and Taiwan independence who took refuge in the US and returned after 22 years in exile to become the first presidential candidate of the Democratic Progressive Party in Taiwan’s first democratic elections in 1996. His path of escape (via Sweden) and his arrest are incorporated in *Green Island* at great length.

¹³ This book had first been published in Japanese (1962) and then in Chinese (1980).

¹⁴ The “memory boom” is generally diagnosed as starting in the 1990s. See Chang (2014).

for lifting the massacre in which tens of thousands of Taiwanese were tortured, imprisoned, and murdered out of its invisibility and oblivion. By unlocking and sharing repressed memories, which still were deeply buried in private and public secrecy, these publications helped nourish resistance against the KMT authoritarian regime and create counter-narratives to the ruling ascription of “Chineseness” (Wang, 2011). Together with the English translation of Wu Zhuoliu's *Orphan of Asia* in 2006—the literary incarnation of Taiwan's anti-colonial spirit and non-belonging par excellence¹⁵—these publications had a significant spillover-effect across the Pacific. From a political perspective, they fed into the KMT resistance dissident groups and into the overseas Taiwan Independence Movement,¹⁶ as well as in the *dangwai* (literally “outside the [Nationalist] party”) movement that functioned as an umbrella organization for the different ideological camps opposing the KMT. In terms of visual impact narratives, Hou Hsiao-hsien's award winning film *City of Sadness* (1989), which explored Taiwan's historical past as trauma through the lens of family, was probably the most powerful artistic creation that resonated with audiences in Taiwan and the global community alike.¹⁷ From a perceptual perspective and its associated emotions, it was not only the event that shattered the understanding of the world and being in the world that was significant; there was also the notion of an overly pro-Chinese and completely unprepared Taiwanese elite in shock and agony in the face of the brutal military crackdown followed by the systematic obliteration of the event from historical records and people's memories. As all of this took place under the eyes of Taiwan's role model for democracy it formed the images of Formosa Betrayed and Orphan of Asia, which were reinforced in the 1970 and 1980s. Decades of systematic and institutionalized forced amnesia explain the sensation these early taboo breakers created at the time.

In the late 1990s, memory sites commemorating victims of the February 28 Incident started plastering the landscape of Taiwan. Under the leadership of President Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008), memory work materialized in numerous February 28 *lieux de mémoire* spread out all over the island. In 2001, the infamous Green Island was turned into a Human Rights Culture Park honouring political prisoners who formerly had been incarcerated there. Likewise, the National February 28 Memorial Museum,¹⁸ located in a history-charged spot in Taipei, mourns the “countless

¹⁵ Originally written in Japanese (1945), the novel saw a number of Chinese translations (first 1962) and an English edition in 2006. Wu has in the meantime become an iconic figure in Taiwan with streets, memorial museums, and a Research Council dedicated to him and his work.

¹⁶ For a succinct summary of the transnational Taiwan Independent Movement, see Fleischauer (2016).

¹⁷ Interestingly enough, Hou always denied that *City of Sadness* was a film about the February 28 Incident. For a critical appraisal, See Tam and Dissanayake (1998).

¹⁸ The Taipei February 28 Memorial Museum (台北二二八紀念館) is located in the February 28 Peace Memorial Park (二二八和平紀念公園) next to the February 28 Memorial Monument (二二八紀念牌). Detailed information is available at the government sponsored website *National Human Rights Museum* (2017). In the novel, the narrator pays a visit to these historical sites to reflect on Taiwan's memory policy (Ryan, 2016).

victims and their families”¹⁹ while its key message points toward national healing and reconciliation (Denton, 2021).

While changing over the course of time, these textual, visual, and monumental impact narratives convey mainly three perceptual concepts, which premeditate how the event is perceived of and how the reader-observer is affected: a national trauma that shattered the material and symbolic world, forced collective amnesia and Chinese identity imposed by KMT ideology, and a history of betrayal and abandonment that deprived Taiwanese of their identity and Taiwan of international recognition and its place in the world. As historical narratives within a highly politicized context, they are historical themselves, moving from the notion of breaking a taboo and exposing historical atrocities in the name of truth and transparency to the notion of developing a common sense and national reconciliation for the sake of building collective identity. *Green Island* reanimates and interacts with these cultural patterns by employing family history as privileged site of transmitting individual experience to the next generation. Diachronically, the novel processes from a traumatic past to a promising future, from dictatorship to democracy, from betrayal to reconciliation, from leaving to homecoming and last but not least from Taiwan to the US and back again.

2.3 Family as a Site to Retell Trans/National History and Build Identity

At first sight, *Green Island* seems to suggest a reading as second-generation coming-to-terms-with-an-inherited-historical-trauma narrative. The author herself points into this direction when she emphasizes how her project was motivated by showing how “something as traumatic as 2/28 and the White Terror ... gets carried on through generations” (Farrelly, 2016). This inclination is reinforced by her choice of a “self-appointed witness/victim” as narrative perspective. However, I argue that Ryan is less concerned with the idea of how trauma travels from one generation to the next nor that her artistic work is a working through of aftereffects of an inherited trauma but that her “trauma narrative” mainly serves as a vehicle to articulate her ethical concerns and her desire to engage in creating a transpacific political and cultural space. This is to say that the author embraces and reconfigures traumatic experiences of the generation before from a transgenerational and transnational perspective. Marianne Hirsch (2012) has defined the concept of “postmemory” as “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (p. 5). Thus, “postmemory” is charged with an activist potential that might produce ethical considerations, involve individuals still alive, disseminate historical awareness, create social activism, repair links with a broken past, or connect memories across lines of differences, geographies,

¹⁹ Quote from the plaque on the memorial.

or cultures, and so on. This suggests a shift of focus from the traumatic experience and its possible intergenerational imprints to the artistic generation of experiential knowledge and leads to the question of how and to what end the author relates to the traumatic past of her ancestors. By constructing her “self-appointed witness/victim” as autodiegetic narrator, Ryan establishes a double epistemological position, which comfortably allows her to describe the factual “historical trauma” as motivation to embrace and reconnect with the past on the one hand and to articulate the process of generating her imaginative work on the other hand. The reader is thus navigated by a nameless narrator, split in an experiencing and in a narrating “I”, through “a stunning story of love, betrayal, and family”²⁰ set against a devastating history whose outcome is already known.

As Halbwachs (2020) has shown, family is a critical unit in the production of individual as well as of collective memory. Stories shared within families are crucial for our understanding of the world and being in the world. Literature is a privileged medium through which to engage in family history as a site to practice national identity work, to tell, to rationalize, to challenge, or legitimize national memory. Reciprocally, national memory can frame what is forgotten and what is remembered in a family as well as how things are remembered and passed on (Barclay & Koefoed, 2021). Fictionalizing facts, and blurring boundaries of testimonials, historical accounts, and life writing, the author utilizes family history to reflect on how these historical realities shape and are shaped by familial relationships and identities across cultures, geographies, and three generations.

Green Island is fueled by a dynamic that fluctuates between the familial and the national, the local, and the global. Family life operates as site harboring the individual, as a domain consistently penetrated and imperiled by state-induced violence and repression, leaving death and survival. It serves as locus of silence and secrecy but also of political awakening and resistance. Family works also as site to negotiate betrayal and abandonment along with reconciliation and solidarity. Juxtaposing the familial and the trans/national domains, *Green Island* chooses a history of victimization to frame the past, a history of resistance and reconciliation to frame the present, and points to a future as continuation of the past and the present.

2.4 *The Victimized Individual and the National Trauma—THE PAST*

The novel opens with the birth of the narrator-protagonist that coincides with the death of the first victim of the February 28 Incident—the bloody prelude to the subsequent White Terror era. While a brutal machinery of people disappearing, incarceration, torture, and killing is set in motion, a new life, the fourth child of the Tsai family, is

²⁰ Quote from the book jacket.

born.²¹ It takes only two weeks before the public domain invades the familial space and turns life up-side-down, “on March 14, 1947, my father disappeared” (Ryan, 2016, p. 26). Trained in the colonial metropole and running a clinic in Taipei, father represents the Taiwanese elite, who “did not believe in the war, or in Japan’s project—the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere” (Ryan, 2016, p. 37) but “wanted Taiwan to rule itself” (p. 56). Being a doctor, he is committed to healing people’s bodies, since “the body, unlike a poem, is tangible” (Ryan, 2016, p. 46). However, it is not only the wounded bodies that need a cure but also people’s minds. To complement the image of the Taiwanese intellectual, the narrator marks her father explicitly as soulmate of his supposedly coeval Huang Shih-hui by assigning Huang’s famous lines to his vision: “You are Taiwanese. The Taiwanese sky hangs over you and your feet tread on Taiwanese ground. What you see are conditions unique to Taiwan and what you hear is news about Taiwan. The time you experience is Taiwanese time and the language you speak is Taiwanese” (Ryan, 2016, p. 45).²²

After father’s disappearance, the private and the public develop into separated domains of knowledge and experience. Eleven years of imprisonment and “re-education” in the infamous New Life Camp on Green Island split family life and catapult him into a perverted space with “solitary confinement ... meant to elicit introspection and remorse ... absent of outer light ... the size of a wardrobe, a psychological effect that implies insanity while simultaneously encouraging it” (Ryan, 2016, p. 59). While both domains play out according to their own rules and logic, they drift apart, turning each other into separate entities linked only by the narrative voice. Baba’s space is where the denial of life is systematically afflicted on bodies and minds by soldiers acting at the will of the Nationalists: “they were so young. Just boys” (Ryan, 2016, p. 26). An efficient, yet faceless, machinery of perpetrators without any sense of wrongdoing is maintained by soldiers, “as ageless as a recurring nightmare” (Ryan, 2016, p. 55). Language is but a tool to weave a fabric of falsehood and arbitrary rule: “Truth. ‘Sincerity,’ ‘honesty,’ and ‘accuracy,’ were all synonyms, but with different connotations. What kind of truth did they want? What kind of truth—if any—would set him free?” (Ryan, 2016, p. 55).

The presence of absence is a leitmotif throughout the novel and leaves family life at a loss. Island-wide “thousands of husbands disappeared in those weeks. Sons as young as twelve. Brothers. Friends” (Ryan, 2016, p. 28). Hope and survival center on what is tangible, what is visible, “books Baba had read and stones he’d collected ... things he had touched and made, scents still lingering. My mother felt like an archaeologist, excavating proof of his existence” (Ryan, 2016, p. 49). Objects, sounds, and

²¹ Similarly, the eldest daughter sees light of the day “the year Japan went to Nanjing [1937]” (Ryan, 2016, p. 13).

²² Like others before, Ryan decontextualizes Huang’s widely quoted lines to support the novel’s nativist ideology. Huang’s lines were at the time directed against the cultivation of the Mandarin *baihua* and classical *wenyanwen* at the cost of Taiwanese *baihua*. As Henning Klöter (2012) confirms, “Huang Shihui’s role as an ideological trailblazer of a distinct Taiwanese cultural identity has been overstated in previous studies. Indeed, dichotomies like ‘pro-Taiwanese’ vs. ‘pro-Chinese’ do not apply to his sociolinguistic agenda” (p. 66). Huang’s article “Why not advocate nativist literature?” (怎樣不提倡鄉土文學) was published in 1930.

smells embody the disappeared, family members are no longer spoken of: “a taboo paralyzed my mouth; ‘Baba’ sat on my tongue like a stone” (Ryan, 2016, p. 70). The omnipresence of the missing rules everyday life, the private and the public converge in present absence: “March 1947, according to official history, had not happened. My father had not disappeared. Nobody in my family spoke of him. My father did not exist. ... The disappearances were an island-wide secret. ... it was simply unspoken ... we would not know for decades that the dead measured in the tens of thousands” (Ryan, 2016, p. 61). Individual experience is encapsulated in collective amnesia, generating an atmosphere of fear and mutual suspicion to dissolve the familial bond.

Father's return after 11 years turns the family into a dysfunctional social unit, leaving each single member to cope with a traumatized individual, a “man who ruled the dinner table with his mood, who punished his children like soldiers, who set loose his son's pets” (Ryan, 2016, p. 111). His traumatic experiences seem to haunt him, making him an outsider of his time, an alien to his family, “a hungry ghost deaf to the world” (Ryan, 2016, p. 110). His future is closed off as he is unable to confront and work through his traumatic experiences. Conditioned by his perpetrators' logic, he is instrumentalized to sustain the machinery of state persecution, and compelled to become a “traitor,” a mechanism that forces his youngest daughter into complicity: “I had brought the paper and pen to Baba. Just like Baba, I also had not refused. I was just a little girl, I told myself. Yet a man sat in jail because of me” (Ryan, 2016, p. 119). The negotiation of guilt and remorse is unresolved, there is no redemption—“your burden is your own” (Ryan, 2016, p. 152). Survivor guilt makes life unbearable and unfeasible: “he was six months out of prison. He had dreamed of the sky, and then discovered its endlessness a burden” (Ryan, 2016, p. 117). On the surface, family life is reigned by the banalities of the everyday, but disturbing tensions simmer below, breaking through as bewilderment and hostility, displacement and alienation. Symptoms of post-traumatic stress overshadow family life and the four children's growing up.

2.5 The Victimized Nation and Reconciliation—THE PRESENT

Historical truth and familial secrecy can only be disclosed when the protagonist-narrator gains spatial and temporal distance by migrating to the US to join her Taiwanese American husband Wei, a successful professor at Berkeley. Across the ocean, her understanding of the world no longer passes through the prism of her familial environment dominated by her father's trauma but by her educated and politically well-informed husband, who basically carries on Baba's abortive mission in the overseas resistance movement. Leaving Taiwan triggers the formation of the narrator's outspoken Taiwanese identity. Her explicit creed—“‘Ba,’ I said. ‘I love you.’ I had never spoken these words to him” (Ryan, 2016, p. 179)—is symbolically confirmed by a jar of “soil from our garden” (Ryan, 2016, p. 182). The narrator needs

to step on American soil, however, to start realizing the implications of her decidedly ethnic identity and performing it: “In America, I had stopped calling myself ‘Chinese’ and started calling myself ‘Taiwanese’. In America, I had met my first Chinese national and discovered the gulf that separated us, despite the language we held in common” (Ryan, 2016, p. 189). As she starts seeing through the fabric of KMT propaganda and US complicity, realizing “none of the terror could have happened without the tacit agreement of the American government” (Ryan, 2016, p. 189), she cannot help but support her husband’s cause.

The author transfers the familial–national constellation into a transnational context by juxtaposing the narrator’s departure to California with Nixon’s visit in China 1972, the diplomatic prelude of removing Taiwan from the international political stage and turning the island into “an empty signifier” (Ryan, 2016, p. 177). While the reverberation of February 28, 1947 follows her as “ghost across the ocean ... where I heard it for years. Where I still hear it” (Ryan, 2016, p. 182)—the US abandons Taiwan officially when on “February 28, 1979, the American consulate in Taiwan closes” (Ryan, 2016, p. 188). Burdened with a past imperiled by serial colonialism, the notion of Taiwan as victim of hostile Cold War logic starts to prevail: “By 1971, the vocabulary of the world had changed. ... Somehow, we ended up on the other side of that road, in a world of two Germanys, two Vietnams, and two Chinas, one Free and one Red” (Ryan, 2016, p. 121). Although the ghosts of Taiwan’s history re-echo in her American family life, it is no longer the nation that frames the second-generation family narrative. On the contrary: untold family memories gain agency and unfurl their potential to challenge the national narrative by disclosing family secrets and unearthing “historical truth.”

The notion of betrayal and abandonment continues as leitmotiv. Set in the US, *Green Island* continues as love story turned political thriller driven by the de facto absurd and ridiculous chicaneries of KMT overseas surveillance and the brutal killings by the Nationalists’ henchmen. While people do get killed and the history of victimization proceeds, it is Taiwan and its overseas extension that is focalized. The notion of “Formosa Betrayed” lingers through all family matters like Wei’s unfaithfulness, the narrator’s forced complicity with the KMT secret service, the couple’s marriage crisis, their daughter’s “situation”, or asylum for their friend/political dissident. They all make up the dense, fast-moving story, yet are only symptoms rattling through the second generation’s family life. Fraught with historical facts, the transpacific space emerges as a complex transnational entanglement where Taiwanese student activism is both encouraged and smashed by Cold War logic, which eventually aborts Taiwanese activists’ aspiration for self-determination and traps them and their families in a present past of betrayal and abandonment. Burdened with a past of alleged salvation from Japanese colonialism by the KMT that turned out to be an agent of Chinese hegemony, as well as fighting in a present safeguarded by freedom and democracy that turns out to be a state-sanctioned hide-out of KMT accomplices, there is only the future left to be negotiated and fought for.

The narrator-protagonist is torn apart by feeling perfectly at home in her “American Dream ... as if I had taken over another women’s life” and her “story” condensing in an “immigrant’s tale told a million times over”, and finally resorts to her origin: “I

had been born on the first night of the crackdown, in my parents' bedroom, guided by my father's hand" (Ryan, 2016, p. 189). However, the birth of the nation is not yet completed and American romance has become a dead-end street, as has the love story with Wei. Building a future can only be achieved by remembrance, reconciliation, and creating a collective common sense at the cost of individual desires and subjectivities: "A shared experience, a shared history, a shared trauma: this is what made us family. ... Now I understood there was something stronger than fate. Choice. It was ugly and quotidian and laced romance, and that was exactly what gave it its strength. So, like my mother, I chose to stay" (Ryan, 2016, p. 344).

2.6 *Activist Memory to Create a Trans/National Space—THE FUTURE*

Green Island maps familial memories from both sides of the Pacific onto each other, thereby affiliating histories across generationally and geographically separate sites. Both Taiwanese nationalism and American long-distance nationalism are driven by the same "impact event" and its emotionally charged conceptual patterns. The pursuit of Taiwanese independence and political sovereignty links both sides of the Pacific as a precondition for and an effect of a trans/national identity. The future is not framed as promising utopia but as a consequence of the past and the present. "Wei's side had won. Taiwan had full enfranchisement and freedom of speech. Now, it could focus on the kind of contemporary concerns brought on by freedom, like global epidemics" (Ryan, 2016, p. 346). Taiwan's third generation is filled with devastating optimism; the island's future is trusted in the hands of Taiwan's third generation.

Ryan's ideology-oriented narrative not only shows political concern and creates historical awareness across the Pacific, but it also establishes a transpacific space from which the trans/formation of Taiwanese American identity comfortably can be negotiated against the background of trans/national history. Although it is a space of ambivalent and mutually exclusive identificatory points of reference, a place of multiple belongings and non-belonging, it is not only the most exclusive but also the most inclusive space: "We are curious creatures, we Taiwanese. Orphans. Eventually, orphans must choose their own names and write their own stories. The beauty of orphanhood is the blank slate" (Ryan, 2016, p. 372).

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