

**WHEN THE PAST BECOMES PRESENT: STORYTELLING, POSTCOLONIAL
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, AND ASIAN CANADIAN STUDIES**

by

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AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, AND ASIAN CANADIAN STUDIES

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Abstract

This creative-critical dissertation brings the family stories of the researcher's Chinese Canadian grandmother into dialogue with a canon of Chinese Canadian narratives. Whereas the familial stories trace a matrilineal history that begins with immigration from China to Canada in 1874, the analysis of Chinese Canadian narratives investigates how this canon has been imagined and produced. In juxtaposing these creative and critical interests, this dissertation explores the tension between the creative impulse to (re)articulate experiences and the critical awareness that conventional narrative forms can be restrictive. The aim of the dissertation is to highlight the importance of sharing the stories of previous generations, while also uncovering some of the potential difficulties and pitfalls of such an endeavour.

In paying heed to the dialectic relationship between past and present Chinese Canadian writing, the dissertation engages with an emergent critique of the formation of Asian Canadian literature. Whereas some critics have discussed Asian Canadian literature as a “coming to voice” of previously silenced groups in Canada, others have warned of the dangers of producing Asian Canadian subjects as mimetic of mainstream subjects. In light of these debates, this research project asks: What are the limitations of historical fiction and life-writing genres? How do narratives of progress or national belonging continue to shape racial injustice in Canada? And how can anti-racist efforts allow for new possible coalitions and better account for differences in situation, experience, and privilege?

Drawing on postcolonial studies and transnational feminist theory, and rooted in the concept of postcolonial autoethnography, the project foregrounds the researcher's contradictory subject positioning, produced through the privilege and alterity of being a third-generation Canadian-born woman of mixed Chinese and European descent. As a creative-critical project, it

moves away from disinterested objectivity, reflecting upon and participating in the production of literary accounts while committing to anti-colonial, anti-racist scholarship and praxis, as well as to innovative ideas of responsibility, engagement, and solidarity.

Lay Summary

This creative-critical dissertation brings the family stories of the researcher's Chinese Canadian grandmother into dialogue with a canon of Chinese Canadian narratives. Whereas the familial stories trace a matrilineal history that begins with immigration from China to Canada in 1874, the analysis of Chinese Canadian narratives investigates how this canon has been imagined and produced. In exploring these creative and critical interests, this dissertation examines the tension between the creative impulse to communicate experiences and the critical awareness that common narrative forms can be restrictive. The aim of the dissertation is to highlight the importance of sharing the stories of previous generations. However, it also uncovers some of the potential problems of such an endeavour. The dissertation intervenes in key debates in the field of Asian Canadian literature around the "coming to voice" of a historically silenced racialized group.

Preface

This dissertation is the original and independent work of the author, Lindsay Ann Diehl.

A version of Chapter 4 has been published as Lindsay Diehl, “Disrupting the National Frame: A Postcolonial, Diasporic (Re)Reading of SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* and Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children*,” *English Studies in Canada*, vol. 42, no. 3-4, pp. 99-118.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother, Gertrude Mah (1925-2015), whose tremendous love and courage made everything possible.

Chapter 1: Introduction: Storytelling, Postcolonial Autoethnography, and Asian Canadian Studies

1.1 My Grandmother's Stories

I grew up listening to my grandmother's stories. Some stories she would tell again and again. I do not think she realized how often she was telling them or how carefully I was listening. She was a meticulous storyteller, recalling moments in her life in detail, sometimes even drawing maps or sketches to accompany her words. As a result, I remember the stories of her being born in Victoria's Chinatown and living in a drafty warehouse that had been converted into her family's flat; stories of her scalding her foot in a pot of hot water that her mother had placed on the floor to heat the room; of her missing her father who was often away from the home, working hard to make a living or perhaps gambling with friends. I remember the stories of my grandmother feeling ashamed and trying to hide from the outside world that her mother had come to Canada using false papers. I can picture her as a child, a young girl not even twelve years old, going to work alongside her sisters to pack salmon at the cannery and earn some much needed money to support the family.

These are the stories that form the background of my life; as much as they are my grandmother's stories, they have also become my own. That is, in many ways, these stories have entered into my life, affecting how I see and participate in the world. They not only help to indicate how I am situated, but also provide the motivation for my dissertation. Indeed, the inspiration for this dissertation arises from my need to work through some of the issues of my own social and intellectual milieu. This need is comprised of several overlapping elements, including a desire to map for myself, as a woman who identifies as half-Chinese and half-white, ways to participate in contemporary anti-racist and equalitarian movements; an aspiration to bring into dialogue my scholarly interests in Asian Canadian literature with my mixed-race

upbringing as a child raised largely by my Chinese Canadian grandmother; a determination to understand how Canada's liberal multiculturalism works to manage and contain diversity, promoting cultural assimilation behind an appearance of tolerance; and lastly, an ambition to foreground social justice concerns in my academic work.

Therefore, by exploring my family's matrilineal history in relation to a canon of Chinese Canadian literature, this dissertation aims to highlight the cultural and socio-political importance of (re)claiming and (re)presenting the stories inherited from previous generations, while also uncovering some of the potential difficulties and pitfalls of such an endeavour. The dissertation is guided by the following research questions: How can family stories help to give voice to, and make sense of, otherwise muted, contradictory, and traumatized experiences? How can they contribute to critical attempts to destabilize dominant versions of Canada's past? At the same time, however, how can these stories be restricted by the linear and developmental frameworks of historical fiction and life-writing genres? To what extent do expectations for narratives of progress or national belonging continue to shape and delimit discussions of racism and injustices in Canada? In endeavouring to answer these questions, I seek to investigate the tension between the creative impulse to share experience, (re)create identity, and (re)articulate history, on the one hand, and the critical awareness that conventional narrative forms and literary approaches can reinforce limited definitions of racial, gendered, and national subjectivity, on the other. My dissertation hence pursues a creative-critical form to navigate this tension, striving to provide a space for thinking through these national, gendered, and raced identifications, while also exploring more personal issues of inheritance, connection, and identity. My intention is to remain attentive to the complexities of difference by highlighting the ambiguities of my own belonging, recognizing variances in experience and self-understanding amongst Chinese immigrants and

their descendants, and drawing attention to Asian Canadian Studies as an important site of struggle, negotiation, and coalition building.

1.2 A Creative-Critical Approach

My dissertation employs a creative-critical approach to include literary examinations of selected Chinese Canadian narratives, as well as excerpts from my grandmother's life writing and reflections from my own journal. My grandmother's stories allow me to trace a family history that begins with my great-great-grandfather's immigration from China to Canada in 1874, and also involves my great-grandmother's arrival in 1905. A creative-critical approach affords me the opportunity to pursue a multi-genre configuration that strategically juxtaposes critical analysis with autobiographical stories and reflections. Such a configuration helps me to navigate two potentially conflicting commitments in my research: first, to deploy a self-reflexive mode that breaks with the disingenuous pose of disinterested objectivity, and that reflects upon, and participates in, the production of literary accounts; and second, to pay heed to the dialectic relationship between past and present Chinese Canadian writing by examining links and disconnections between the narratives that I read and my own family's stories. The multi-genre format, therefore, provides a way to bring these commitments into dialogue: the passages of critical analysis consider the literary innovations of Chinese Canadian writers, as well as the socio-political and cultural context out of which their work emerged; whereas the passages of autobiographical writing serve to distinguish me—my context and literary concerns—from the writers examined. By critically narrating and reflecting upon my own subject position, I wish to foreground a sense of self-interrogation in my research, as well as clarify my relation to, and difference from, the various Chinese Canadian writers included in my study. In this way, I signal

the investments and qualifications that both guide and delimit my own perspective, while also investigating seemingly stable definitions of both national and racial identity.

This dissertation enacts a politically aware and self-reflexive mode as a means to trace some of the ways in which Chinese Canadian literature has been imagined and produced, as well as gesture to future implications and possibilities. Importantly, Chinese Canadian literature is part of a larger critical category and literary praxis known as Asian Canadian Studies, which arose in the 1980s and 90s in response to community-based, anti-racist efforts (Lai 1). With the initial goals of recovering the experiences of early Asian immigrants and making visible a history of Canada's racist state policies of exclusion (for Chinese Canadians) and internment (for Japanese Canadians), Asian Canadian Studies is best understood as a contingent formation, "produced relationally [i]n the context of the state and whiteness" (5); it is the result of a struggle in which Asian Canadian activists, writers, and scholars "had to fight to have their stories told" and share their "painful experience of subordination in a white-dominant nation" (Miki 11). Despite its community-based, activist history, however, Asian Canadian Studies has increasingly gained institutionalized standing as an academic field of study (Chris Lee 3). While such a development can exert a productive influence in drawing attention to the experience of racialized subjects in Canada, many critics have also noted potential drawbacks (3). One such drawback is that, in an institutional setting, "Asian Canadian" can misleadingly seem to reference a fixed or essentialized identity, and thus cover up the racially discriminatory histories that has produced the term. Indeed, some critics have emphasized that "[t]he power of the term" Asian Canadian is not that it denotes "a particular essence," but that it signifies a strategic coalition of diverse non-white individuals/groups who have been similarly perceived as an alien/Asian threat to Canada's national body (Lai 5). For these critics, the emergence of Asian Canadian Studies calls for a

certain level of awareness, as it could “open” Asian Canadian literature to forms of “state incorporation” by abstracting the sign of “Asian Canadian” from the social and political particularities that have discriminated against racialized subjects and concealing ongoing racial injustice (6). As Larissa Lai asserts, this danger of state incorporation is heightened due to Canada’s liberal multiculturalism, which attempts to locate racism in the past and promote apolitical notions of diversity (94). She highlights the need for disruptive strategies to destabilize multiculturalism as “a state strategy of containment” that obscures the ways that white supremacy remains foundational to contemporary Canadian society (94).

This dissertation acknowledges the current debates surrounding Asian Canadian Studies, for in its own explorations, it takes inspiration from Roy Miki, who contends that the field should be approached as “a double-edged site,” where forms of non-white difference can be managed and contained “*or* where critiques of the nation can posit future methodologies of resistance and collective formations” (51). Consequently, my dissertation considers the importance of participating in Asian Canadian Studies as “the face of literary and cultural possibilities with the power to critique...the past” (xiii), while also recognizing Asian Canadian literature as “a provisional body of texts,” which is responsive to specific socio-political and intellectual conditions (27). Significantly, this kind of participation requires innovative strategies of reading and writing Asian Canadian literature—strategies that would “question what the institutional boundaries of Asian Canadian contain,” critique the historical framework of colonization and whiteness still evident in Canada’s policy of multiculturalism, and examine diversity within the specificity of histories, cultures, and subjectivities (94). This dissertation is thus interested in exploring the “progressive” shifts in critical and creative discourse that Miki suggests need to take place (150); it contends that these shifts involve complicating ideas of scholarly objectivity,

as well as combining elements of critical and creative practice. Miki asserts, for instance, that critical and creative writers alike need to move away from “declarations of neutrality and objectivity” to foreground who they are as “social subjects” (151); they should “account for the contingencies of [their] location(s)” to contextualize their viewpoints and “envision more malleable methods to negotiate the intellectual and social shifts occurring around [them]” (151). This dissertation correspondingly pursues a creative-critical engagement to question my own location and instill flexibility into my reading and writing practices. Aiming to avoid the “tendency of [more conventional] criticism...to generalize and allot objects, people, and ideas [a fixed] exchange value” (Budde 289), such an engagement creates openings to emphasize a process of inquiring, searching, and meaning-making. In crossing between creative and critical modes, my intention is to better acknowledge my limitations, accommodate difference and relativity, and invite intervening dialogue. In other words, I hope to underscore how the workings of racialization and difference, both in the production and reception of texts, is a continuing process of negotiation.

Importantly, a creative-critical approach helps to traverse some of the respective restraints of both critical and creative work. One of the major limitations of critical work is that it traditionally relies upon a sense of detachment, and an “instrumental process of constructing a rationally sound argument” that can ignore “much of the non-rational, affective whirlpool of phenomena [that gets] experienced” when reading a text (Miki 259). Miki proposes a method of creative-critical reading that effectively slows down the interpretative process, so that “[t]he activity of reading then holds the potential of releasing creative (and somatic) energies” (260). Such a reading practice resists the appropriative act of “pinning down meaning...for predetermined ends” (272), and opens a site for critical self-reflection wherein difficult questions

of responsibility and accountability can arise. This dissertation thus ventures to participate in literary analysis not as a comfortable act of confirmation, but as an unsettling and “tense” interaction “between self and other” (264), in which I am asked to evaluate myself—my interests and motivations—just as much as the texts I am reading. Moreover, it considers that the value of this kind of creative-critical framework is that it can account for the personal, emotional, and affective elements that are overlooked in conventional readings. These elements are a vital source of critical insight; they not only communicate some of the more complex and unpredictable aspects of historical experience, but also allow for a greater appreciation of alternative perspectives and “new possibilities that can alter our understanding of the past” (273). Accordingly, this dissertation infuses the critical act of reading with a creative openness to stories—and the quality of irreducibility, uncertainty, and affective responsiveness that necessarily arrives with stories—as a worthy counterbalance to the ways in which Asian Canadian Studies may otherwise work to stifle the very body of texts that it claims to speak for.

While this dissertation seeks to navigate the limitations of critical work, however, it also endeavors to circumvent some of the associated risks and pitfalls of creative production. Larissa Lai warns, for instance, that “the liberatory power” of creative writing is “not pure,” as the tension between “generic trope and experience” often results in a “problem of articulation,” which means that “[i]mportant silences can be broken, but others can be more deeply encrypted” (37). That is, creative writing—and its popular genres of historical fiction and life-writing in particular—can generate “ambivalent results” (37): on one hand, it can assist in “bringing to voice” some previously silenced or unacknowledged experiences; yet on the other hand, it can “drive deeper underground aspects of marginalized subjectivity” that do not fit into “generic conventions” (37). Lai, therefore, asserts that Asian Canadian writers should be wary of narrative

conventions, which are implicitly built upon “myths” of progress and national belonging, and which promote “obliterating fantas[ies] that hid[e] prior trauma” (7). By using a creative-critical strategy to explore my family history, I attempt to avoid these myths and fantasies, and highlight how “the retrieval of history is not as easy as it might appear...It is certainly not as simple as [a straightforward] recounting of ‘what happened’” (42). More specifically, my reflections on my grandmother’s stories show how I am still grappling with ideas and their significance—still working through “both the articulable and the inarticulable that roil beneath” these stories (61). I am thus attentive to Lai’s suggestion that experiences of discrimination and exclusion have produced Asian Canadians “not as linear [or coherent] subjects...but as discontinuous subjects for whom the possibility of speaking or writing the self is never easy or complete” (9). Applying a kind of formal disruption or generic crossing, this dissertation juxtaposes passages of literary analysis, history, and autobiography to construct a non-linear, multi-layered, and fragmented narrative. In this way, it is dedicated not only to a “multiplicity of stories rather than to the singular truth of [dominant] history” (34), but also to a form of “poetic association” that Gloria Anzaldúa posits is “another way of organizing experience,” one that tries to negotiate similarities and differences by paying attention to the imbrications of race, gender, class, nation and colonialism (“Haciendo” xvii). Indeed, it is this dedication to a multi-voiced and applied poetics that lays the groundwork for this dissertation’s specific theoretical contexts and methods.

1.3 Methodology

My dissertation responds to two major developments in Asian Canadian Studies: debates about representation (who is speaking? for whom? and why?), and the increasing call for self-reflexivity in all forms of writing. The common thread linking its creative and critical components together is an overriding interest in stories—how can stories (re)narrate identity and

history in ways that contribute to oppositional knowledge and politics? In what ways can they emphasize the lived, concrete, and particular to better illuminate struggles and build strategic coalitions? And finally, to what extent can stories provide new lenses through which to understand the past and (re)orient approaches to the future? As discussed above, Asian Canadians frequently need to tell their stories to counter the objectified and reductive representations of them circulated by others; yet, at the same time, they run the risk of repeating the limited subjectivities, stereotypes, and myths of dominant narrative logics. A central concern of my dissertation is thus the act of self-narrative and the tension that exists between received categories for selfhood and the possibilities for self-(re)invention; such a concern raises important questions about the intersections of individualized experiences and systemic and historical processes of racial, gendered, and colonial domination. To address these questions, this dissertation takes up a theoretical foundation that is based on postcolonial studies combined with transnational feminist theory.

Postcolonial analysis—that is, analysis that investigates the continuing social and psychological effects of European colonialisms—is particularly useful in framing this dissertation’s explorations. Postcolonialism is relevant here because it acknowledges Canada as a white settler colony that has an “urgent need...to rethink the question of ‘how to remember,’” and, more specifically, to acknowledge “the survival of what we call the past into the present” (Brydon 55). Indeed, Diana Brydon asserts that postcolonial examinations are crucial in the Canadian context to destabilize “the will to forget,” a desire that functions not only to prevent confrontations with the country’s “unsavory colonial history,” but also to inhibit the activity of “imagin[ing] a more socially equitable future” (49, 50). Brydon suggests that the “will to forget” is pervasive; it exerts an influence across “Indigenous, immigrant, and settler [populations]

(which themselves, of course, tend to be leaky categories of convenience),” though it “operates differently” within each context (53). Moreover, other critics have pointed out how Canada’s liberal multiculturalism contributes to this widespread “amnesia” (53). Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua, for example, stress how multicultural policies work to “consign” Indigenous peoples “to a mythic past,” implying their communities have “died out and no longer need to be taken seriously,” so that whiteness can be reinforced as the norm (123). Indicative of an overarching “structure of motivated disavowal” (Brydon 53), these policies foster a forgetting of how “[o]ngoing settlement of Indigenous lands, whether by white people or people of colo[u]r, remains a part of Canada’s nation-building and is premised on displacing Indigenous peoples” (Lawrence and Dua 134). In this case, postcolonialism represents a needed resistance to this forgetting, facilitating the “task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past” (Gandhi 4). Importantly, this task involves a “returning to the colonial scene to disclose” complicated colonial and racial relations (4). In Canada, the colonial scene was particularly intricate, as it was composed of a “plurality of racisms” (Mawani 30); it relied upon both the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the exploitation of “cheap” racialized labourers to “build the economic scaffolding” for the colony (32). Emerging from this colonial scene was a “triangulated” racial hierarchy, which exerts influence to this day (Thobani 75). As Sunera Thobani explains, this “triangulated formation” defines three categories: Indigenous populations “marked for physical and cultural extinction,” white settlers distinguished as “future national[s]...worthy of citizenship *and* membership,” and “non-preferred race immigrants” characterized as “threatening” and “unwelcome intruder[s]” (75, emphasis as cited). Thobani’s explanation highlights how racialized Asian Canadians, “despite their marginal positionality,” have also been “beneficiaries of settler colonial structures” (Phung, “Reaching” 12). My

dissertation hence utilizes a postcolonial framework to explore the relation between past and future, and investigate how Canada's colonial encounter, like other colonial encounters, promises to "narrate multiple *stories* of contestation and its discomfiting other, complicity" (Gandhi 5, emphasis added). Such a framework helps me to acknowledge the complex positioning of Asian Canadians, who in spite of "[b]eing colonized elsewhere and subsequently marginalized here" (Phung, "Reaching" 12), bear some accountability in addressing the continuing oppression and displacement of Indigenous peoples.

A major postcolonial concept informing this dissertation is Mary Louise Pratt's formulation of autoethnography. In her influential study, *Imperial Eyes*, Pratt describes autoethnography as a type of writing that emerges from

instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations. (*Imperial* 7 emphasis as cited)

For Pratt, autoethnography is an oppositional practice that involves countering and questioning the authority given to "metropolitan" representations or representations originating from the imperial centre; it is a strategy that creates opportunities for resistance, presents alternative versions of history, and gives narrative expression to marginalized perspectives. She stresses, however, that autoethnographic texts should not be viewed as fixed, "'authentic' or autochthonous forms of self-representation" (7); rather, they are strategic responses to historical conditions, as well as "creole" in form due to their "collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the [colonizer]" (7). Yet, she also emphasizes that autoethnographic texts do "not

simply imitate” (“Arts” 36); they select and adapt “pieces of the [colonizer’s] representational repertoire” to intervene in dominant modes of understanding (36). Pratt thus conceptualizes autoethnography as an “interactive,” “heterogeneous,” and “dialogic” type of self-writing, which brings multiple genres and styles into the same textual space (*Imperial* 7). Building on Pratt’s autoethnography, and her attention to what might be called a “mixed” strategy or discourse, my dissertation seeks to work against the notion of a singular, straightforward, or unmediated truth, and eschew the assumption of “a stable, centered sense of knowledge and reality” (“Arts” 37). Instead, it aims to demonstrate a conception of self-writing as a process, which traces the limits of dominant representations, while also creating spaces to explore communal, familial, and personal narratives that have been suppressed by racial and colonial histories. Such a process, it considers, resists premature closure of meaning and emphasizes the need for continuing engagement with the past to question the present and (re)envision the future.

Postcolonialism and its conceptualization of autoethnography provide a productive core from which my dissertation’s analytical trajectories can be made. Nonetheless, postcolonialism has been criticized for its tendency to assume a “male point of view” (Oyewumi 339); I have thus informed my framework with the insights of transnational feminism. Transnational feminism offers my dissertation a nuanced “feminist and postcolonial” approach for examining “intersecting systems of oppression and privilege” that work within and across national boundaries, and “construct and position [racialized subjects] in similar yet disparate ways” (Park 9). Sometimes termed as multicultural feminism, Third World feminism, and postcolonial feminism, transnational feminism has developed in response to “the systemic exclusion of Third World women and women of colo[u]r from theory and practice relating to processes of subordination” (24); it is attentive not only to the absence of attention to gender in postcolonial

investigations, but also to the implicit eurocentrism and whiteness of Western feminisms, which too often reduce non-Western women as mere victims and dependents (Mohanty 22). This body of scholarship considers how colonial processes have led to “the naturalization of masculinist and [eurocentric or] racist values” and the establishment of oppressive structures that are overlapping, relational, and historically produced (250). Unlike “mainstream” feminisms, which rely on Western notions of universality and individualism, transnational feminism acknowledges “differences as well as similarities” between racialized and gendered subjects, referring to relations as “different and linked” (Park 25). This kind of framework is valuable to my dissertation for two main reasons: firstly, because “Asian Canadian cultural production” has tended to discuss “the Asian/Canadian subject (albeit unnamed)” as working-class, heterosexual and male (18); and secondly, because the texts that do mention Chinese Canadian women often reproduce “gendered Orientalism” (19), representing these women as primarily being victims of the “male-oriented Chinese” traditions of polygamy and motherhood (Chao 26). Significantly, this representation of Chinese Canadian women elides a recognition of the colonial politics and culture of indentured labour, as well as the impact of Canada’s policies of head tax and exclusion on immigration patterns and relationships between Chinese Canadian men and women. Transnational feminism hence helps me to conduct an “intersectional, relational reading” that “simultaneous[ly] consider[s] the local and the global” and addresses how larger political, economic, and cultural forces converge and present specific, historically grounded challenges (Park 25). Furthermore, since many transnational feminists place great significance on the acts of remembering and sharing their own stories, their writing most clearly provides me with the models and methods for my own investigations.

One of the distinguishing features of transnational feminism is its critical awareness that “single-issue and single-identity politics are unresponsive to the complexity of many people’s struggles” (Stone-Mediatore 128). In other words, it realizes that various identity categories overlap to complicate conventional and narrowly focused approaches (Kaplan and Grewal 359). Transnational feminism accordingly demands more investigational writing practices to document and transform the lived imbrications of race, gender, class, nation, and colonialism in history and in the present (Alexander and Mohanty xix). An established way of accomplishing these aims is through a method of storytelling, which “slides from factual statements and memories to criticism and reflective poetry” (Bannerji, “Returning” xix). In her influential essay “Haciendo caras, una entrada,” Gloria Anzaldúa describes such a method as “interfacing,” a process of organizing the various “fragments” produced by “lives simultaneously mediated, marked and influenced by race, class, gender, and vocation” (xviii). The idea behind interfacing is that the resulting “story” resists the power of patriarchal nationalist forms by generating a “poetic” and “multi-surfaced” narrative that allows for moments of silence or gaps between the fragments, while also giving voice to experiences, events, and realities that would otherwise be rendered invisible (xvi). In this way, interfacing reveals how systemic or everyday forms of oppression and exploitation condition the lives of racialized and gendered subjects, transforming these lives into a critical source of knowledge and theories—“theories that are partially outside and partially inside the Western frame of reference...theories [that] create new categories for those of us left out or pushed out of existing ones” (xxvi). Moreover, because it intervenes affectively, politically, and critically in situations of personal and historical violence and oppression, storytelling “can coax us into the habit of listening to...and learning [about alternate] ways of seeing and being” (Bambara xxxi). Therefore, Anzaldúa concludes that storytelling, and

interfacing in particular, constitutes a powerful method of bringing about “recognition of difference within the context of commonality,” as well as “the recognition of commonality within the context of difference” (“Bridges” 244). That is, stories can bring to light commonalities without reconciling differences, encouraging solidarity and coalitional work across these differences. Combined with postcolonial modes of inquiry, then, transnational feminism provides me with the methods and inspiration for carrying out my dissertation’s creative-critical explorations of my own family’s stories in the context of Asian Canadian literature.

1.4 Chapter Overview

Employing the juxtapositional and dialogic methods of postcolonial autoethnography and transnational feminist storytelling, my chapters include both critical arguments and creative reflections. They begin by critically outlining the theoretical stakes and methodological practices that I need to set up my analysis of Chinese Canadian texts and situate my interactions with my grandmother’s stories. However, once the investigational frameworks are established, the writing becomes more fluid, moving between various textual elements, including fragments from my grandmother’s letters, excerpts from my own journal writing, personal thoughts and questions, and critical engagements and discussions. Importantly, even though my personal contemplations and grandmother’s stories emerge in-between the critical portions, they should not be seen as extraneous to my thinking. Rather, they should be regarded as another mode of inquiry that adds a complicating dimension to my research questions. As discussed above, I take particular inspiration from transnational feminists who bring together multiple modes of writing using spacing, font changes, and dialogue boxes. This technique of “interfacing,” which produces a

“multi-surfaced” text (Anzaldúa, “Haciendo” xvi), endeavours to enact a historically situated strategy to recover the past and (re)imagine the future.

In chapter two, I investigate two well-known Chinese Canadian autobiographies, Wayson Choy’s *Paper Shadows* (1999) and Judy Fong Bates’ *The Year of Finding Memory* (2010). Since the anti-racist movements of the 1980s and 90s, Chinese Canadian “self-writing” has mostly been appreciated for its ability to “break the silence” and provide “a voice” for alternative histories (Lai 37). While this appreciation has led to a greater awareness of Chinese Canadian head tax and exclusion, it has also bolstered a linear narrative of “silence to voice,” which implicitly suggests that racial injustices are safely located in the past. Thus, in order to complicate this linear narrative, I employ a postcolonial gothic approach to analyze these texts, showing how their allusions to family secrets and ghostly hauntings create a dialogue between past and present. The unresolved nature of this dialogue is important to consider, as it indicates what Juliana Chang calls a “palimpsestic” strategy—a strategy that calls attention to “what remains after national [versions of] history...are narrated through modern trajectories of development and progress” (111). That is, it works to acknowledge experiences and emotions that exceed “the symbolic order” (116) and cannot be incorporated into Canada’s liberal multiculturalist discourses of national belonging. A postcolonial gothic framework thus helps me to critique the dominant notion that “the present...fully replaces the past” (111) by highlighting the ways that Choy’s and Fong Bates’ texts remain “haunted” or unsettled. Reflecting on my own grandmother’s stories, moreover, I contemplate how the notions of ghosts and secrets recur within her recollections and function within a family dynamic. Throughout this chapter, I focus on how engagements with the past are infused with feelings of uncertainty, loss, and sorrow. I ask: How do these feelings gesture to what remains inarticulable and “invisible”? How do they

point to “an understanding of transmission which is not simply horizontal (i.e., across a particular community) but also vertical (through generations)” (Cho, “Affecting” 120)? In answering these questions, I suggest that Chinese Canadian self-writing contains resistance to the “injunction to ‘move on’ [which] demands a forgetting” (116). More specifically, I argue that these Chinese Canadian autobiographies intimate how unanswered conflicts and concerns from the past continue to emerge and disrupt the present.

In chapter three, I explore how representations of early Chinese immigrants as pioneers or nation-builders can serve to reinforce a dominant (white, colonialist, heteronormative, masculinized) conception of Canada. More specifically, I argue that, since the late 1980s, Chinese Canadian literature has, in many ways, taken up the task of dismantling the “yellow peril” stereotype through a re-working of white settler nation-building myths. While this literature has sought to reinvent these myths, however, it has also tended to reinforce its most salient, nationalist and masculine features. The first half of the chapter thus examines Yee’s *Tales from Gold Mountain: Stories of the Chinese in the New World* (1989) and Huffman and Kwong’s *The Dream of Gold Mountain* (1991) to show how presenting Chinese Canadian men as reconceptualised versions of Western Frontier heroes is a powerful, yet problematic, anti-racist strategy. Indeed, I acknowledge how my grandmother relies upon this strategy and lionizes her male ancestors in her stories as well. Nonetheless, while the strategy helps to tell a history that is marginalized in dominant mythology, it also re-enacts exclusionary processes that diminish the experiences of women, gay men, and Indigenous peoples. Most concerning, it repeats the myth of *terra nullius*, perpetuating the notion that “Canada was once a wilderness—wild, uncultivated, and largely empty—until [male settlers] arrived and carved out a society” (Coleman 28). As transnational and Indigenous feminist scholars have stressed, Chinese

Canadian writers and critics should endeavour to recognize Indigenous presence and integrate “an understanding of Canada as a colonialist state into their frameworks” (Lawrence and Dua 123). There is a need for a more “inclusive perspective” that recognizes “the dynamic interaction between people of colour, Indigeneity, and colonialism” (133). Accordingly, the second half of this chapter examines Yee’s most recent novel, *A Superior Man* (2015); it contends that the narrative breaks with settler nation-building myths and emphasizes notions of Chinese-Indigenous co-presence and interracial interaction. Unlike my grandmother’s stories, *A Superior Man* poignantly illustrates how the arrival of Chinese Canadians intersects with the oppression of Indigenous peoples. As such, I argue that the novel provides an entry point into discussions about how to make Indigenous presence and ongoing colonization foundational to antiracist efforts. Yet, since it represents Indigenous peoples as largely peripheral, I conclude that the novel also points to how much anti-colonial work remains to be done.

In chapter four, I examine SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990) and Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children* (1994). Although these novels are commonly discussed in Asian Canadian Studies, the dominant framework for understanding privileges a modern Canada over a traditional China. This framework takes its cues from a feminist plot structure, which was influential in the 1980s and 90s when these novels were written. In depicting a daughter’s movement from silence to voice, this structure risks positioning issues of gendered oppression in the past. Moreover, when it interacts with stories of immigrant parents and their Western-raised children, it can reify East-West distinctions by projecting Orientalized difference onto the parents and linking the children’s acculturation with increased freedom and autonomy. Therefore, this chapter utilizes a postcolonial diasporic perspective, which is informed by transnational feminist insights, to emphasize textual moments within these novels that destabilize

this plot structure; it seeks to examine questions beyond the national frame and disrupt notions of Canada's liberal multicultural progressivism. Thus, I situate these novels more clearly within a global context of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism. Additionally, I present some of my grandmother's stories about my great-grandmother to signal my investments in exploring Chinese Canadian mother-daughter narratives. I ask: how can writers and critics destabilize interpretations of Westernized daughters as "free" and "modern" in comparison to their "unfree" and "tradition-bound" immigrant mothers? As my great-grandmother was a concubine, this topic is of special interest to me. By creating a dialogue between my grandmother's stories and the stories of these writers, I consider the possibility for innovative and subversive interactions with feminist narrative structures and conventions. My goal is to highlight and complicate the underlying notions of national and developmental history that typically organize this genre.

Finally, in chapter five, I consider the intersections of race and poetic form in Wah's *Diamond Grill* (1996). As Lily Cho explains, since its publication in the mid-1990s, the book has attracted critical appraisals that tend to "presum[e] a transparency to race" and preclude a deeper appreciation for the poems' "formal innovations" (*Eating*, 133). This chapter thus examines how the poems explore notions of racialized performance both in content and form. Shifting away from "the abstraction" of hybridity theories (Matthews 42), it draws on Critical Mixed Race Studies and transnational feminism to highlight the complexities of the body, which include perceptions of racial ambiguity and their embodied responses. In particular, my analysis stresses how context-specific interrogations are needed to uncover how the mixed race father and son, Fred Wah Sr. and Jr., rely upon divergent performative strategies that are based upon the different ways their bodies are racially read. Furthermore, I demonstrate how the poems' multifaceted form indicates how such performances have both conservative and transgressive

effects. Appreciating the poems in this manner generates an understanding of how navigating the racialized terrain produces paradoxical movements, which simultaneously reinforce and challenge racialized categories. That is, it shows how negotiating and contesting “the rigid rules of racialization” is an ongoing and difficult process (Mahtani 207). Importantly, my examinations of Wah’s poems create meaningful opportunities to reflect upon my own mixed race positioning and acknowledge how my ability to “pass” as white means that my own familial relationships are marked by differing degrees of privilege and alterity. The last part of this chapter uses transnational feminist Minelle Mahtani’s spatialized framework of mobile paradoxical spaces to demonstrate the mobility of mixed race subject’s positioning among differently racialized communities. Focusing on the potential for everyday interracial networks support, sympathy, and solidarity, I suggest that Fred Wah Sr.’s forging of inter-racialized relationships gestures to the larger coalitional formations, such as the one that produced the category, Asian Canadian. Yet, since his inability to recognize strategic sameness does not seem to extend to Indigenous and Black communities, I assert that the poems raise important questions about the contradictory and ambiguous positioning of Chinese Canadians in a Canadian white settler colonial state. I conclude that the silences and empty spaces between the poems are consequently significant, as they point to the largely undeveloped potential of Chinese-Indigenous and Chinese-Black alliances, asking how looking back at the past can generate new possibilities for moving forward into the future.

Chapter 2: Family Secrets and Ghostly Hauntings: A Postcolonial Gothic Analysis of Wayson Choy's *Paper Shadows* and Judy Fong Bates' *The Year of Finding Memory*

2.1 Background

Laying the groundwork for Asian Canadian Studies, the anti-racist movements of the 1980s and 90s were often predicated on a concept of “breaking the silence” or providing “a voice” for alternative histories (Lai 37). This concept contributed to a critical platform and “oppositional mode,” which viewed Asian Canadian writers as “speaking out” for their communities and addressing their lack of representation in Canadian history and literature (38). Within this context, autobiographies and memoirs held a special place, as the creative non-fiction genre was seen as providing a straightforward “recounting of ‘what happened,’” poignantly calling attention to the experiences of marginalized peoples (42). While this emphasis on autobiographies and memoirs, and their silence breaking abilities, was probably “a necessary first step in the public presencing of Asian Canadians,” it also carried with it some limitations (33). Mainly, its linear narrative of “silence to voice” led to interpretations of these texts “as a moment of arrival” in which Asian Canadians supposedly “enter[ed] into a liberated ‘Canadian’ subjectivity” (7, 11). Such a narrative inadvertently works to bolster ideas of Canada’s liberal multicultural progress, suggesting all forms of racial injustice are located in a distant and unrelated past. As Larissa Lai points out, the problem with the breaking-silence perspective is its tendency to incorporate marginalized subjects into “a discourse of national belonging, while actually covering over the violent history of exclusion it was supposed to have expiated” (37). She posits that another kind of politics is needed, one that “emphasizes open-endedness rather than happy arrival” (33).

Given these concerns about the breaking-silence perspective, I explore an alternative manner of appreciating Chinese Canadian autobiographies in this chapter. I examine Wayson

Choy's *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood* and Judy Fong Bates' *The Year of Finding Memory* from a postcolonial gothic perspective, paying attention to the writers' allusions to secrets, ghosts, and hauntings. As Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte propose, a postcolonial gothic approach pairs "the language of the postcolonial" with "the tools of the Gothic" in order to interrogate the nation's claims of liberal multicultural progress and racial inclusivity (xv). More specifically, this approach emphasizes how depictions of "ghosts or monsters" can be seen as creating a dialogue between past and present, and illuminating the lingering effects of "imperialism and globalization" (vii). Rather than reading Choy's and Fong Bates' texts according to a linear narrative of "silence to voice," therefore, I use a postcolonial gothic framework to consider how the texts remain unsettled by, and move back into, the past. I ask: How do these texts acknowledge unresolved experiences resulting from racialization and exclusion through portrayals of family secrets and ghostly hauntings? How do these secrets and hauntings suggest difficult emotions, such as sorrow and loss, that are passed down through generations and "kept alive in the present" (Juliana Chang 111)? Nuancing my framework with Juliana Chang's concept of "a palimpsest, [or] multilayered surface," I show how textual references to secrets and hauntings gesture to "unassimilated and unresolved" moments (111), which are continuously returned to and grieved. I contend that, since these moments cannot be fully incorporated into liberal multiculturalist discourses of national belonging, they complicate the idea that "the present...fully replaces the past" (111). By viewing these Chinese Canadian autobiographies from a postcolonial gothic perspective, I thus underscore "what remains after national [versions of] history...are narrated through modern trajectories of development and progress" (111). More specifically, I argue that these texts intimate how unanswered conflicts and concerns from the past continue to surface and disturb the present.

2.2 The Postcolonial Gothic

In their discussions of the postcolonial gothic, Sugars and Turcotte assert that critics should explore imaginative allusions to ghosts and monsters, as these allusions can provide a strategy to comprehend how “the Canadian national project is inherently haunted” (xi). Stressing how ghosts and monsters are often related to “colonial oppression, diasporic migration, or national consolidation” (vii), they argue that a postcolonial gothic approach helps to foreground “a sense of the forgotten and unacknowledged, the repressed and the denied” (xiv), and challenge the “oft-proclaimed” notion that Canada is a peaceful, non-colonial nation that embraces diversity (xiii). Crucial to Sugar and Turcotte’s formulation of the postcolonial gothic, then, is its ability to make present the racist and oppressive foundations of the nation, which have produced “an excess” that cannot be thoroughly incorporated into liberal multicultural myths of racial and national progress (ix). Their comments on “the manifestations of the Gothic in Canada” underscore the nation in a white settler postcolonial context (viii), which needs to rethink the question of “how to remember” and acknowledge how “the past...remains in the present (Juliana Chang 111). Indeed, Juliana Chang stresses how modern forms of nationalism promote “selective” versions of history, which encourage an active “forgetting” and prevent confrontations with racist and colonial realities (111). She outlines a process where subjects cope with this “forgetting” by “keeping alive” unresolved experiences through “encrypted secret[s]” (112). Thus, she suggests that secrets and ghosts are sorrowful, “haunting remainders” of “losses,” which have gone mostly unrecognized and unarticulated, and which have been implicitly been passed down across generations (112). This conceptualization of transmitted secrets and ghosts is useful in considering how Choy’s and Fong Bates’ texts work to “palimpsestically kee[p] alive what should be left behind” (115) by revisiting unfinished

business and questions about the past. In effect, these texts follow what Juliana Chang calls a “palimpsestic structure”—a structure that “signifies an improper attachment to the past,” moving back and forth in time to open a dialogue between past and present (111). My postcolonial gothic analysis of Choy’s and Fong Bates’ texts, therefore, focuses on depictions of secrets and ghosts, showing how these depictions create a kind of “temporal loop,” revealing how “the past is not erased” but “always haunting” the present (111). Moreover, this focus allows me to interrogate “what has been encrypted” (112), mainly the excess that has been subtracted to enable national versions of history.

A postcolonial gothic reading of Choy’s and Fong Bates’ texts necessitates an awareness of Canada’s interactions with early Chinese immigrants. In particular, Canadian immigration laws in the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, in many ways, produced unresolved experiences—“remainder[s] or surplus[es]” (Juliana Chang 111)—which conventionally have not been narrated as national history. The laws were extensive, Peter Li explains:

The first federal anti-Chinese bill was passed in 1885...It took the form of a head tax of \$50 imposed, with few exceptions, on all persons of Chinese origin entering the country ...Chinese entering Canada were then given a certificate of entry or residence, which had to be returned to the controller in exchange for a certificate of leave when they left the country, even temporarily; otherwise they would not be allowed to return. In 1900 the head tax was raised to \$100 and in 1903 to \$500...In 1923 the Canadian Parliament passed the Chinese Immigration Act...According to this law...Chinese were in essence excluded from entry. (34-35)

These racist policies had wider implications that operated to disrupt the formation of Chinese settler families. By preventing the large-scale entry of Chinese women and children, the laws

ensured a population that was mostly male, and created a cheap and exploitable labour force; they also allayed white “anxieties about the potential permanent settlement of this ‘alien’ race” (Juliana Chang 112). Canadian participation in World War II, which “took the ideological form of highlighting and defending the superiority of [Western] democracy,” engendered a re-examination of these racially-based and exclusionary immigration policies (112). The withdrawal of the Chinese Immigration (Exclusion) Act in 1947 subsequently permitted the limited entry of wives and unmarried children, and enabled a more widespread formation of Chinese Canadian families (Li 7). Chinese Canadian history has thus frequently been framed in linear terms, charting a trajectory from “bachelor communities” to “conjugal family life,” racist exclusion to multicultural inclusion, and silence to voice (7). This chapter hence provides a “palimpsestic reading” (Juliana Chang 113) of these autobiographies to consider how the intergeneration transmission of secrets and ghosts haunts the formation of Chinese Canadian families and troubles the linear logic of this trajectory. My treatment of secrets and ghosts is particularly attuned to how the restrictive conditions created by Canada’s racially-based immigration laws have produced a haunting legacy of exploited racialized labour and “paper families,” or families reunited by illegal means through the purchasing of false documents or paper identities (Erika Lee 190). As Hijin Park elucidates, one of Canada’s “main strategies” for ensuring a cheap, mobile, and “expendable labo[u]r” source was “separating Chinese men from their wives and families” (11). Moreover, Erika Lee describes how these Chinese men partly circumvented head tax laws by sponsoring the immigration of family members using fraudulent paperwork (204). While the paper identity system helped “multiple generations of Chinese” to come to Canada, however, it also required Chinese Canadian immigrants to change their names and personal information (190); that is, it produced a need for secrecy to avoid deportation. My

postcolonial gothic approach thus explores how secrecy structures the historical formation of Chinese Canadian families, stressing how it has not been an isolated event, but a more general condition of living in Canada.

2.3 Paper Shadows

Commonly celebrated as one of the country's foremost Chinese Canadian writers, Wayson Choy emerged as a spokesperson for Chinatown communities in the 1990s. He was quickly credited with "realizing that...the silence [Chinese Canadians] had kept for decades had to be broken: their history and their stories had to be told" (Lorre 80). That is, he was recognized for "breaking the silence." As crucial as this idea was in creating an awareness for marginalized experiences, however, it has also contributed to a limited framework for reading Choy's *Paper Shadows*. Placing emphasis on his perceived ability to "voice" Chinese Canadian experiences, the breaking-silence perspective has diminished attention towards what escapes transparent description and can only alluded to. Even critics like Huai-Yang Lim, who recognize multiple silences in Choy's narrative, still frame the book as a moment of arrival. For instance, Lim observes that "silences...constitute a heritage or lineage that Choy inherits," but he still interprets the book as trying to claim "a sense of belonging" (255). More recently, Cynthia Sugars has identified *Paper Shadows* as a gothic text, which potentially points to "the silenced spectres [Canada] has had to discount in order to chart its story" (*Canadian* 182). While her brief analysis initiates a discussion of how "the characters in Choy's [text] are...haunted and tormented by...ghosts" (184), my reading extends her observations to conduct a more in-depth analysis. Utilizing a postcolonial gothic framework, it draws upon Juliana Chang's concept of the palimpsest to show how allusions to secrets and ghosts complicate any straightforward reading and counter linear notions of time. I investigate how these secrets and ghosts serve to keep alive,

and pay homage to, the disruptive experiences and feelings that remain incomprehensible within dominant understandings of the Canadian nation-state and its liberal multiculturalist progress.

Reflection

For me, there is no question about whether or not autobiographical texts, like Choy's *Paper Shadows*, "retain their liberatory possibility," even if they were conceived during the "heady" or optimistic moment of the 1980s and 90s (Lai 59). As the following excerpt from my journal reveals, these texts provided an important opening for my grandmother and me to talk about her childhood in Victoria's Chinatown. Also, because they inspired her to engage with her past, she was able to tell her stories in a freer and more detailed manner than she would have been otherwise. Choy's work, specifically, was a conversation starter. That is why, I guess, I am so hesitant to relegate early autobiographical texts, such as *Paper Shadows*, to the dust-bin. I believe highlighting the haunting and unresolved aspects of these stories can generate interpretations that are still relevant today.

Excerpt from Journal

It really began in the fall of 2008, when I moved to Kelowna. That's when my grandmother started writing me letters, and I asked her to record her life stories. We had talked about doing a project like this before. But it had never happened, partly because my grandmother kept insisting her life wasn't that interesting. She didn't like the pressure of getting everything right, and would get nervous if I asked too many questions. What changed in 2008 was that we missed each other. My grandmother's hearing was failing her, and she couldn't hold a conversation over the phone. So, we started writing to one another. One of the ways we created a dialogue was to talk about the books we had read. My grandmother was particularly fond of Wayson Choy, as she had grown up with his Aunt Freda in Victoria. I think his books gave her a sense that her stories were worth telling. Also, Choy's family secrets helped her to see that she didn't need to have all the answers to speak about the past.

A postcolonial gothic reading of *Paper Shadows* highlights how Choy's recollections of his childhood in Vancouver's Chinatown evoke traces of earlier "bachelor communities." As discussed above, exclusionary laws meant that early Chinese immigrants coming to Canada "faced harsh institutional and popular racism" (Pon 142). These laws prevented many Chinese men from immigrating with their wives and children, contributing to the formation of easily exploitable and largely male communities. Partly because of the absence of Chinese settler families, Chinatowns gained the reputation of being: "lewd and debauched," full of "perverse,

drug-addicted, pedophilic, syphilitic” men who “morally and medically endanger[ed] the health of the...white, Christian nation” (Juliana Chang 113). The establishment of Chinese merchant families and the development of so-called “paper families” subsequently took on importance, signifying the potential inclusion and normative status of Chinese immigrants in the Canadian nation-state. As Juliana Chang explains, the presence of families in Chinatowns served as a reassuring indication of wider acceptance and normality, enabling Chinese Canadians to challenge their positioning as “temporary” sojourners and claim “legibility [as] modern, national subjects” (114). On the surface, Choy’s family in *Paper Shadows* appears to represent the developmental progression of Chinese Canadian communities (from bachelors to families) and nation (from racist marginalization to multicultural inclusivity). In other words, his family seems to testify to the liberal multiculturalist myth that “the racial immigrant enjoys...opportunit[ies] that allo[w] [him/her] to follow a trajectory from initial hardship to eventual fulfillment and belonging” (113). However, the apparent normativity and upward mobility of the Choy family are haunted by more intricate, unresolved experiences of exclusion, labour exploitation, and paper identities, as well as enduring feelings of loss and shame. The secrets that Choy discovers about his family can thus be seen as gesturing to larger national secrets, uncovering some of the deeper implications of a racist, discriminatory past. These family secrets call attention to the unrecorded, disturbed realities that cannot be fully known or incorporated into dominant discourses of a progressive Canadian nation-state.

At the beginning of *Paper Shadows*, Choy narrates his “official” family history in much the same way that national histories are presented. That is, he provides a succinct and linear version of his family’s background in Canada, restricting himself to those details that are acknowledged or domesticated in government papers. As he imparts, “These are the documented

facts that I have known all my life: I was born Choy Way Sun, on April 20, 1939, in Vancouver, in the province of British Columbia, to Nellie Hop Wah [Lilly Choy], age thirty-eight, and Yip Doy Choy [Toy Choy], age forty-two” (14). The idea that these “documented facts” are trustworthy, however, is immediately undercut by Choy’s admission that his parents’ names are not their “real” names, but rather “the *gai-gee meng*, the *false-paper names*...recorded in [their] immigration documents” (14, emphasis as cited). In this way, Choy suggests that his “official” family history conceals at least one “secret,” mainly that his forebears’ relied upon fraudulent paperwork to enter the country. Importantly, this secret at the level of the family gestures to a secret at the level of the nation-state: the measures that thousands of Chinese immigrants had to take to facilitate their families’ arrival under Canada’s strict head-tax and exclusion laws. Nonetheless, Choy is initially not too distressed by this reality. He has become somewhat accustomed to the idea that his parents had to suffer “*five-times-as-hard* hard times” to start a family in Canada (6, emphasis as cited). What surprises Choy, then, is not the presence, but the endurance, complexity, and depth of these “hard times.” Just when Choy believes he has come to terms with his family’s past, he receives “a phone call from a stranger [that] pushe[s him] towards a mystery” (5); it is a phone call that makes his perspective “beg[i]n to shift” (5). Specifically, his discovery that Lilly Choy is not his “real” or biological mother leads him to the realization that the past is not as settled as he once thought; rather, it has the ability to surface and disturb the present. As Choy concedes, “nothing of my family, of home” is as “solid or specific” as it appeared (280). He is provoked to confront the unrecognized and unresolved excess that has been suppressed by “official” family and national histories.

Much like the “real” names of Choy’s parents, or the identity of his biological mother, the experiences of early Chinese Canadian immigrants have been mostly covered over by

dominant narratives of progress and racial inclusivity. The consequence is that stories about these immigrants—their experiences and feelings—have remained mostly hidden, unknown and incomprehensible within the available frameworks of the Canadian nation-state. Choy's attempts to render "visible," or to "voice," these unheard stories, thus reveal the haunting and unending quality of trying to recover a forgotten and racist history. Indeed, it is meaningful that Choy locates his narration in the present and then moves back into the past, rather than starting in the past and moving forward into the present. This backwards movement, which is characteristic of a palimpsestic structure, tacitly counters the idea that the past exists as a stable and predictable entity, naturally unfolding into the present (Juliana Chang 115); instead, it suggests the past is a complex and uncertain construction, open to interpretation. When Choy describes that his "earliest memories" are organized around the concept of "first hauntings" (Choy 6), then, he intimates that his narrative is not a linear account. As he muses, he is "not worr[ie]d about family history," or "documented facts," so much as he is concerned with what seems strange or unexplained (6). My reading hence explores how his stories create openings to ponder what does not fit into "official" histories; I emphasize their palimpsestic nature, as they shift from haunting to haunting, from past to present.

Reflection

One aspect of *Paper Shadows* that really struck my grandmother was Choy's willingness to talk about his parents' fraudulent identity papers. Excerpts from her letters suggest that, through her reading of Choy's experiences, my grandmother came to realize how much she had been raised to keep secrets or not talk about certain topics, such as her own mother's reliance on a paper identity.

Letter from Grandma

Now that I think about it, maybe there was something strange about Choy's family. Like he says, they were reclusive...But then again, it wasn't unusual to keep secrets in those days. There were just some things that you never talked about—that you couldn't talk about.

My mother was, in a lot of ways, a kind of “mystery woman.” She came over on false papers and lived in fear of being found out. We thought she was paranoid, but didn’t ask questions or push her to explain... When my mother was around ninety years old, the government sent her a letter congratulating her for turning one hundred. It terrified her, as she was actually much younger than the woman listed on her identity papers. She wasted no time in burning all of her immigration documents. “Don’t worry,” she told us, “they’ll never find out.” We couldn’t believe it, and openly wondered if she had lost her mind. Of course, my mother’s actions made it almost impossible to recover any information about her. And that’s exactly what she wanted, I suppose.

2.4 A Haunted Chinatown Domesticity

Significantly, Choy’s descriptions of his childhood hauntings are indicative of what Juliana Chang terms “a Chinatown domesticity” (Juliana Chang 119), a domesticity which is complicated by the enduring conditions of Chinese bachelor communities. In particular, his portrayals of his parents, and their struggles to achieve a normative or nuclear family structure, point to the added demands of marginalization and racialized labour. In describing his first and second hauntings, for example, Choy reveals that both events occur while his father is “away...on one of his frequent alternating three- and five-week stints as a cook on a Canadian Pacific steamship liner” (Choy 8). Choy’s father, Toy Choy, is regularly absent from the family, but not because of negligence or indifference. Instead, Toy’s disappearances are the result of his occupation. Although he may wish to be a more loving provider, Toy is obliged to participate in precarious and low-wage jobs due to laws that racially segment the labour market (Li 48). As Li explains, these laws meant that “the Chinese were vulnerable to labour exploitation and wage discrimination...the Chinese were paid much less than white workers—in many instances about half their wages” (48). With little alternative, then, Toy works as a Chinese cook for a transportation company, which requires him to ship out to sea for a month or more at a time. This situation, where the father is required to travel extensively for work, points to an established labour pattern where Chinese men were often expected to be bachelors, unattached and mobile,

to stay employed (Juliana Chang 120). Choy's childhood hauntings are thus partly a response to the social and economic vulnerability caused by his father's compelled mobility. Sleeping in his mother's bed for a sense of comfort and safety, Choy is twice awakened by a "distant clanging" sound, which he interprets as a distressing sign that his mother is about to die (Choy 6). A young boy of four and then five years old, Choy pictures "a wild, hairy creature" or "a slimy three-eyed monster" dragging its chains on the ground and coming to devour his mother (6, 8). Even though Choy's apparitions can be read as simply products of his overly-active imagination, from a gothic standpoint, they can also be interpreted as metaphors for understanding his historically-specific fears and anxieties, which have implicitly been transmitted from his parents to him. In this case, Choy's nighttime terrors are symptomatic of domestic difficulties, which are particular to Chinatown and brought on by his father's frequent absences. More specifically, with a father who is always coming and going, Choy has developed a marked fear of losing his mother. Choy's first hauntings, therefore, suggest how the demands of racialized labour structure his family's Chinatown domesticity, complicating the notion that his family easily fits into understandings of racial and nation progress.

Just as the demands of racialized labour oblige Toy to live as a mobile bachelor, who must be away from his family for long and consistent periods of time, they compel Lilly to worry about her sense of propriety. As Juliana Chang contends, the frequent absence of husbands in Chinatown domestic situations meant that the wives were susceptible to wider perceptions that they were "husbandless fallen wom[e]n" and "improper national subject[s]" (122). Lilly's concerned awareness of these "gendered demands of respectability" (121) manifests in her steadfast attempts to raise her family away from "the overcrowded rooming house conditions" of Vancouver's Chinatown (Choy 18). As Choy describes, by the time he is three years old, his

mother is “desperate to escape the confines” of shared apartments, which accommodate the majority of working-class Chinese Canadian labourers (19); she resolutely “demand[s] of Father that we rent a house all to ourselves,” despite the family’s limited means (18). Importantly, Lilly’s desire to attain “her own home” is tied to a need to appear as worthy of respect according to dominant white standards of motherhood (18). Although she must continue to work at “the Ken Yen Jan Chinese sausage factory” to supplement the family income (18), she is committed to constructing a facade of white middle-class decorum. As evidenced by the “British bone-china teacups” that she meticulously displays in her dining room (24), Lilly anxiously attempts to portray an image of acculturation and normativity, showing that her standards of domesticity have been shaped by a desire to be accepted into the nation-state. However, Lilly’s inclusion in these standards of domesticity turns out to be illusionary or impossible to achieve. In searching for a house to rent, Toy and Lilly discover that the only residence they can afford is “possessed” by a *bak kwei*, or “a *white man’s ghost*, an apparition full of spiteful trickery” (31-32, emphasis as cited). This ghost, who makes “its appearance only when Father [is not] home,” materializes during the night to create a “loud knocking downstairs” (32). That is, he emerges when Lilly feels most defenceless, imitating the sounds of “wayward drunks slamming against closed doors, clever hoodlums picking flimsy locks, immigration officials showing up unannounced” (20). The ghost is thus a sign of Lilly’s continuing insecurities about being “left alone” (20); she lives in fear of “strangers appearing at [her] front door” to accost or deport her (20). When Lilly discusses her dread of the ghost, she is consequently suggesting the ignominy and angst of her domestic situation, which has been shaped by her husband’s absences and the racial segmentation of the labour market. The *bak kwei* can thus be interpreted as a powerful symbol of

how external threats—racism and exploitation—have permeated and structured the internal space of her home, and been tacitly passed on to Choy himself.

Due to Chinatown's socially and economically vulnerable position within the Canadian nation-state, Lilly adopts secrecy and suspicion as coping mechanisms to contain her anxieties and protect her son. Choy describes how his mother would carefully try to shield the domestic space from outside scrutiny. For example, portraying his mother's life edict as "One c[an] never be too cautious," Choy recounts how Lilly installs four separate locks on the front door: "one key lock; one inside chain lock; and two bolts" (20). For her, household security is paramount, and she instills in her son a strong sense of apprehension for "stranger[s]" (21). At "bedtime," Choy is encouraged to partake in the elaborate "game" of locking the front door (21); and when unexpected visitors come calling, he is instructed to go "quietly" upstairs with his mother to hide (21). Lilly's fear is palpable when she cannot "recognize [a] caller," as Choy depicts how she "would kneel and hold me close to her...the intensity of her grip [telling me to] keep as still as possible, to outwit the stranger with silence" (21). Though Choy is not entirely aware of the source of Lilly's mistrust, he absorbs her deep-seated and unresolved feelings through these experiences. Choy speculates that his mother's anxiety is the result of her status as a woman left alone in Chinatown and as a member of a "paper family" (34); yet, he cannot fully grasp or articulate the depth or intensity of her feelings. Just like the thick curtains that she uses to "cushio[n]" her household in "darkness," Lilly uses silence in hopes of creating a protective cocoon around her son (32); thus, her feelings are only implicitly communicated. Yet, while she does not express herself directly, she relies on the *bak kwei*, a figure of "the white man's ghost," to gesture to her distress (32). In this case, the "malevolent spirits" that Choy repeatedly imagines as haunting his childhood are closely related to unspoken, yet perceptible, fears of

“[i]mmigration officials,” “city health inspectors,” and white strangers with “slim notebook[s] in hand,” which have been passed on to him (21). The language of ghosts and hauntings thus provides mother and son with a vocabulary to access what otherwise could not be addressed, those fears and losses that are too terrifying to fully confront and acknowledge.

Reflection

Moments in my grandmother’s letters gesture to how her mother’s fear of deportation emerged in everyday life, especially when there was a knock on the front door. Though she suggests that her mother’s fear was irrational, she also admits that she has inherited this wariness of strangers. To me, the admission gestures to the transmission of unarticulated feelings across generations. It is the kind of transmission that cannot be highlighted in logical or fact-based narratives, but that can be emphasized in ghostly stories of secrets and hauntings.

Letter from Grandma

My mother was very paranoid, and we weren’t supposed to open the door without checking to see who it was first. Sometimes she would tell us to hide so that the person at the door would think there was no one home. I never asked her what she was afraid of; I just did as I was told. It became a habit for me, and to this day I don’t like answering my door.

Noting how the demands and pressures of racialized labour infiltrate Choy’s family and disrupt the workings of his childhood home, my postcolonial gothic reading contrasts a dominant framework for approaching autobiographies, which concentrates on “evidence” and dismisses “superstitious nonsense” (Choy 32). By drawing inspiration from the mother’s advice to her son that, when he focuses on “[e]veryday facts [and e]veryday reality,” he “miss[es] the point” (33), my reading hence highlights the excess—what Juliana Chang identifies as the fears, anxieties, and degradations that exceed “legitimacy, propriety,” and national discourses of progress (117). To further illuminate the insights yielded by such an approach, I call attention to a moment in which Choy compares so-called “reasonable interpretations” of his parents’ relationship with his own ghostly explanations (Choy 30). According to “reasonable interpretations,” his father and

mother have arguments because of Toy's "bad temper," and Lilly's habit of "playing mah-jong [late at] night" (30). Though these interpretations are not necessarily wrong, Choy suggests that "there [is] a more significant cause" behind his parent's disagreements, "one that r[uns] deeper than mundane facts" (30). In particular, he indicates that the *bak kwei* plays a major role in "family disturbances" by provoking "father to turn into a demon" (31). Describing a situation when Toy returns early from work to discover Lilly out gambling, Choy reveals his father's fury. When he is angry, Toy quickly becomes unrecognizable, changing from a mild-mannered man into a "howl[ing]," "dark figure [of the] night" (39). Attempting to understand this transformation, Choy surmises that Toy has been "tricked" or "driven...mad" by the white man's ghost (39). While this version of events may seem fanciful, I insist that it points to contributing factors. As Choy later explains, Toy's "labours on the CPR ships," involving "twelve- to fourteen-hour shifts, cramped working conditions, and the superior attitudes of his white supervisors," have instilled in him "a bursting rage" (243). Likewise, Lilly's late-night gambling habit has developed in response to her anxiety over Toy's long absences (36). Although the *bak kwei* is not an evidence-based construct, then, it provides a vehicle for uncovering the hardship and suffering, as well as the feelings of loss and shame, which have been created by racism and transmitted to Choy. In effect, the ghostly figure captures the excess of his childhood, pointing to the ways that larger historical forces shape the "calamitous" and "wall-shaking" tensions periodically erupting within his parents' domestic situation and haunting his childhood (31).

Reflection

Though my grandmother insists that her parents got along and did not have open confrontations, she also admits that there were tensions in the household created by her father's gambling habit. Whereas Choy's father burst into a rage, it seems her father dealt with his frustrations through gambling. She also gestures to an overwhelming sense of shame that encouraged the family never to discuss their problems with each other. These stories make me ponder: How did economic and political pressures on early Chinese

immigrants lead to hidden domestic conflicts? How did the effects of these conflicts linger, and did they shape subsequent generations?

Letter from Grandma

My parents never fought—I never saw them fighting, even when my father’s gambling habit was bad. I’m sure my mother was angry with him, but she didn’t let us children know about it. She didn’t talk to us that way. We didn’t even talk to each other that way. My father’s gambling was one of those things—if we saw it, we pretended we didn’t, and just hoped it would go away.

2.5 Lost China People

My postcolonial gothic analysis of *Paper Shadows* considers how ghosts provide not only a depiction of his family’s domestic situation, but also a wider view of the Chinatown; that is, it explores how hauntings operate at the level of families, but also at the level of communities. Importantly, Choy explains that his childhood is populated by “two categories of ghosts”: the *bak kwei*, the “spiteful” spirits of white men who are discussed above; and the “harmless, familiar ghosts” of Chinese “bachelors,” the “[l]ost China people” who are examined in this section (Choy 31). On one hand, I contend that the white men’s ghosts portray the demands of racialized labour and threats of deportation that invade the domestic space and structure everyday life in Chinatown. Belonging to the dominant order, these ghosts are associated with legitimacy, “official” documents, and the nation-state. On the other hand, I assert that the “lost China people” represent the aging and unwanted old-timers of Chinatown. Forced to inhabit at the margins of society, these “isolated” people are linked to illegitimacy, illegibility, and invisibility (74). Choy’s categories of ghosts thus point to Canada’s exclusionary policies and their consequences for early generations of Chinese Canadians. Though his parents have achieved the semblance of a “normal” family, the majority of Chinatown residents have not been able to circumvent Canada’s exclusionary immigration laws. These residents are obliged to live

out their lives as “sojourners,” or temporary alien residents, without much hope of a future in Canada. As Choy describes, many of his father’s generation had “dreamed of one day sending for their wives and children” and reuniting “in Gold Mountain” (75); yet, these dreams are dashed by the head tax and exclusion era, as well as the exploitative conditions of racialized labour. These immigrants are consequently relegated to a circumscribed existence, what Juliana Chang calls “a social death” or “living death,” where they continue to perform jobs but are not fully “alive” (Juliana Chang 119). To be sure, Choy observes how the “bachelor men” of Chinatown continue to work and “send their family remittances,” only to suffer lonely deaths “of old-age, of despair, of ill-health” (Choy 74-75). Conventionally unrecognized in national versions of history, these “bachelors” are thus haunting presences. As Juliana Chang describes these early immigrants have been “cast aside” in narratives “of progress and development [and] rendered surplus after the extraction...of their labo[u]r” (119). Their worn-out bodies, and later their decomposing bones, offer traces of their exploited lives.

Choy’s use of the term “uncles” to refer to the aging members of Chinatown’s bachelor society suggests an effort to dispel stereotypes that these men are deviant and debauched, stereotypes that helped justify racially-based immigration and labour laws. Although he concedes that some “bachelor men” gamble and drink, he posits that these men are pushed to such activities due to their being “separated [for] five, ten, twenty years from their wives and children” (Choy 75-76). He maintains that the “bachelors” are “family men,” who seek to become “extensions of families already established in Chinatown” (76). That is, they find ways to escape their “cell-like tenement rooms,” and replenish their “desperately missed” family lives, by developing paternal relationships with the children in Chinatown (76). In praising these men for “help[ing] to watch over [him],” even as they “faithfully sent money” back to their own

children in China (89), Choy emphasizes that the “bachelors” are not “sojourners by choice” (75); he also gestures to how the nation-state, in estranging “lost China people” from their families and using their bodies as expendable labour, has driven some to depression and suicide. Indeed, he comments on how a percentage of “bachelor men” cannot “h[o]ld back the flood tides of their frustration and anger,” and eventually succumb to dark thoughts (89). Most poignantly, Choy relates the tragic passing of a neighbourhood figure, “*Lao Tong, Old Candy*” (161, emphasis as cited). A “limping veteran of the shingle mills,” Old Candy gives out penny candies to the local children (161). Nonetheless, “the old man with the cane...end[s] his own life” (162). Having become too physically disabled to “leave his tiny room,” he “decide[s] to lay down on the floor and open the gas jets of his small kitchen oven” (162). The story of this unfortunate man is an example of how the text remains haunted by traces of earlier bachelor communities. Choy’s acknowledgement of “lost China people,” like Old Candy, disrupts the notion that his family’s formation represents an uncomplicated movement towards national belonging. Rather, the spirits of the “bachelors” linger in his recollections, pointing out what is covered over but not entirely expunged by national versions of history.

Reflection

My grandmother expressed a sense of grief for the men who died alone in Chinatown. In conceding how most of these men were illiterate and reliant on others to record their thoughts and feelings, she acknowledges the inadequacy of written documents and points to a feeling of being haunted by what can never be fully known or recovered.

Letter from Grandma

A lot of men in Chinatown had wives and children in China, and were always sending money back home. Because many couldn’t read or write, they relied on people like my father to write letters for them. When they got old and were close to dying, they asked my father to contact their families and let them know. The contents of these letters must have been sad. I can’t imagine what my father would have written.

Although Choy continually returns to the past and tries to recover the “older, long-ago faces” from his youth (Choy 14), it is significant to recognize how his efforts are incomplete and marked by uncertainty and loss. He cannot fully access the stories of his “uncles” and other Chinatown acquaintances (14); to a large extent, the substance of their experiences remains unclear, “weighted with a sense of mystery and meaning” (14). Indeed, Choy concedes his inability to act as a spokesperson for older generations, admitting that his “elders” often see him as a “*mo-no*,” a “mindless” person who is unaware of the difficulties surrounding him (78). Ascribed to “local-born” Chinese Canadians, the term *mo-no* is complex, suggesting that those “raised in Gold Mountain” are both “brainless” and privileged (78). On the surface, it operates as an insult, criticizing younger generations for their apparent lack of concern for their parents’ struggles; yet, on a deeper level, it is a compliment, expressing the hope that children are not burdened by the difficult, racialized experiences of their forebears. The condition of being a *mo-no* is thus an indication that Chinatown parents have withheld information, or maintained secrets, in an attempt to shelter their offspring from unpleasant realities; nonetheless, this sheltering does not mean that feelings of loss and shame are not implicitly transmitted. Choy recalls, for example, being asked to leave the room whenever “adult” or upsetting topics are being discussed (90). Likewise, he recollects his mother trying to “deceive” him at operas, telling him that the performances are happy when they are in fact sad, so that she can “weep in peace” (55). These childhood incidents show that Choy has developed what Juliana Chang terms “a direct empathy” for the “trauma” suffered by previous generations (Juliana Chang 112). In other words, Choy senses his parents’ losses, even if these losses remain mostly unknown to him. The implicit nature of this transmission means that Choy is somewhat “brainless,” as the “barrier” of “silence” that surrounds him creates limits to his insight and understanding (Choy 56). Whenever

he expresses a desire to know more about his parents, for instance, he is scolded and reminded of how hard they have worked for him (98). This dynamic shows how Choy cannot “break the silence” and give “voice” to the stories of his elders; he can only depend on intuitive perceptions that “*something* [i]s amiss”—something remains unaccounted for—even though he cannot entirely grasp it (55, emphasis as cited).

Much like Choy cannot recuperate the experiences of the “lost China people,” he cannot fill in the gaps of his family history—an inability that ultimately troubles the progressive narrative of “silence to voice.” For example, throughout his autobiographical endeavours, Choy highlights the uselessness of “official” documents in answering questions about his birth, adoption, and ancestry. Searching the British Columbia archives, he is unable locate the immigration records or head-tax papers for Toy’s arrival in 1918. Because there is no standard romanization for Chinese names, Toy’s name could be listed in any number of ways (Choy 290). Also, Toy might have used a “*maaih-ji mengh*” or “bought-paper name” to enter the country (289, emphasis as cited). Choy is likewise unable to find materials on Lilly, as she employed “the birth document of a married woman born in [New Westminster]...to book [her] passage to Canada” (297). Choy’s frustration with government records means that he has to depend on Chinatown elders to sort through the past, but these elders frequently remain reluctant to talk. The inadequacy of verified information and the hesitancy of “old Chinatown families” to share their “secrets” (289) points to how the past remains unknown and open to interpretation; his investigations are ongoing and unending. He must continually (re)visit the past to grieve what has been left behind by dominant versions of national history. In some of his ruminations, Choy intimates that the most palpable remains of the past are the bones of “lost China people,” which are “packed...or triple-buried...in poorly drained land reserved ‘For Chinese Only’” (75). He

thus presents bones as haunting reminders of early Chinese Canadians—reminders which Juliana Chang stresses speak to “the nationally encrypted secret of racialized labo[u]r exploitation” (128). In paying homage to these Chinatown “spirits,” Choy emphasizes the “signs” that the past is not as resolved as he had once believed (Choy 281). Rather, he gains an appreciation for how racist policies have produced a legacy infused with “sadness” and a sense of incompleteness (12). A postcolonial gothic approach hence underscores the text’s palimpsestic structure, which tacitly challenges the idea that Chinese Canadian family formation signifies a transition into national belonging. It calls attention to how secrets and ghosts allude to the excess concealed by narratives of progress, creating a dialogue for what might otherwise stay buried or concealed.

2.6 Stereotypes of Oriental Mystery and Inscrutability

While I have read Choy’s allusions to secrets, ghosts, and hauntings from a postcolonial gothic perspective to examine the unresolved and difficult to express aspects of his childhood, other critics have tended to situate his text more typically within the autobiographical tradition. As Lai explains, this tendency places an expectation on “Chinese Canadian writers to explain themselves to the white mainstream” (58), creating a “problem of reception” in which “secrets” are interpreted in ways that reinforce stereotypes of “Chinese inscrutability” (58-59). Indeed, she emphasizes how “racist expectations about Chineseness” make it difficult for Chinese Canadians to share “secrets” without facing accusations of trading self-Orientalizing images “for national belonging” (58). Given that “Chinatown secrets” are often perceived in ways that play into Orientalist fears and fantasies, I contend that it is important to unravel the complexities involved with this trope. This section of my chapter hence shows how Choy’s allusions to secrets and ghosts can be seen as an attempt to rewrite racist scripts of Chinese difference. Orientalist views of so-called Chineseness have a history in Canada, as is evidenced by the “popular” 1935 film,

Secrets of Chinatown (Gittings 55). This film, which is a local variation of the “American Fu Manchu films,” casts the residents of Vancouver’s Chinatown as mysterious figures of the Orient (55-56). By examining Choy’s text in relation to this film, I highlight how his portrayal of Chinatown involves a transposition and reversal of Orientalist conventions.

Significantly, Choy’s depiction of the spiteful spirit of a white man, the *bak kwei*, registers a paradox whereby the Canadian nation-state creates a need for secrecy through its institutionalized racism and then, in turn, exoticizes Chinese Canadians as inscrutable and untrustworthy. More specifically, when he portrays the *bak kwei*, as infiltrating and threatening the domestic spaces of the Chinese Canadian community, he both mirrors and counters narratives such as *Secrets of Chinatown*, in which the white protagonist travels to “the mysterious centre” of Chinatown “to ascertain a knowledge of the Chinese” (Gittings 55). On one hand, Choy seems to draw inspiration from the idea that “the Chinese hold...secrets,” as he initially describes these “secrets” as conundrums needing to be solved through investigation (55). In this way, Choy appears somewhat similar to the white detective in *Secrets of Chinatown*, who embodies the promise to decipher or “make sense” of “Vancouver’s old Chinatown” (Choy 3). On the other hand, Choy’s creation of the *bak kwei*, a gothic-inspired monster, reverses the invasion narrative that forms the plotline of *Secrets of Chinatown*—instead of a “good” Canada being threatened by an “evil” Oriental presence, it is a Chinatown being disturbed by a hostile white authority. The “secrets” in Choy’s text are thus necessitated by the nation’s racist and exclusionary policies. By suggesting that the nation-state, and not Chinatown, is the source of horror and terror, Choy’s descriptions of the *bak kwei* emerge as an effort to dispel the notion that Chinese Canadians are inherently mysterious and deceitful.

The risk involved with rewriting racist narratives like *Secrets of Chinatown*, however, is in the potential for misrecognition. More specifically, Choy's effort to subvert these narratives through allusions to secrets and ghosts is often not considered. As Lai points out, when critics access Choy's text as an "authentic voice," his "secrets of Chinatown" are misguidedly accorded "the legitimizing power" to affirm Orientalist ideas about Chinese difference (Lai 59). Thus, I maintain that my reading is useful in considering how secrets and ghosts are vehicles for evoking traces of earlier bachelor societies; they too gesture to experiences that go beyond liberal multicultural narratives of progress and belonging. Moreover, unlike the white detective in *Secrets of Chinatown*, Choy ultimately cannot decode "Chinatown's secrets"—he cannot convert his observations into readily consumable lessons about "these Chinese" (Newmeyer, *Secrets*). Choy signals that an exhaustive investigation of the past is impossible. As he elucidates, ghosts—those "intricate shadows and silences between [recorded] facts" (Choy 338)—can never be "subdued," only "wrestled with" (318). When appreciated from a gothic postcolonial perspective, Choy's family secrets and ghostly hauntings thus frame the past as an agitating force that can never be fully exorcised or dealt with.

2.7 The Year of Finding Memory

Although she has not received the same amount of critical attention as Choy, Fong Bates has been credited with following "[i]n the tradition of *Paper Shadows*" (Penguin). She has also been similarly interpreted as "giv[ing] voice to the stories of her parents and the history of that generation of immigrants" (Luo 131). Just as with *Paper Shadows*, however, I argue that *The Year of Finding Memory* is more complex and open-ended than this interpretation allows. Indeed, my postcolonial gothic perspective considers that, rather than signifying a straightforward shift from silence to voice, Fong Bates' text is structured palimpsestically, in a

chronology that moves back and forth in time to examine what is concealed beneath her family's "official" history. I contend that this palimpsestic structure creates an unsettling effect that resists narrative closure; as Juliana Chang contends, "the notion of text as palimpsest" highlights "how time is layered such that the past is not erased but remains in the present" (111). Moreover, Fong Bates' allusions to secrets, ghosts, and hauntings can be seen as extending Choy's treatment of the unresolved excess, which has been left out of national narratives of belonging. This section of my chapter hence uses a postcolonial gothic framework to examine Fong Bates' text, highlighting how the intergenerational transmission of loss, shame, and anger structures her family's formation and points to a disturbed domesticity.

Whereas I suggest *Paper Shadows* portrays a Chinatown domesticity complicated by Canada's racist and exclusionary policies, I assert *The Year of Finding Memory* depicts a more contemporary domesticity that is troubled even after these policies have supposedly been lifted. As I explained before, Canadian participation in World War II forced a re-evaluation of immigration policies targeting Chinese immigrants. The Canadian government's decision to repeal the Chinese Immigration Act in 1947 was subsequently framed as a turning point, in which Chinese migration was no longer impeded and Chinese Canadian families were able to reunite (Li 7). In her text, however, Fong Bates offers a potential critique of this framing, suggesting how Canada continued to control the arrival of Chinese immigrants and disturb family formation. Indeed, even though Fong Bates' father, Fong Wah Yent, had worked in Canada for "more than forty years," he is not permitted to reunify his family (Fong Bates 22). Like other Chinese "bachelors" who paid the head tax, he is barred from bringing his older children to Canada, as immigration laws only allow him to sponsor his wife and "single children under the age of twenty-one" (23). This legislation thus serves to divide the Fong family,

“leaving us to live the rest of our lives on opposite sides of the world” (24). In describing her family’s division, Fong Bates gestures to how this contemporary situation bears traces of earlier “bachelor” communities, in which men were forced to separate from their families. Because she intimates how this past formation is still alive and informing the present, I argue that her stories create openings to question the notion that Canada has developed into a more progressive and racially-inclusive nation.

Significantly, a postcolonial gothic appreciation of Fong Bates’ text illuminates how the title provides an indication of the narrative’s palimpsestic structure and alternative temporality. More specifically, in foregrounding the effort needed to “find memory,” the title subtly signals how “remembering,” in the context of white settler nationalism, is not a simple task. Juliana Chang explains, for example, how nation facilitates a form of “remembering” that is simultaneously an activity of forgetting; “the proper subject of the nation” is required to disavow memories that contradict, and thus undermine, dominant discourses of the nation’s liberal multiculturalist progress (112). On the other hand, for the improper subject, remembering entails uncovering “what has been encrypted by the nation” (112). Fong Bates’ investment in this “improper” form of remembering is signaled in moments where she ponders the extent to which Canada has had a “hold on” her (Fong Bates 148). Continually reflecting on her childhood as “a Chinese girl living in a white world” (148), Fong Bates expresses regret about how much she previously distanced herself from her parents and their “past lives” in China (81). She surmises that she has lost an important sense of connection with her family due to her drive to prove herself worthy of “acceptance” in a white dominant society (148). Fong Bates thus gestures to unsettling feelings of loss and shame, which cannot be incorporated into discourses of national belonging. In refusing to forget or repress these feelings, she suggests an unfitting attachment to

the past, as well as what backward-gazing temporality that keeps returning to the excess created by national versions of history.

Reflection

In her letters, my grandmother frequently seems to regret not being able to read Chinese, and thus not being able to interpret documents left behind by her father. As a young person, I think my grandmother was future-oriented, always thinking about getting by or starting a new life; whereas, as she got older, she appeared to want to recover whatever information she could about her father and mother. Her later attempts to learn about her parents inspires me to ask: How can we access the past when it is defined by secrets, and when we have lost the framework for interpreting it? Are there times with the demands of interpretation are just too great?

Letter from Grandma

My father's family history is contained in a book of genealogical records, which traces his lineage back hundreds, maybe even thousands, of years. We still have a copy of this book, somewhere. But we can't read it because it's in Chinese. If we found it, maybe you could hire a translator and tell us what it means?

At the beginning of her narrative, Fong Bates portrays an event that signals her desire to explore what has been left out of "official" national and family histories. More specifically, she depicts the unsettling experience of finding a cardboard box containing all of her father's "old documents," head tax and immunization records (Fong Bates 3). Even though these "stale papers" are stored under "a layer of dust," she notes how they are "in pristine condition, considering that [they have] crossed the Pacific Ocean five times" (5). Observing how her father must have taken "exceptional care" of the papers, she wonders why her father kept them in "a small cardboard box tucked far beneath his bed" (3). By describing the cardboard box as a kind tomb or coffin, which has been "sealed off for a long time from anything living" (3), Fong Bates alludes to a feeling of being haunted; her hands begin to "trembl[e]" and she suddenly wishes to "find a way into the past" (6). The "stagnant smell" that is released when she opens "the lid" of the box further suggests the unleashing of previously unrecognized and upsetting aspects of the

past (3). Like the phone call that provokes Choy to re-evaluate his childhood, the cardboard box pushes Fong Bates to inspect her parents' neglected experiences. For example, "a small black-and-white portrait" of her father as a young man compels her to question why he committed suicide (5). She asks: "How did this youth become the old man my mother found hanging from a rope in the basement of their house?" (5). Although her father's suicide is formerly a subject that "no one in [her] family dared to voice" (14), she is spurred to acknowledge the "tangle" of emotions—"shame, anger, guilt, and grief"—that this event entails (91). Importantly, the story of his suicide has been buried partly because it does not fit into national discourses of liberal multicultural progress and development. As Fong Bates acknowledges, the way her father died has "remained [her family's] secret shame" (39). My reading thus demonstrates how this "secret shame" is connected to a larger, national shame: the racist and exploitative treatment of early Chinese immigrants. Showing how Fong Bates cannot "escape the fact" that her parents' experiences in Canada had been decidedly "unhapp[y]," I emphasize how her recollections cannot be incorporated into the immigrant myth that their "lives had been filled with challenges but were ultimately well lived" (13). Due to exclusionary policies that divided the family, I contend that the Fongs are never able to achieve a sense of fulfilment or belonging; instead they are saddened by memories of their estranged family members in China, as well as "unending ...loneliness" and loss (21). By recognizing these unresolved feelings and experiences, I therefore explore the ways that Fong Bates offers insights into the persistent consequences of racism and labour exploitation.

My reading of Fong Bates' text calls attention to how her father's suicide emerges as an insistent and haunting event, which she repeatedly returns to and tries to narrate. After describing the suicide at the onset of her narrative, for example, Fong Bates begins juxtaposing stories from

the past with events taking place in the present. Effectively organizing her text in a palimpsestic chronology, she cuts back and forth between her parents' experiences in Canada and her own explorations in China, creating a movement that is suggestive of her efforts to comprehend the reasons behind her father's tragic end. The reasons she uncovers, however, are not simple or concrete; similar to other "palimpsestically" organized texts, Fong Bates' narrative indicates a "diffuse unfolding of hardship, sorrow, and endurance" (Juliana Chang 114). Fong Bates thus uses a palimpsestic structure to open a dialogue between past and present, and create multiple points of connection. This non-linear structure circumvents a progressive, cause-and-effect trajectory, and instead explores the multiple pressures on her father. In trying to grasp her father's state of mind, for instance, Fong Bates shares a memory of an abusive white customer, who had misplaced his laundry ticket, hurling derogatory names at him: "the man leaned against the counter and boomed, 'I know. No tickee, no laundree. You find, Charlie. You find'" (Fong Bates 18). What Fong Bates finds most telling about this incident is the way that her father "never protested," but "nodded his head up and down, a stiff smile plastered on his face" (18). Her depiction of this disturbing incident, and others like it, serve to illustrate how her father had learned to repress his feelings and navigate racist social pressures with "a sense of resignation" (20). Significantly, because he never openly expressed his emotions, Fong Bates admits that she grew up believing that he was too "difficult to understand" (4). Nonetheless, he has still transmitted the trauma of his losses to her; as she describes, "his death still haunts [her] like a dark shadow" (286). She has implicitly inherited what he has "left behind" (91)—perceptible, yet unspoken, feelings of loss, sorrow and shame, which disrupt the interpretation that her family's formation signifies national, liberal multiculturalist progress.

2.8 A Divided Domesticity

Showing how the conditions of earlier “bachelor” communities continue to inform a contemporary situation, my postcolonial gothic examination highlights how Fong Bates’ childhood memories point to an unfulfilled domesticity, even after the 1947 repeal of the Chinese Immigration (Exclusion) Act. As I stress, this unfulfilled domesticity works to belie national versions of history, which frequently refer to Chinese Canadian family formation as evidence of liberal multicultural progress and racial inclusivity. It is significant to recognize, for example, how Fong Bates’ stories often focus on her parents’ unhappy existences in Canada. Estranged from their older children, the father and mother are effectively rendered vulnerable to continuing labour exploitation, as they work harder and harder to send remittances to their family in China. Fong Bates repeatedly illustrates the “long hours of relentless, monotonous work” that her father and mother have to perform day after day at the laundry (Fong Bates 59). Her descriptions of their labour bear a resemblance to those of the “lost China people” in Choy’s text: the father and mother are forced to work “hard” for very “little” (59) in order to send a portion of their “paltry earnings” to China (110). Fong Bates’ portrayals of her parents thus gesture to the ways that post-WWII sponsorship laws perpetuated exclusionary policies, maintaining family separation and, as Juliana Chang points out, producing a racialized labour force willing to “fill otherwise undesired low-wage jobs of the national economy” (124). Indeed, Fong Bates describes her parents as becoming enmeshed in an “endless cycle” of work (Fong Bates 20) and discovering “too late” (60) that Canada’s liberal multicultural discourses cover over an exploitative system that uses and discards them as cheap, disposable labour. It is telling, then, that as a child, she imagines her parents’ washing machine as “a monster,” a “strange mechanical creature” that could “com[e] alive and swallo[w] me into its belly” (56). As a gothic figure

representing her fears and anxieties, the washing machine intimates a sense that “work” has consumed her parents, diminishing them to “ghosts,” “shadows of their former selves” and not “fully fleshed human beings” (259-260). Moments like this underscore Fong Bates’ realization that her parents live out their lives in “a land that was never home” and that exploits them for their labour (31). These moments also suggest Fong Bates’ sadness on behalf of her parents—a sadness that she cannot fully grieve because it cannot be incorporated into celebratory liberal multicultural narratives about the nation.

Reflection

Once my grandmother expressed an interest in travelling to China to try to reconnect with the family that still lives in the home village. However, she quickly dismissed the thought as crazy. It seemed she had trained herself to think only of her relatives in Canada as family. Yet, sometimes she appeared to grasp how restrictive this idea of family was, and how much she had given up in order to feel “Canadian.”

Letter from Grandma

We have a lot of family in China, but we’ve long since lost touch with them...Our connection was my grandfather, Lee Woy. But he died in the 1930s when I was a little girl. That’s also when my father lost everything due to the Depression. So everything happened at once, just like that! When I think about it, I realize that we’ve lost so much. My grandfather had a large family: three wives and thirteen children. With his first wife, he had three sons. The first son, we called “Dai Bak” or “big uncle”; he inherited the estate in China. My father was the second son, and inherited the estate in Canada (though he didn’t keep it long). The third son, “Sa-im Soak,” immigrated to the United States and started a family there. It’s strange to think about, but we’re just one branch of a very large family.

When Fong Bates travels back to China to learn more about her parents, she recognizes how limited and incomplete her memories are. Though she has implicitly absorbed her parents’ unspoken losses, she cannot bring them to “voice.” Because she was only three years old when she immigrated to Canada, Fong Bates “remember[s] almost nothing” of her parents’ lives in China (Fong Bates 25); she only recalls their experiences of working at the laundry, where they were “worn out from all th[e] years of hard work,” and “eaten away by despair and humiliation”

(286). Thus, she has come to think of her parents as “people without status,” whose ostensible “helplessness” made her feel a sense of “embarrassment” (74). Yet, during her visit to China, Fong Bates starts to question the validity of her memories. After interacting with her older siblings, for example, she learns that her parents are “almost [regarded] as mythic figures” in their recollections (259). Her father is known as “a well-respected Gold Mountain guest with a reputation as a man of learning” (78-9), while her mother is admired as a “popular” teacher who gave people valuable advice (90). Both parents are cherished for sending “money at regular intervals” and ensuring family members had enough “to eat and live” (136). In hearing these stories, Fong Bates is confronted with “[a]nother side” of her parents that she is not familiar with (136). Most surprising for her, however, is her siblings’ account of her parents’ marriage. Unlike her, they have “happy memories,” seeing the father and mother as “soul mates [who] fell in love” (92, 80). This account contradicts Fong Bates’ impression that her parents’ “marriage had nothing to do with love and everything to do with survival” (80). She is thus compelled to ask what could have happened to transform her parents’ “love into contempt” (287). Although she surmises that the answer to this “sad...questio[n]” is ultimately “inaccessible” (287, 284), her juxtaposition of her memories with her siblings’ stories points to how racist and exploitative conditions in Canada may have “poison[ed]” the inner workings of the parents’ marriage (287). A postcolonial gothic appreciation of Fong Bates’ text hence calls attention to her family’s divided domesticity not as a separate sphere unaffected by larger pressures, but rather as a space shaped and informed by the nation-state. Moreover, this appreciation finds openings within her stories to challenge the idea that Chinese Canadian family formation affirms a temporality of liberal multicultural progress by showing how this formation bears disturbing traces of the nation’s racist and exploitative policies.

2.9 Final Thoughts

While the breaking-silence perspective, which grew out of the anti-racist movements of the 1980s and 90s, was probably “a necessary step in the liberation of marginalized peoples” (Lai 59), it has inadvertently played into “myths of arrival,” which are “easily coopted” by national discourses of liberal multicultural progress and belonging (7). As Lai points out, the developmental “silence to voice” narrative can unfortunately be “put into service of...white supremacist hegemony” (59) by “driving deeper aspects of marginalized [experience] that do not fit into” these national discourses (37). In light of these limitations, a new politics is required to recognize that, while some “[i]mportant silences can be broken...others can also be more deeply encrypted” (37). This chapter has consequently sought to examine Choy’s *Paper Shadows* and Fong Bates’ *The Year of Finding Memory* from a postcolonial gothic perspective. Aiming to highlight what remains inaccessible and unresolved in both texts, it has argued that Choy and Fong Bates allusions to secrets, ghosts, and hauntings create an awareness of how the past lingers and continues to shape the present. Significantly, this reading helps to illuminate how these texts are structured “palimpsestically,” in a manner that maneuvers back and forth in time, and helps to counter progressive “notions of subjectivity and history, as...formulated by the nation-state” (Juliana Chang 111). A postcolonial gothic framework, therefore, provides opportunities for reconsidering the task of “how to remember” by calling attention to the lasting legacies created by the nation’s racist, exploitative, and exclusionary foundations. Such a framework is especially useful as critics within Asian Canadian Studies begin to shift their focus “to attend to both the articulable and the inarticulable that roil beneath” autobiographical expressions (Lai 61).

Chapter 3: Gold Mountain Heroes: White Settler Nation-Building Myths and the Remasculinization of the Chinese Canadian Male Body

3.1 Background

The year 1988 signaled a politicization or change in consciousness for Asian Canadians, as many became increasingly involved in community-based, anti-racist activism and began to generate “an organic energy” that would “ope[n] up possibilities for ethical practices, human relations, ‘self-fashioning,’ art, and writing” (Lai ix, x). The year marked “the growing acceptance of post-structural theory in Canadian universities, the passing of the Multiculturalism Act...and the Japanese Canadian achievement of apology from the Canadian government for wartime internment” (1). It was “an extraordinary moment in Canadian cultural politics” (ix), which precipitated a re-imagining of “Asian Canadian identity” and a coordinated effort to claim national belonging as full citizens and “pioneers” (Chao 55). As part of this effort, some Chinese Canadian activists started to see the official symbolic history of Canada as a tool for agency, rather than an instrument that necessarily creates images of Chinese men “as small, effeminate and weak in relation to the bodies and masculinities of white men” (Millington, Vertinsky, Boyle, and Wilson 198). Although this symbolic history had been used to racialize Chinese men by exploiting their labour and segregating their communities away from whites (Pon 142), Chinese Canadian activists discovered that this same history could be manipulated to re-masculinize early Chinese immigrants and produce “heroic images” of their “contributions...to the development of the West Coast” (Chao 53). Such a remasculinization was deemed as meaningful to combat the stereotype of the “yellow peril,” which “vilified, feminized, and pathologized” these immigrants as threatening and deviant (Pon 141). As this chapter demonstrates, since the late 1980s, Chinese Canadian literature has, in many ways, taken up the task of dismantling the “yellow peril” stereotype through the re-working of white settler nation-

building myths, which had previously subordinated and excluded Chinese Canadians. Yet, while this literature has sought to reinvent these myths, it has also tended to reinforce its most salient features, which are decidedly nationalist and masculine.

Chinese Canadian writers like Paul Yee, Ivy Huffman, and Julia Kwong, who emerge shortly after 1988, have tried to incorporate the experiences of early Chinese immigrants into the mythology of the Western Frontier. As Lien Chao asserts, these writers have been misunderstood as producing “children’s literature” when, in reality, the writers are participating in “the genres of legend and myth” (64). Her arguments emphasize how Yee, Huffman, and Kwong are “myth-makers” who have been “trivialize[d]” and overlooked by “mainstream critic[s]” (64). Despite Chao’s interventions, however, critical attention to Yee, Huffman, and Kwong has been wanting. Her approach to appreciating the writers, which highlights “the historical nature of [their] tales,” remains the influential framework (53). Yet, while this framework acknowledges “the power of legend and myth” (64), it also largely neglects their potential shortcomings. In particular, since these texts emphasize the activities of “manly” men, such as the Chinese labourers who built the Canadian Pacific Railway and the “bachelors” of Chinatown, they tend to discuss Chinese Canadian history in ways that conform to white, masculine, and heterosexual norms. More specifically, in mobilizing the idea that the Chinese Canadian male body can represent a larger social and cultural community, these writers mark the male body as a significant site for claiming Canadianness. As Daniel Coleman explains, the metaphor of the male body as symbolic for national values has long-standing roots in Canadian literature; it is a figure that acts as “a central representation of [acceptable] civil ideals...[including] practical education, independent initiative and self-discipline” (130). In effect, by adapting this symbolic history, Chinese Canadian writers attempt to stake a claim alongside the norm of white manliness through a re-masculinized image

of the Chinese Canadian male body. The first half of this chapter thus examines Yee's *Tales from Gold Mountain: Stories of the Chinese in the New World* (1989) and Huffman and Kwong's *The Dream of Gold Mountain* (1991) to show how these writers engage with white settler nation-building myths to destabilize the "yellow peril" stereotype and proclaim a sense of Chinese Canadian identity. It explores how presenting Chinese Canadian men as reconceptualised versions of Western Frontier heroes is a powerful, yet problematic, anti-racist strategy. While the strategy helps to tell a history that is otherwise marginalized and degraded in the dominant mythology, it also re-enacts what Himani Bannerji terms "politically exclusionary, debilitating and epistemologically occlusive" processes that diminish the experiences of women, gay men, and Indigenous peoples (*Dark Side* 39). Most concerning, it repeats the myth of *terra nullius*, perpetuating the notion that "Canada was once a wilderness—wild, uncultivated, and largely empty—until [male settlers] arrived and carved out a society" (Coleman 28).

As transnational and Indigenous feminist scholars have pointed out, there is a need for Asian Canadian writers and activists to recognize Indigenous presence and integrate "an understanding of Canada as a colonialist state into their frameworks" (Lawrence and Dua 123). These discussions demonstrate that "[o]ppositionality to whiteness"—while a seemingly productive response to Canada's institutional racism and neglect—is not a sufficient stance to "unpac[k] the specific problematics of racialized subjects who have inherited the violence of colonization" (Wong 158). Indeed, such a stance still directs energy to a dominant, masculinist construction of Canada; it positions "normalized whiteness as the reference point through which" to articulate marginalized identities (158). The liberal multiculturalist structure of Canadian antiracism thus conceals Canada's colonialist history of genocidal policies and land-theft, and denies the contemporary situation and struggles of Indigenous peoples (Lawrence and Dua 125).

The challenge for Asian Canadians is to create an anti-colonial perspective that recognizes “the dynamic interaction between people of colour, Indigeneity, and colonialism” (133), and that avoids “settler moves towards innocence” (Tuck and Yang 1). In other words, anti-racist efforts should employ a relational approach to “raise questions regarding immigrant complicity in the colonization of the land” (Wong 158-9). This approach affords a view of how variously marginalized groups can be “victims of white supremacy, but [also] complicit in it as well,” through their entanglements with settler-colonial misogyny, Indigenous dispossession, and environmental destruction (Smith 69). Accordingly, the second half of this chapter examines Yee’s latest novel, *A Superior Man* (2015). Though Yee has been a prolific writer since the 1980s, he has only recently explored the role of early Chinese immigrants in white settler colonialism. Responding to “cultural and political” developments, such as the Prime Minister’s 2008 apology for residential schools, the Supreme Court’s 2014 ruling in favour of aboriginal land title, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Yee indicates in an interview that “[n]ow I s[ee] a darker side [to...t]he transcontinental railway” (Yee, “Lucky Seven”). This chapter, therefore, investigates how the novel breaks with white settler nation-building myths and seeks to articulate Chinese Canadian masculinity in alternative ways. It argues that the novel calls attention to the racial diversity of the Western Frontier by emphasizing notions of co-presence and interracial interaction. *A Superior Man* illustrates how the arrival of Chinese Canadians intersects with the oppression of Indigenous peoples; it also highlights how Chinese Canadian masculinity has been informed by the structures of settler colonialism. Nonetheless, while the novel complicates the symbolic history of Canada, it still largely represents Indigenous peoples as peripheral figures. Even as the novel provides an important entry point for ongoing discussions, then, it also exposes how much anti-colonial work remains to be done.

3.2 Settler Nation-Building Myths

The official symbolic history of Canada is characterized by a set of white settler nation-building myths, which play a central role in defining Canadian identity. These myths exert an influence on dominant culture, history, and politics by portraying a desired vision of the nation. As Paulette Regan observes, the purpose of the myths is to “bolste[r] settler justifications for appropriating Indigenous lands by framing these actions as a moral...imperative” to bring “civilization” to all areas of the country (105). Frequently, these narratives ignore Indigenous presence, opting instead to represent the West as a vast and untamed wilderness. This strategic omission allows for a focus on white settlers and their efforts to build “a new home in the New World” (Coleman 29). Indeed, despite an apparent diversity of white settler nation-building myths, which feature “epitomizing moments [such as] Confederation, [W]estern settlement, [and] the building of the railway,” the narratives are structured along strict and common lines (Regan 105); they work to stress “the importance of establishing the settler imprint on the land” and perpetuate a “visionary of ‘Great White Man’ heroes who...fulfill their national dream” (105). The recurrent images of white men “carving, fighting, and battling” the landscape help to solidify the view that the nation was formed through a determined and violent contest with nature (Coleman 29). The underlying message is that white men have earned their right to “own” the land, as they valiantly “fought the overwhelming odds of nature—harsh weather, wild animals, fecund and chaotic vegetation—and won a cultivated, orderly society” (28). Indeed, Coleman explains that able-bodied, heterosexual white men are frequently pictured as “literary personifications for the Canadian nation,” embodying the vaunted masculine qualities of future-oriented vision, robust strength, and advanced morality that supposedly define “normative...whiteness in English Canada” (6). This popular symbolic history is so pervasive, it has effectively become embedded in the national character. It is little wonder, then, that Chinese

Canadian writers have deemed it necessary to find their symbolic place in such a mythology in order to claim national belonging. For these writers, white settler nation-building myths provide a vehicle for re-writing national history, as well as re-masculinizing the Chinese Canadian male body—a body which, as Gordon Pon elucidates, has been typified as “vile, womanly, [and] cowardly” in Canadian legislation and popular rhetoric (142).

Reflection

When my grandmother traces her family history, she tends to discuss her male relatives in heroic terms. For example, even though she admits to not knowing her grandfather, she speculates that he was a brave and determined man. These speculations make me realize that settler nation-building myths circulate within my own family, particularly in stories that were passed down by my grandmother. I wonder to what extent such family stories were inspired by the myths about white settler men, and how long these family stories circulate within individual families before they take hold within the national imaginary?

Letter from Grandma

The first in our family to come to Canada was my grandfather, Lee Woy. He came in 1874 when he was only a teenager. I don't know what he was like, because I never met him. But I think he was a brave and determined man. In Guangdong, he had passed the government exams, and so he could have been a high-ranking official or something. Instead, he came to Canada to be trained as a merchant. He spoke other languages like English and Chinook. He eventually worked for a company called Tai Yuen, and sold provisions like rice, tea, and salted fish to Chinese workers building the railway. He went back and forth across the ocean, from Victoria to Hong Kong. Whatever the people wanted, he would get. He made a lot of money that way.

Reflection

Though my grandmother, of course, exaggerates the greatness of her grandfather (neglecting to mention how he profited from the exploitation of Chinese rail workers and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, for example), I have researched and uncovered how import-export companies, like Tai Yuen, were hugely successful. Historian Timothy Stanley points out, for instance, that one of these companies, Kwong Lee, “was the largest company in Victoria after the Hudson's Bay Company” (58). The success of Chinese-owned companies contributed to “fears [amongst white settlers] that ‘the Chinese’ would take over,” as well as a series of provincial laws that restricted Chinese immigrants “from participation in the political control over the territory” (58). That my great-great-grandfather was marginalized and alienated within white settler colonial culture is further evidenced in the limited representation Chinese immigrants receive in white settler nation-building myths.

Just as white settler nation-building myths have worked to define white men as “Canadian,” they have functioned to racialize Chinese men as unworthy “foreigners” and perpetual “aliens.” Although these myths enact a violent exclusion against Indigenous peoples, they deploy a limited inclusion of Chinese settlers by portraying these settlers as occasional “interlopers” who jeopardize the “Canadian” landscape (Stanley 52). As Timothy Stanley suggests, this representational dynamic allows white settlers to be positioned as “native”—“as already occupying the territory and as being threatened by an influx of...Chinese [immigrants]” (51). In other words, the dynamic creates a symbolic history in which white men are imagined as “already indigenous,” whereas Chinese men are figured as envious and untrustworthy “latecomers” (Coleman 16). Furthermore, the constructed opposition between “Chinese” and “Canadian” results in “a cluster of negative stereotypes” about “‘Chinamen,’” which reify the privileged, normative status of “middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied” white men (Millington, Vertinsky, Boyle, and Wilson 198). Labelled as “the ‘Yellow Peril,’ ‘heathens,’ and ‘unassimilable celestials,’” Chinese men are typecast as lacking conventional masculine qualities (Pon 142). It is a stereotyping that marks the Chinese male body as underdeveloped, effeminate, and “inferior to the ‘white somatic norm’” (Millington, Vertinsky, Boyle, and Wilson 198). This bodily emasculation of Chinese men is historically significant, as it provided reasons to marginalize, exploit, “and discipline the Chinese in Canada,” as well as reinforce exclusionary laws and head tax policies (Pon 142). Moreover, critics have noted that the legacy of such emasculation has been to diminish the “presence of the Chinese immigrants in pioneer projects,” and deny their “contributions” to the building of British Columbia (Chao 55). The re-masculinization of the Chinese male body has thus become a useful mode of political consciousness for some Chinese Canadian writers. By creating their own symbolic tradition of

“Gold Mountain heroes,” these writers attempt to disrupt the dominant preoccupation with “Great White Men.” Participating in what Stuart Hall describes as a tactic to change the “relations of representation,” the writers seek to destabilize racist stereotypes through “the counter-position of a ‘positive’ ...imagery” (Hall 442). Placing emphasis on the physical toughness, mental fortitude, and family orientation of Chinese workers, the writers convey the message that Chinese Canadian men, like their white counterparts, deserve recognition as heterosexual bread-winners, “pioneers” and “nation-builders.” Nonetheless, this liberal multiculturalist method has intrinsic limitations, in that it conforms to white settler-colonial myths of “empty land” and “progress.” Moreover, as Hall points out, the method is “predicated on the assumption that the categories of gender and sexuality [will] stay the same and remain fixed and secure” (445). In other words, it risks upholding and naturalizing Western constructions of masculinity, heteronormativity, agency, and aggression.

3.3 Remasculinizing the Chinese Male Body

Centred on the travails of young Chinese men who immigrate to Canada around the turn of the nineteenth century, Yee’s *Tales from Gold Mountain* and Huffman and Kwong’s *The Dream of Gold Mountain* are examples of narratives that rework an existing collection of Canadian mythology to destabilize the “yellow peril” stereotype. With a focus on restoring the “lost manhood” of Chinese men (Pon 143), these narratives modify the heroic journey motif of white settler nation-building myths to claim a sense of Chinese Canadian importance and belonging. The primary objective is not necessarily to debunk these myths, so much as it is to modify them and point out what is presumably “missing”—what Chao calls the “major role” that Chinese Canadian men have played in shaping, clearing, and cultivating the land (54). The narratives substitute “Gold Mountain heroes” for “Great White men” as embodiments of the

nation, and celebrate the arrival of settlers to the so-called “New World.” Importantly, this positioning of Chinese men is politically powerful against the background of their emasculation and marginalization from white society; it counters the perception that Chinese Canadians are perpetual “aliens.” Yee, Huffman, and Kwong thus create images of Chinese workers conducting an aggressive battle against nature in order to suggest that Chinese Canadians, like other land-clearing “pioneers,” are a meaningful part of Canada’s formation. These nationalist stories, which feature Chinese men confronting dangerous labour conditions, corrupt bosses, and unfair immigration restrictions, also emphasize the ingenuity and commitment of Chinese Canadians, who have historically been denied citizenship rights. Yet, their indictments of Canada’s racism cannot disturb the masculinist, heteronormative white settler logics that undergird nation-building myths.

Reflection

My grandmother’s stories about her father suggest that he had access to class privilege, which set him apart from Chinese labourers. My research into Chinese Canadian masculinities supports the idea that, like many members of the Chinese merchant class, my great-grandfather was able to “obtain knowledge and form habits” that made him more “fit...for intercourse with [his] fellow subjects under British rule” (Millington, Vertinsky, Boyle, and Wilson 200). By attending government-controlled schools, wearing expensive clothing, and joining a white-only country club, he was able to participate in white mainstream society in a manner that most Chinese immigrants could not. For example, his skill at playing tennis probably earned him some “social and physical capital,” as “white society [tended to] regar[d] sport as a form of assimilation” (201). I believe that, to some extent, my great-grandfather’s activities may have helped to undermine racist assumptions about the unassimilability and foreignness of “the Chinese,” as well as the effeminacy and perversion of Chinese men. Yet, I am simultaneously aware that, in his attempts to “fit in,” he most likely became “complicit in supporting the hegemonic masculinities of the times” (200). As historians point out, the efforts of Chinese merchants to appear as “gentlemen” often acted to “subordinat[e] working class masculinities, including Chinese working class ones” (200). Thus, I have come to the conclusion that, far from being a heroic figure, my great-grandfather was ambivalently situated in a complex and multilayered white settler colonial milieu.

Letter from Grandma

By the early 1900s, Lee Woy was a successful businessman, and he sent for my father, Lee Hor, to join him in Canada. Lee Hor was just a boy, maybe twelve years old, when he made the voyage across the Pacific Ocean. He was all by himself, and he had never been away from the home-village before. He didn't know how to act when he first arrived in Victoria—he was still sporting a Chinese-style pigtail! But it didn't take long for him to find his footing. His father was a wealthy merchant and sent him to Victoria's public schools. From his teachers and private tutors, my father became proficient in English. He started wearing three-piece suits and playing tennis at an all-white country club. He was athletic, good-looking, and competitive. He wanted to be seen as a gentleman, just like everybody else.

Yee's collection of short stories, *Tales from Gold Mountain*, demonstrates how a critique of Canada's racism and historical treatment of Chinese immigrants often coincides with an attempt to re-masculinize the Chinese Canadian male body. The collection, which begins with "Spirits of the Railway" and ends with "The Revenge of the Iron Chink," follows a basic format of white settler nation-building myths that Jane Tolmie and Karis Shearer identify: it showcases male protagonists who undergo a series of difficulties and must learn to channel "their strength into productive and profitable *physical* labour" (95, emphasis as cited). As Tolmie and Shearer explain, the transformation from impressionable boys to "pioneering m[e]n of the land" symbolizes the protagonists' development into "model citizens" (95). This narrative convention of producing largely working-class, muscular, idealized subjects helps to explain why Yee creates Chinese male protagonists who are modifications of Western Frontier heroes; they occupy traditionally masculine roles such as "familial leadership, protection, and provision" (95), and perform physically-demanding work. For instance, in "Spirits of the Railway," the dual role of young Chu as dutiful son and railway worker means that he must become the main provider for his family and find a place for himself in Canada. As a dutiful son, young Chu must "cross the Pacific" to "the New World" to support his ailing mother and search for his father, Farmer Chu, who is missing (Yee, *Tales* 11). Upon his arrival, young Chu discovers that "[t]here [a]re

thousands of Chinese” along the West Coast shaping the landscape, including “[g]old miners scrabb[ing] along icy rivers, farmers plough[ing] the long low valleys, and labourers travel[ing] through towns and forests” (11). Young Chu’s vision highlights the importance of Chinese male labour in creating the nation; his challenge is then to follow in the footsteps of men who came before him. Because he is “strong” and “fear[s] neither danger nor hard labour,” young Chu joins a “work gang...to build the railway” (12). The work is explicitly framed as a violent struggle against nature, as young Chu is pictured as “hack[ing] at hills with hand-scoops and shovels,” using “hammers and chisels to chi[p] boulders into gravel,” and directing “dynamite and drills [to make] tunnels deep into the mountain” (12). Chu’s triumph over the “towering ranges of dark raw rock” (12) facilitates his emergence as a strong, nation-building hero. Near the end of the story, moreover, young Chu is able to stake his claim to Canadian land by creating a gravesite “on top of [a] cliff” to honour his father and other workers who died while building the railway (15). The act of making a “final resting place” for the railway workers (14) underscores an idea that the blood, sweat, and bones of Chinese men has entered into, and become one with, the Canadian soil. It is a symbolic idea that helps to establish young Chu’s right to “own” the land and be recognized as “Canadian.”

Like young Chu, Yee Chang Gong, the male protagonist of Huffman and Kwong’s *The Dream of Gold Mountain* transforms from a lanky boy into a manly provider and nation-builder. Chang Gong must labour physically and show tremendous strength to support his family and navigate the Canadian landscape. At the tender age of thirteen, Chang Gong makes “his way to Gold Mountain to join his father” and find “his fortune” (Huffman and Kwong 15). Once in Canada, however, Chang Gong learns that he must grow up quickly, because his father has passed away due to working long hours in trying conditions. At this moment, Chang Gong

knows that he “must work hard” and “squares [his] shoulders as though to receive [a] yoke” (26). In other words, he prepares himself to perform strenuous physical labour and carry the weight of his family on his “strong back” (27). Nonetheless, Chang Gong’s work is not as exalted as young Chu’s contributions to the railway. He is a lowly “hired hand” at a Chinese laundry, where he works nearly twenty hours a day and gets “very little rest” (31). Huffman and Kwong’s effort to re-masculinize the Chinese laundryman is important, as the image of Chinese men washing clothes had once been used to “diminish their masculinity in the eyes of white [Canadians]” (Millington, Vertinsky, Boyle, and Wilson 199); these men were widely “perceived to be doing ‘women’s work,’” a perception that bolstered the idea that Chinese immigrants were effeminate and unassimilable (199). Thus, Huffman and Kwong underscore that men like Chang Gong, who ran “grocery stores, little restaurants, and above all, the laundries,” were not weak, passive, or “feminine” (Huffman and Kwong 30); rather, they were untiring labourers, who trained their bodies through “herculean hours of work” and contributed greatly to their communities (38). Moreover, in emphasizing Chang Gong’s unerring dedication to his family, Huffman and Kwong counter the stereotype that Chinese men were unlawful and deceitful individuals, who abstained from “masculine” roles of sons, fathers, and husbands. Aligned with white settler nation-building myths, these writers stress that Chang Gong conforms to heteronormative standards of family life. He longs to be “a man among men” (52), desiring not only to provide for his family back in China, but also to start a new family of his own in Canada.

3.4 Furthering the Nation through Marriage

In both Yee’s and Huffman and Kwong’s texts, the narrative depictions of masculine toughness move in predictable fashion toward heterosexual unions. As Anne McClintock asserts, in white settler nation-building myths, heterosexual unions often symbolize not only the

establishment of the traditional family, but also a presumed “unity of interests” within the nation (McClintock 357, emphasis as cited). She elaborates that the “family trope is important to nationalism,” as it offers a seemingly “natural” figure for conveying a forward-looking and reproductive vision of the nation (357). Within this symbolic history, “[w]omen are represented as...embodying nationalism’s conservative principle of continuity” (359); whereas, men signify “nationalism’s progressive, or revolutionary, principle of discontinuity” or enlightened development (359). By presenting Chinese male protagonists as desirous of heterosexual marriage, these writers attempt to not only challenge the racist stereotype of “Chinamen” as backward and effeminate “perverts,” but also describe them as strong, ideal, and forward-thrusting national subjects. In this way, the writers insist that early Chinese immigrants were recognizable within dominant understandings of gender. For example, the suitor in Yee’s “Ginger for the Heart” is portrayed as a virtuous young man who is committed to Yenna, the daughter of a Chinese merchant. In order to get married, the suitor must first “repay his debts” and earn enough money to provide for Yenna (Yee, *Tales* 36). The story thus highlights the suitor’s “masculine” role as breadwinner. While the suitor is away—transforming from a boy with “broad and strong” shoulders into a man with “calloused hands”—Yenna shows self-sacrifice by denying other suitors and tending to her blind father (36). As the model “feminine” counterpart to the suitor, she contributes to his transformation. When the suitor returns to Yenna, he is “older and wiser” (37), but he has not yet become a dynamic figure of change. As with other nation-building heroes, he needs to pair his physical strength with a future orientation, which requires him to prove his adaptability in the “new land” (38). At first, the suitor is angered by Yenna’s request to stay in Chinatown and look after her father, a request that breaks with the convention that “A man does not live in his wife’s house” (38). Nonetheless, the suitor

learns to relinquish “the old ways” when he tosses Yenna’s gift of ginger into the fire and sees that it is unscathed. The ginger’s durability signifies the patient constancy of Yenna’s love, as well as the couple’s promising future together in Canada. The suitor subsequently chooses to embrace change and become an agent of national modernity. Countering notions of Chinese unassimilability and backwardness, the story represents early Chinese Canadian men as progressive and “masculine”—capable of carrying out the strenuous physical labour of territorial expansion, and the continuation of the nation through heterosexual marriage and children.

Reflection

My grandmother frequently insisted that her parents were in love. To her, it was important for people to consider that her parents had married by choice, and not through arrangement. Her insistence reveals an adherence to a Western conception of romantic love as heterosexual union. In my grandmother’s mind, this conception was intimately linked with being seen as a moral or upright “Canadian.” Interestingly, in the following excerpt, she endeavours to bring Chinese and Western ideals of love together, in order to emphasize a notion of heterosexual union as both “natural” and “good.”

Letter from Grandma

My father’s first marriage was arranged, but I think his second marriage to my mother was based on love. Within the span of seven years, my father and mother had five children together, three girls and two boys... They were fairly traditional parents. They wanted me to get married, but they didn’t pressure me. Remember what I told you? The Chinese character for “good” is composed of two distinct symbols; the symbol on the left means “girl” and the symbol on the right means “boy.” Only when you put the two symbols together, and make a balance between them, can you produce the word, “good.”

Similar to the male protagonists in Yee’s *Tales of Gold Mountain*, Huffman and Kwong’s Chang Gong must work hard to secure his love interest by balancing his muscular exterior with a vision of the future. For Chang Gong, however, his love interest involves a more complex racial dynamic, in that he pursues the affections of a white woman. In exploring their male protagonist’s attraction to a white woman, Huffman and Kwong seek to challenge the supposed inferiority of “the Chinese” by showing how Chinese men are basically “the same” as white men

(Huffman and Kwong 34). As the writers explain, “All men” experience “desires of the flesh,” and want to come home to a “wife and family...at the end of each day” (34). The tragedy, then, is that early Chinese immigrants did not get to fulfill their “natural desires,” as “strict immigration laws and the excessive head tax made it impossible for [men] to bring their wives from China,” and racist legislation “barred them from consorting with white women” (34). By referring to naturalized codes of manly behaviour, Huffman and Kwong reveal the extent to which heterosexual marriage is featured in white settler nation-building myths as not only a rite of passage into manhood, but a potent symbol of the nation. Following the homophobic morality of these myths, the writers suppress the possibility of same-sex relations and focus, instead, on the notion that early Chinese Canadians were “bachelors.” As Richard Fung observes, the image of the Chinese “bachelor” is often mobilized in anti-racist efforts as a way of “summoning a poignant image of connubial denial” and stressing the “racial violence” committed by exclusionary immigration policies (294). While he concedes that such an image conveys a sense of the “profound deprivation” endured by early Chinese Canadians (294), he also explains how it continues to define “gay men...outside dominant constructions of masculinity” (292). Huffman and Kwong’s plot of heterosexual courtship and marriage thus illuminates Fung’s point that attempts to “confront the privilege [of heterosexual white men] are [often] forced to replay” the same privilege (297). Fung suggests that such attempts “should not automatically be dismissed,” for they do challenge the “feminization of Chinese men” (298); yet, the limitations of Huffman and Kwong’s depiction of Chang Gong also needs recognition. As Fung’s arguments help to make clear, this depiction does “not speak to the lives of most gay men” (296).

To demarcate Chang Gong’s status as a “real man” (Huffman and Kwong 55), Huffman and Kwong focus on his heterosexual pursuit of Florence, a white waitress working at the

restaurant of his employ. Committed to winning Florence's approval, Chang Gong demonstrates a future orientation by adapting to dominant "masculine" norms. He "transform[s] his image" by getting an expensive haircut and three-piece suit, and later learns how to dance and gets baptized at a Christian church (43). Chang Gong hence endeavours to embody an acceptable, white masculinity through a display of material wealth, Western sartorial style, and Christian spirituality. For her part, Florence responds to Chang Gong's efforts: "She likes Chang Gong's politeness, and his good looks" (52); she also recognizes his "ambitio[n]" as "a hard worker" (52). Huffman and Kwong's depiction of Chang Gong and Florence's romance works to destabilize the racist narrative that white women could never be attracted to Chinese men—a narrative that, Fung explains, produces a "figure of the Chinese man [that] oscillates...between an asexual wimpiness and a degenerate, sexual depravity" (295-6). At the same time that Chinese men have been feminized "into nonmen" (294), they have also been imagined as "fiends" who "lur[e white women] with offers of opium into the backs of Chinese laundries and restaurants to rape them" (Pon 142). The connotation of sexual danger that emerges in this representation reveals how "Chinese men [have been positioned] as posing a special threat to white wom[en]," who act as boundary markers of racial purity and distinction (Fung 295). It is significant, then, that Florence is shown as seeking Chang Gong's attentions, and wanting to get married and start "a business" with him, for this portrayal breaks with the racial expectation that white women would not willingly engage with Chinese men (Huffman and Kwong 52). Despite the genuineness of Florence's affections, however, her marriage to Chang Gong is pictured as doomed from the beginning, due to wider societal fears that interracial union and mixed-race children threaten to pollute racial boundaries, and thus undermine the white nation.

Whereas Canada's white settler nation-building myths conventionally "conclude with idealized heterosexual unions that promise to further the nation" (Tolmie and Shearer 95), Huffman and Kwong's novel ends in misfortune and heartbreak—Chang Gong's marriage to Florence falls apart after facing intense racism from the surrounding community. While Chang Gong naively hopes that his life as an "outsider" has "receded" (52), he soon discovers that his marginalization has escalated upon his marrying a white woman. For instance, when Florence becomes pregnant, Chang Gong takes her to see a doctor, who shouts at the Chinese man to keep his "filthy hands off that woman," and kicks him out of the office (53). Chang Gong realizes that his union with Florence will "never be recognized" (53). Florence too comes to this realization and enters into a depression; she is not accustomed to facing this kind of discrimination or living in "a hostile world" (54). Growing increasingly unhappy, Florence blames Chang Gong for her marginalization and stares at him with a "look [that is] accusing and akin to hate" (56). In other words, she internalizes the racial prejudices of the white townspeople. Following the birth of her son, Florence runs away, wanting to escape the situation where she feels "cut off from her own race" (58). Chang Gong is thus left to raise the newborn baby on his own and to show a level of care and dedication that ostensibly his wife lacks. He must become the child's principal care-giver as well as the family's breadwinner, a point that is elaborated in my analysis below. That Florence refuses to become what Coleman identifies as the typical "self-sacrificing mother" of white settler nation-building myths (145) is indicative of the novel's criticism of Canada's legislated racism against early Chinese immigrants. Florence's rejection of Chang Gong effectively signifies the larger processes of emasculation and exclusion directed at Chinese men. In response to this rejection, Huffman and Kwong attempt to re-masculinize the

Chinese Canadian body by continuing to emphasize Chang Gong's remarkable perseverance and heroic deeds.

3.5 Moral Ideals and Chinese Manliness

By stressing the manly qualities of their "Gold Mountain heroes," Yee, Huffman, and Kwong tacitly present a masculinity contest, in which a difference between Chinese settlers and their white counterparts is clarified. These Chinese male protagonists prove resistant to Western-style greed and selfishness, placing communal ideals over their own individual interests. Thus, the protagonists are depicted as archetypical working-class heroes. Morally superior to the privileged white settlers, they can take on the best of white "Canadian" ideals—physical strength, courage, and enterprise—and reject the less-appealing aspects, like crass self-interest and materialism. For example, Lee Jim, the main character of Yee's "The Revenge of the Iron Chink," is described as a loyal and responsible boss of a salmon cannery; he runs the business well, so that the white owner, nicknamed "Chimney Head," makes a great deal of profit (Yee, *Tales* 60). The contrast between Lee Jim and Chimney Head is striking; whereas the Chinese boss is practical and conscientious, the white owner is out-of-touch and greedy. Indeed, Chimney Head is pictured as a "little man" with "fat hands" to symbolize his lack of physical fitness and tendency toward gluttony (60); his habit of wearing a "tall hat" further indicates a sense of self-importance and arrogance. The story implicitly asks the question: who really "owns" the cannery, the Chinese man who works it with his own sweat and blood, or the "fat little" white man with citizenship papers and title to the land? This question is then exacerbated when Chimney Head is "invited to send a case of fish to the Queen of England" (61). While the white owner gets rich and famous, the Chinese boss gets no recognition and must continue to struggle. The unfairness of the situation comes to a climax when Chimney Head purchases a machine

“called the Iron Chink” to replace his workers (60). Because the workers are portrayed as a homogenous group of Chinese males, the story suppresses the possibility of Japanese and Indigenous workers, and instead focuses on a simplified contest between Chinese and white men. Chimney Head, caring only for making a profit, fires all of his workers, including Lee Jim. The Chinese boss must subsequently make a decision—either he can finish out his service “mak[ing] sure that everything r[uns] smoothly,” or he can avenge the exploited workers in a search for justice (61). In the end, Lee Jim acts defiantly; he tricks Chimney Head into thinking that he has shredded his ““baby fingers”” into the salmon being sent to the Queen (62). While the Chinese workers rejoice by throwing “their arms around Lee Jim” and calling him ““a brave man,”” Chimney Head “curse[s] and stamp[s] his feet” (62). Lee Jim has won a victory for the workers, especially since “his baby fingers [are] still attached to his hands” (62). Lee Jim’s commitment to just dealings and his compassion for the workers distinguish him from his white competitor. In effect, his depiction as an admirable working-class hero is put forward to challenge the dominance of white manliness.

Reflection

Much like Yee constructs his protagonists as brave and admirable men, my grandmother portrays her father as “an important man,” who generously offered his time and skills to the community. She found a sense of comfort in the idea that he provided his valuable services to those in need. Her prideful boasting about his intellectual accomplishments and kind-hearted altruism contrasts with her occasional allusions to his financial losses and gambling problems. My sense is that she embellished her father’s successes and superiority as a coping mechanism, which helped her not only to rationalize his long absences from the home, but also to deal with racist attitudes that equated Chineseness with inferiority and failure.

Letter from Grandma

My father was educated and could read and write in both Chinese and English. Because he was well-respected, he became a community leader and a spokesperson. Even after the Depression, when he had lost everything, people still looked up to him. Sometimes, he would accompany people to their doctor’s appointments and translate for them. Other times, he would write letters to send to their families in China. At one point, he was even

elected the president of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association. When I saw him afterwards, I said to him, “Hello, Mr. President,” and he looked so happy.

Reflection

However, there is an important difference in how Yee depicts his “Gold Mountain heroes” and how my grandmother describes her father. While Yee’s protagonists embody a kind of hardy, working-class masculinity, which is typical of white settler nation-building myths, my great-grandfather exemplifies the gentlemanly codes of upper-class Britishness. Hence, my grandmother stresses his education, polite manners, and polished appearance. She also remembers how he wore tailor-made suits and saw manual labour as beneath him, even during the Depression.

Similarly, in *The Dream of Gold Mountain*, Chang Gong is distinguished as a working-class Chinese Canadian hero who is morally superior to his white counterparts due to his privileging of familial and communal ideals over business and individual interests. Chang Gong’s qualities of selflessness, accountability, and cooperation are especially revealed after Florence leaves him. As a single father, Chang Gong dedicates himself whole-heartedly “to provid[ing] for his family in China and his small son in Canada” (Huffman and Kwong 60). His dedication to the “half-caste baby” separates him from the white community, which views the child as “a reminder of the sins of the flesh” and wants “to be rid of him” (61). Eventually “driven out” of town, Chang Gong must start again, without an idea of where to go (62). In contrast to the rejection he finds elsewhere, he meets with a supportive network of Chinese immigrants in Chinatown, who “congratulate him on his fine son” and help him to devise a plan (63). As these immigrants reason, Canada is not a friendly environment; “the true place for this child [is] China” where Chang Gong’s mother can assist in child-rearing (64). Relying on the generous loans of “other kinsmen” (64), Chang Gong travels to an unspecified home-village where he arranges for the care of his son. The willingness of the Chang Gong’s mother and other Chinese women to nurture the mixed-race child, once again, contrasts with the fear and repulsion expressed by the white townspeople in Canada. The novel thus seeks to criticize Canada’s

racism, suggesting that the nation lacks the fundamental values of compassion and community, as well as a genuine commitment to the nuclear family as metonym. Although Chang Gong must return to Canada to pay his debts and “keep up [his] obligations,” he no longer tries to join mainstream society (66); he has resigned to “his lot as a foreigner in an alien land” (60). The story of Chang Gong is consequently tragic; despite being an honest and hard-working man with moral ideals—who is, in many ways, more heroic than the “Great White Men” of nation-building myths—he is treated dishonourably in Canada. It is significant, then, that Chang Gong decides not to be buried in Canadian soil; he wants his ashes to be sent to China. After spending a lifetime in Canada, and pouring his blood, sweat, and tears into the nation, he has found no place of acceptance in the national landscape.

Reflection

My grandmother confided that her father never left Victoria’s Chinatown, even after his children had moved away. The reasons for his staying are unclear; however, I would speculate that it points to a kind of resignation. Even though my great-grandfather projected an image of Britishness, educated refinement, and successful assimilation, did he still feel an enduring sense of rejection or marginalization by mainstream society?

Letter from Grandma

Long after I moved away from Chinatown, my father remained—I don’t think he could ever leave. It was the only place where he ever felt at home. He died in 1971 when he was about eighty years old.

In attempting to destabilize the “yellow peril” stereotype and provide positive images of Chinese Canadian decency, manliness, and agency, Chinese Canadian writers like Yee, Huffman, and Kwong have engaged with the heroic tradition of white settler nation-building myths. More specifically, these writers have sought to counter the marginalizing and emasculating effects of Canada’s racism by presenting their Chinese male protagonists as reconceptualised versions of Western Frontier heroes—embodiments of the hardy masculinity

and moral qualities that supposedly distinguish the nation. Indeed, that these Chinese male protagonists are portrayed as having a manly, “results-oriented work ethic” and “devout” moral capacity is significant (Chow 44); as Rey Chow suggests, these qualities hold a “spiritualized and idealized” status in the West (44). While these narratives have successfully challenged racial stereotypes and raised awareness of early Chinese immigrants, however, they have also perpetuated a dominant patriarchal and heteronormative perspective. Re-masculinizing the Chinese Canadian male body ironically involves reaffirming exclusionary notions of manhood, which were once directed at Chinese men, and which continue to deny the experiences of gay men as well as mark the female body as subordinate and dependent. In their appropriations of white settler nation-building myths, Chinese Canadian writers have not only produced their own “masculine” mythology that is based on the presumption of heterosexuality and suppresses the possibility of same-sex relations; they have deployed historically accessible tropes of “femininity as the Other” (Nguyen 152) to contrast and develop their male protagonists as truly “masculine.” In these stories, female characters either represent complimentary feminine values, such as Yenna in Yee’s “Ginger for the Heart,” or act as signifiers of emasculating oppression, such as Florence in Huffman and Kwong’s novel. In both cases, female characters are relegated to a formulaic background against which Chinese men act out their more significant roles. This tactic can thus be viewed as empowering only by white settler, heteronormative, and patriarchal norms of masculinity.

Moreover, while trying to restore Chinese Canadian presences in the past, these writers work within a colonial logic, which frames the arrival of settlers as a “noble” conquest of an “empty” and “hostile” wilderness. By completely neglecting to acknowledge Indigenous presences, the writers implicitly build their narratives on a framework that participates in the

ongoing colonization of the land and Indigenous peoples. This framework cannot address Indigenous peoples' histories and current realities, and so actively distorts a more complex understanding of Canada's past and present. Problematically, therefore, the liberal multiculturalist strategy of reworking settler nation-building myths re-inscribes whiteness as the norm; it pursues the limited goals of gaining visibility and claiming belonging, without fully considering how the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and exploitation of Chinese immigrants intersect in the making of the white settler colonial nation.

3.6 Developing a Relational Framework

Regarding how Asian Canadian writers and activists can move toward "alliance building in the face of ongoing" colonization and racial oppression, Rita Wong has suggested that more attention needs to be paid to the contact zones of exchange and interaction "where diasporic communities meet Indigenous communities" (160). As she elucidates, such a focus can assist in thinking through "the question of how to speak and acknowledge debts and interdependencies," which have historically been ignored (160). Wong argues that writers, in particular, can play a major role in deepening anti-racist efforts by illuminating "the social and economic injustices neglected and deflected" by a liberal multiculturalist lens (160). Using an anti-colonial framework, these writers can examine how racial identities are produced relationally in a white settler-colonial state, exploring considerations like those proposed by Lawrence and Dua: "In what ways did people of colour support or challenge policies used to colonize [Indigenous] peoples? What were moments of conflict and collaboration?" (Lawrence and Dua 137). This kind of approach creates opportunities for meaningful and strategic alliance-building between different groups—opportunities "which are based not solely on shared victimization, but [on the idea] that anyone can be complicit in the victimization of another" (Ruthann Lee 78).

Correspondingly, the challenge for Chinese Canadian writers is to address the intricate history of relationships between those racialized as “Chinese” and those racialized as “Indigenous,” in order to confront interlinked systems of oppression. As Lawrence and Dua elucidate, these writers should “examine how these ...relationships were influenced by Canada’s ongoing colonization” of Indigenous peoples, and “make Indigenous presence...foundational to their analyses of race and racism” (Lawrence and Dua 122, 127).

Importantly, Paul Yee’s most recent novel, *A Superior Man*, takes up the challenge of re-articulating Chinese Canadian cultural formations in relation to Indigenous histories, endeavouring to discuss the West Coast of British Columbia as a diverse and multifaceted colonial contact zone. Countering the misconception that Indigenous-European contact and Chinese migrations occurred “in different historical periods, spaces, and trajectories” (Mawani 5), Yee portrays how Chinese immigrants were in regular contact with both white settlers and Indigenous peoples. The novel’s presentation of Yang Hok, a Chinese railway worker who has had an affair with an Indigenous woman, underscores the idea that the Western Frontier was a space of “heterogeneity,” which facilitated “interracial encounters, proximities, and miscegenation” (7). Nonetheless, the novel also reveals how colonial “truths” or stereotypes helped to manage differently racialized groups, generating potent divisions and setting these groups against one another. Yang Hok’s reluctance to fulfill his obligation and act as a father to his mixed-race son animates these tensions, showing how early Chinese immigrants occupied an ambiguous position in the settler colonial state. On one hand, the novel demonstrates how these immigrants were persecuted as “outsiders” and exploited for their labour; yet, on the other hand, it reveals how they enjoyed some settler privileges and discriminated against Indigenous peoples. Unlike the heroes of nation-building myths, therefore, Yang Hok is depicted as a difficult and

anti-heroic character, who is enmeshed in the colonial violence of Indigenous dispossession and oppression, even as he is a victim of white racism. Yang Hok's selfish reluctance to recognize his son gestures to the ways the colonial state has encouraged notions of racial purity and segregation. In essence, Yang Hok has adopted a dominant form of masculinity, which is premised on an aggressive self-interest and combativeness. At the same time, however, Yang Hok is challenged by his Chinese and mixed-race counterparts to depart from this dominant norm and become "a superior man"—a Confucian ideal of manhood which entails upholding one's responsibilities and maintaining harmonious relations. The dilemma for Yang Hok is thus between these forms of masculinity: will he recognize the cross-racial relationships that have helped to sustain him in Canada or continue to act in a self-centred and ultimately destructive manner? By introducing the concept of "a superior man," Yee gestures to an alternative way of viewing interracial relations and obligations in the West Coast contact zone, opening a space for relational analyses and a more comprehensive understanding of how Chinese Canadians are situated within a white settler formation.

3.7 The Colonial Contact Zone

Complicating the marginalized versus dominant, or Chinese versus white, dynamic that frames many Chinese Canadian narratives, Yee endeavours to discuss the colonial contact zone as a space where various cross-racial entanglements, alliances, and competitions are possible. For example, the narrator-protagonist, Yang Hok, describes how in 1885 interactions between Chinese and Indigenous peoples were common, as "Native traders always passed through Victoria's Chinatown" to conduct business with "many people [who] spoke Chinook" (Yee, *Superior* 24). Indeed, Yang Hok himself reveals an ability to converse in the pidgin trade language—an ability that points to his reliance on longstanding and mutually beneficial Chinese-

Indigenous trade networks. As Renisa Mawani clarifies, such trade networks were historically extensive in British Columbia, forging informal bridges “across racial divides” and showing a level of “collaboration and participation” among differently marginalized groups (202). In some ways, these networks were “ungovernable,” providing a significant method of navigating “shared experiences” of discrimination and exclusion (204). That colonial proximities and connections produced cross-racial alliances and intimacies is further explored in the novel when Yang Hok discusses his short-lived affair with Mary, an Indigenous woman. In reflecting on what produced his feelings of interracial affinity and attraction, Yang Hok surmises that “[b]oth Mary and [he] were alone and lonely” working in a “makeshift” railway town for corrupt “redbeard” or white bosses (Yee, *Superior* 140). Yang Hok’s comments suggest that Chinese and Indigenous groups were similarly positioned on the borders of white settler society, employed to do “dirty” jobs for whites like “emptying the redbeards’ chamber pots, digging their latrines, and washing their clothes” (140). Despite their different backgrounds, then, Yang Hok and Mary found a point of connection in their “quiet sorrow” and offered one another comfort for a brief moment in time (140). The fleeting nature of their partnership, however, points to the existence of colonial divisions and racial stereotypes, which were propagated to weaken Chinese-Indigenous relations and the potentially subversive threat they posed.

While the novel demonstrates how the diversity of the West Coast contact zone created opportunities for close and affective relations across race, it also gestures to how the settler colonial state mobilized racial comparisons and stereotypes to reinforce social boundaries and manage interracial encounters. Although in private moments of reflection Yang Hok admits to feeling a poignant connection with Mary, in other moments he deploys racially infused, colonial discourses to explain his time with an Indigenous woman. These moments reveal the extent to

which Yang Hok has absorbed discriminatory views of Indigenous peoples as a “‘lesser rac[e]’” (Yee, *Superior* 31). Mawani explains that such views, which produced seemingly “immutable racial distinctions” between white, Indigenous, and Chinese populations, were “precisely” circulated “amidst racial intermixture” to deter cross-racial alliances and mix-race offspring (11). These alliances, and their resulting offspring, were seen as challenging “imperial visions of European resettlement and white superiority,” and so racial comparisons and tensions were promoted to break them up (13). That Yang Hok has been influenced by these racial comparisons is evident when he bristles at the suggestion that “the Chinese [are] one and the same as Native people” (Yee, *Superior* 52). He has learned that such an association is an insult, and hence responds with a series of colonial “truths”—about Indigenous peoples being unrefined or uncultured—to distinguish himself (52). Moreover, Yang Hok has appropriated disparaging colonial stereotypes about Indigenous women to interpret his interactions with Mary and deny his responsibility for their mixed-race son. When Mary informs him that they have a child together, for example, Yang Hok responds by calling her a “fox” who could have “spread her legs for any number of China men” (23). In so characterizing Mary, Yang Hok dismisses the sense of affinity that they once shared and casts her off as a stereotypical “Squaw Drudge [or] a sexually licentious...beast of burden” (Stevenson 57). This stereotype permits Yang Hok to rationalize that he, like other settler men—Chinese and “redbeard”—“cha[se after] Native women” like “dogs in heat” and have no accountability for their “mix-blood” children (Yee, *Superior* 23). Yang Hok’s justification demonstrates how colonial discourses created an antagonistic racialized and gendered dynamics, which deflected attention away from shared experiences of marginalization and disrupted meaningful interracial friendships and connections.

Reflection

Like many Chinese women and children during the Depression, my grandmother had to enter the workforce to help support her family. Her experiences of working at a salmon cannery highlight the reality that canning locations were spaces of racial heterogeneity and proximity. As Renisa Mawani elucidates, canneries were often “dependent on a racially mixed and seasonal labour force” (44). Yet, because cannery owners feared the formation of cross-racial “friendships [and] political alliances,” which could undermine their authority, they enforced “rigid race and labour aristocracies” (39). Racial categories, “and the [colonial] truths that underpinned them,” thus shaped the organization of cannery labour, determining where one could work, what tasks one could do, and how much one could get paid (45). In her stories, my grandmother illustrates the racial arrangement of labour when she describes how white men performed the privileged task of fishing, she and her sister fulfilled the intermediary work of counting and cleaning, while Indigenous women did the “dirty” jobs of butchering and can-making. Her comments gesture to how imposed racial hierarchies managed the workers, creating a divide between Chinese immigrant and Indigenous women, and diminishing their interracial encounters and interactions. They also point to how Indigenous women were probably the most marginal and exploited workers at the cannery.

Letter from Grandma

Oh sure, lots of people struggled during the Depression, especially in Chinatown. That was just the way it was. We all had to work harder; we all had to do our part. But I don’t remember talking about it; it just happened. I went to work with my older sister, May, at the salmon cannery in Esquimalt. Our job was to sit on the deck while the fish boats were unloading. You know, these white fishermen would spear the fish over and into a great big container—and we would sit there counting, keeping track of how many fish there were. On other days, we wore gloves and had to wash the fish down. The Native women were the ones who did all the cutting and packing. They wore special hats and aprons, and worked amongst themselves. We all had separate stations and went about doing our jobs. I was nine years-old when I started, or maybe a bit younger. Each day, I think I made something like twenty-five cents, and gave all my wages to my mother so that she could buy groceries.

In emphasizing Yang Hok’s reluctance to accept responsibility for his mixed-race son, the novel explores how early Chinese immigrants occupied a conflicted position in the white settler colonial state. On one hand, the novel illustrates how Chinese “coolies,” or indentured labourers, were subjected to vicious racism, especially while constructing “the iron road” (Yee, *Superior* 134). As Yang Hok recounts, these labourers were often tricked into coming to Canada with promises of well-paying jobs, only to discover that “no one would ever get rich here” (66).

The labourers were also assigned the most dangerous duties, placed into “ugly situation[s]” where death was looming and “blood [was] everywhere” (134). The novel thus underscores the ways that early Chinese immigrants were mistreated and exploited “to build the economic scaffolding for colonial settlement” (Mawani 33). On the other hand, however, the novel examines how Chinese immigrants were complicit, in many ways, with the colonial domination and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. After surveying “the wreckage” caused by the railway, for example, Yang Hok realizes that “redbeards” rely on “China men” to carry out the “dirty work” of colonization (Yee, *Superior* 194). What would happen, he wonders, if ““China men” rejected the ““shit jobs”” offered to them by the ““redbeards”” and went back ““home”” (152)? Yang Hok comes to understand why some Indigenous people would believe that ““China men are the same as redbeards,”” as both groups plunder Indigenous lands and cause unbelievable damage (235). Moreover, both groups ““think [they] are smarter than”” Indigenous peoples, denying to ““care for their own bone and flesh,”” their mixed-race children (235). Yang Hok’s efforts to disown his son and “dump him with his [mother’s] people” animates these tensions (34). While the novel suggests that Yang Hok’s desire to return to China is to some extent understandable due to the hardships he has experienced, it highlights his selfishness in trying to disavow the debts and responsibilities he has formed in the West Coast contact zone.

Yang Hok is decidedly anti-heroic, unlike the typical protagonists of nation-building myths. Although he has followed a similar trajectory as these protagonists—by undergoing a series of difficulties, learning to channel his strength into physical labour, and becoming an ambitious, self-disciplined wage-earner—he is not upheld as a model citizen or community leader. Instead, the novel scrutinizes the very masculine qualities that would conventionally position Yang Hok as an idealized subject. At the beginning of the novel, for example, Yang

Hok is introduced as a strong, able-bodied labourer, who is “[t]aller than most men” and can “battle three or four men at once” (Yee, *Superior* 9, 17). His body has been trained through hours of work, and his previous role as a railway worker suggests that he is a “self-made man” and nation-builder. Yang Hok’s status as an admirable pioneer, however, is destabilized by his tendency to succeed at the expense of others. To pursue his goals of “sav[ing] money” and providing for his family in China (106), Yang Hok has relied on unsavory schemes to make extra cash. As a railway worker, he started a “bootleg” business of smuggling and selling alcohol “in the railway camps” (106); he was quickly reprimanded, however, for doing business with “Native men [who had] wives and children” (108). Importantly, Yang Hok was warned by his Chinese colleagues not to sell to these men, as it was considered immoral and unlawful. As one colleague expressed, Yang Hok should only sell to “redbeard men [who] don’t have families here,” otherwise he would “make us all smell bad” (108). The colleague worried that Yang Hok’s behaviour would tarnish the reputations of all Chinese workers, not just his own. That Yang Hok proceeded with his scheme reveals a careless disinterest in how his actions affect others. He is single-mindedly concerned with making a profit, as is confirmed by his later stint as a gambling-house bouncer who physically “beat[s]” the customers that a Chinese merchant “cheats” (18). The novel hence questions Yang Hok’s self-congratulatory claims that he “[is]n’t a child” or a “railway worm...without the means to leave [Canada]” (21). It asks: is Yang Hok really a commendable and self-sufficient “man” if he has made his money through brutal, exploitative means? The novel is effectively criticizing Yang Hok for adopting the same aggressive, cutthroat attitude that characterizes his Chinese and “redbeard” bosses; it is also disrupting the ideal codes of manly behaviour—physicality and entrepreneurship—that are often upheld in settler nation-building myths. In the hostile environment of the West Coast contact

zone, Yang Hok is susceptible to Western-style greed and self-promotion; his desire for material wealth and social mobility encourages him to assume a dominant masculinity and survival-of-the-fittest outlook, which efface the needs and concerns of others.

Reflection

Emerging in between my grandmother's fulsome accounts of her father's community service are brief mentions of his gambling problems and long absences from the home. Interestingly, in all her letters, she could never bring herself to openly criticize her father, leading me to believe that she saw his gambling as a selfish, yet, to some extent, understandable reaction to the stress he was enduring. Unflattering glimpses of her father, however, challenge the idea that he was a model citizen or upstanding community leader. He certainly was not impervious to outside influences and the lure of common vices. Was his gambling, in some way, a response to a dominant, colonial masculinity and its resulting individualistic culture? Or could it have been a desperate attempt to win back his business and redeem his "failed" manhood? A reading of my great-grandfather turns upon the amount of sympathy one feels for his positioning within the vexed and contradictory conditions of a white settler society.

Letter from Grandma

During the Depression, my father lost his business. Times were tough, and he struggled to find a job. That's when he developed a very bad habit of gambling. Once I saw my mother trying to hide some of her jewelry under a mattress. She must have been worried that my father might try to take it... Throughout this period, my father would disappear for long stretches of time, and I still have no idea of where he would go or what he would do. When he came back to visit us, he would leave money, perhaps a few dollars, on the kitchen table for my mother to find.

3.8 A Superior Man

Throughout his mission to find Mary and "dump the boy" (Yee, *Superior* 41), Yang Hok is repeatedly challenged by his Chinese and mixed-race counterparts to act as a "good father" and become "a superior man" (131). Sam Bing Lew, the guide that Yang Hok hires to help him track down Mary, for instance, consistently troubles Yang Hok's reasoning that "A boy belongs with his trueborn mother" (125). Sam Bing, whose father was Chinese and mother was Indigenous, suspects that Yang Hok is just trying to shirk his responsibility. He knows how many "railway snot worms...look down on" mixed-race children, regarding these children as

“dirty mongrel[s]” with “no brains” (77). Furthermore, he witnesses how Yang Hok dismisses his son, worrying only about his ticket to China, which might expire before finding Mary (81). In response, Sam Bing acts as a more positive role model to the young boy; he “sp[eaks directly] to the boy,” tells him stories, and walks “hand-in-hand” with him (78, 79). Sam Bing’s caring attentiveness underscores Yang Hok’s impatience and self-centered thinking; even Yang Hok must admit that Sam Bing is, in many ways, “superior to me” (91). Similarly, when Yang Hok meets “old Yang,” a Chinese “washerman” with a mixed-race daughter (123), his lack of fatherly concern and sense of obligation is highlighted. The older man is critical of Yang Hok for not “even know[ing]” his own son (131). In contrast to Yang Hok, old Yang has raised his daughter on his own. The girl’s mother died a long time ago, and so he has acted as primary caretaker, showing more regard for her welfare than about what other people might think (131). The comparison between the older and the younger man further undermines Yang Hok’s logic for “drag[ging] the boy to his mother” (130); as old Yang points out, the “[t]ruth is” Yang Hok does not want to take his son to China, as he is anxious about “los[ing] face” (130). Underneath Yang Hok’s weak excuses, his actual objective in “dumping the boy” is to return to his home-village without the complication of having a mixed race son. Significantly, both Sam Bing and old Yang call on Yang Hok to become “a superior man,” a term that suggests he learn to not only be a more conscientious father, but also live up to a Confucian ideal of manhood.

Reflection

Near the beginning of *A Superior Man*, Yang Hok expresses anger at “the merchants of Chinatown, those kicked-in dogs” for blocking his return to China (14). Describing how the merchants had formed a Council “to deal with shady China men and foreign bullies,” Yang Hok explains that he needs a receipt from the Council to board his ship (28); yet the Council refuses to do so until he does one of three options: puts his son in the Mission School, returns him to his mother, or agrees to take him to China (30). Yang Hok’s frustrated thoughts about “the merchant princes” reveal how they occupied an ambivalent space in the colonial contact zone (28). While these merchants met with racism and

discrimination from white settler society, they held a significant amount of privilege and authority over Chinese labourers. As is evident in Yang Hok's experience, the merchant Council often played a governing and protective role, but it also did so for its own self-interested reasons in defending trade and profit. Furthermore, his experience suggests that the Council had adopted a colonialist mindset, propagating racialized divisions and advising Yang Hok against "mix[ing] with the lesser races" (31). Finally, Yang Hok criticizes the merchants for their greed and extravagant displays of wealth during a time when most Chinese immigrants are struggling; he calls attention to the "[r]osewood chairs and tables, carved and gleaming" at the Council headquarters, for example (29). Interestingly, the headquarters are located at a "general store [owned by] Tai Yuen" (29), the company for which my great-great-grandfather worked. This detail further destabilizes my grandmother's heroic images of her male ancestors, casting their business activities and community service in a more complex and problematic light. It also suggests there is an important distinction between the merchants, who strove to emulate a more upper-class, British masculinity, and the working-class labourers, who worked with their hands and have since been commemorated as strong, pioneering men of the Western Frontier.

Although Yang Hok has adopted a dominant masculinity, which is premised on physical prowess, competitiveness, and aggression, the novel points to an alternative form of masculinity in its references to "a superior man." Unlike its Western counterpart, the Confucian concept of "a superior man" is determined by one's ethical accomplishments and virtuous choices, "instead of...by male gender traits" (Rosenlee 36). In other words, "a superior man" is associated with one's fulfilment of social roles and responsibilities, not necessarily with one's attainment of so-called masculine qualities such as strength, assertiveness, and autonomy (36). As Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee elaborates, "a superior man" is someone who has promoted "harmony," by nurturing "proper relations," and by "acting for the good of others, not for the good of one's narrow, selfish interest" (38). According to this definition, Yang Hok is far from the Confucian ideal. Although he plans to take his earnings to China to support his grandparents, he shows a truncated sense of "family" when he refuses to recognize his son (Yee, *Superior* 24). In so doing, Yang Hok defies Confucian teachings, which consider the parent-child relationship one of the most sacred and important to uphold. Moreover, Yang Hok's desire to return to China is not entirely

honourable. While he wants to help his grandparents, he also wants to impress the other villagers with his wealth and prestige (21). For instance, Yang Hok imagines “the clan elders” talking about his “gruelling quest” and singing his praises “to the ancestors at the hilltop graves” (120); he also envisions propping his “feet on a table and gloat[ing] over” the men who are still “snared in Gold Mountain shit” (25). These dreams of self-glory suggest that Yang Hok is interested in acquiring an image of success, not the moral attributes of “a superior man.” Further, Yang Hok’s competitive tendency to set his achievements against those of others contrasts with the peaceful vision of “a superior man.” Antonio Cua explains that “a superior man” possesses “an inward disposition” which is inclined towards maintaining peace within himself and his surrounding environment (326); he portrays the Confucian virtue of “sincerity,” by acting in an honest way and producing the best outcomes (326). Unfortunately, Yang Hok lacks this ability to be honest with himself and others. Upon relinquishing his son to Sam Bing’s mother, he realizes that he has been behaving in a manner “worse than vermin” (327). All along, he has been lying, knowing that he ought to “take the boy to China” or stay behind to raise him (333); as he later admits in shame, “I was his father, but I had walked away” (343). Yang Hok discovers too late that he has been focused on a damaging vision of manhood and success.

Reflection

Though my grandmother attempted to downplay her father’s absence, emphasizing stories about how he would help the community, she occasionally offered indications of her sorrow and disappointment. It is apparent that her father did not, or could not, live up to all her expectations. These poignant moments prompt me to question if the ideal of the superior man was achievable given the trying conditions of early Chinese Canadians. I wonder: Was my great-grandfather absent due to work demands? Or was he immersed in an individualistic lifestyle of drinking and gambling? In other words, to what extent was his parental negligence voluntary or not?

Letter from Grandma

The truth is, I didn’t get to see my father that much. When I got older, he became an insurance broker and had an office downtown. On Sundays, he would sometimes pick us

up and take us for a ride in his car. These were special occasions, and we would all pile in—there was five of us after all. We would wear our best clothes and wait for him on the street corner. If he didn't show up, my oldest sister, Emma, would hide behind a tree, and we would call out to her, "Ba-ba! Are you on your way?" "Yes," she would answer, "I'll be there soon!" This was just a game we used to play.

3.9 Perpetuating Colonial Violence

Unlike Chinese Canadian narratives which can implicitly position early Chinese immigrants as "innocent" or outside of white settler colonial formations, *A Superior Man* addresses the shifting and contradictory relationships that these immigrants had with Indigenous peoples. Although marginalized and dependent on Chinese-Indigenous networks to navigate the landscape, Yang Hok enacts a dominant masculinity that is complicit, in many ways, with colonial domination of Indigenous peoples. It is symptomatic of the white settler colonial state, and its propagation of colonial divisions and stereotypes, that Yang Hok starts to function within racial concepts of purity and segregation, and selfishly look out for his own material wealth and security. Moreover, his feelings of subordination and emasculation encourage him to make displays of physicality, such as various feats of labour, fights, and contests of strength, which perpetuate the violence and exploitation of the colonial project. Yang Hok's trajectory can, therefore, be read as a complex negotiation of the West Coast contact zone, revealing the motivations that might compel a Chinese railway worker to deny and neglect the cross-racial affinities and responsibilities he has formed. Indeed, Yang Hok's adoption of a dominant masculinity is presented as a defensive response to the discrimination and hostility he has faced. Nonetheless, the novel highlights the limits and inadequacies of such a response, showing how it contributes to the very aggression and violence he wants to resist. For example, Yang Hok's inclination for vengeance is framed as highly destructive. At the end of the novel, when Yang Hok is free to return to China alone, he engages in another attempt to redeem his "failed"

manhood, by devising a scheme to blow up a railway bridge (Yee, *Superior* 315). The scheme is dangerous and poorly planned, leading to tragic consequences. While trying to demolish the bridge, Yang Hok contributes to the untimely death of a “redbeard” railway worker—a death that, through a twist of circumstances, Sam Bing, is held responsible for. The novel thus concludes in a cautionary manner, suggesting that Yang Hok should have cared more about his obligations to Sam Bing and his son, than his reckless efforts to prove his manliness. Moreover, since Sam Bing is ultimately blamed for Yang Hok’s actions, it points to how mixed-race and Indigenous peoples faced higher social stakes in the white settler colonial state. That Sam Bing is presumably going to be executed without a fair trial gestures to the ugly reality of colonial injustices and policies of Indigenous genocide. In this way, the novel underscores how Chinese Canadian and Indigenous struggles were co-existing and relational, but definitely not equivalent.

Reflection

My grandmother conveyed a sense of guilt and regret about not knowing more about the experiences of the men living in Chinatown. She felt some responsibility, like she should have been able to address these experiences. Maybe it was because she had encountered the mythology of “Gold Mountain Heroes,” which celebrates the contributions that Chinese Canadian men made to Canada’s nation-building. That my grandmother does not address at length the relationship between Chinese Canadian and Indigenous struggles—despite working in close proximity to Indigenous women as a child—I think reveals the extent to which she had internalized the racial distinctions promoted at the salmon cannery. Indeed, Mawani suggests that these racial distinctions were just as effective as physical separation in creating “boundaries” between white, Indigenous, and Chinese populations (67).

Letter from Grandma

What happened to all those men in Chinatown? I don’t know. I never used to think about it. My only thought was to move ahead, to get away. I didn’t start looking back until recently. I don’t think many men went back to China; I think they probably died in Chinatown. Oh, I think they were very lonely. I don’t know, I don’t know. I wish I knew.

Throughout the novel, Yee encourages readers to wonder what would happen if Yang Hok abandoned his investments in a dominant masculinity and decided to act as “a superior

man”—for example, what would happen if he asserted solidarity in his interracial relationships with Mary, Sam Bing, and his son? His failure to nurture and sustain such relationships emphasizes his blinkered perspective in focusing too much on his own subordination, and not enough on his participation in other aspects of colonial violence and domination, such as land appropriation and destruction. The novel thus points to the need for a relational approach to understand how Chinese Canadians have always been settlers in a multifaceted colonial contact zone. Moreover, it shows how Chinese Canadian writers can disrupt the official symbolic history of Canada by breaking with white nation-building myths and nationalist narratives where claiming recognition and belonging are the central goals. These writers can instead move towards acknowledging Indigenous struggles and deepening their anti-racist efforts. As Glen Sean Coulthard suggests, this move necessitates shifting away from the politics of “state recognition and accommodation,” a politics which is “ill-equipped to deal with the...dimensions of colonial power” (25-26). While the novel provides an important entry point for thinking about the complexity of Chinese-Indigenous relationships in Canada, however, it still positions Indigenous peoples as peripheral figures. For example, the Indigenous woman, Mary, with whom Yang Hok has had an affair plays a very limited role in the novel’s action. Despite setting the plot in motion—when she “suddenly appear[s]” and leaves the mixed-race son with Yang Hok (Yee, *Superior* 25)—Mary’s presence in the novel is highlighted by silence, mystery, and absence; she has a habit of disappearing just as quickly as she appears. In describing how their romantic relationship ended, for instance, Yang Hok insists that “Three years ago, she [simply] vanished without a word” (24); he claims to have no idea why she left him or where she went. Likewise, he can only speculate on her motivations for giving up their mixed-race son, as she provides no direct explanation (27). Mary thus largely remains an enigma to both Yang Hok and

the reader. Her peripheral presence may be indicative of Yee's awareness of the dangers of representational appropriation, but, in giving Mary such a restricted voice, he also risks carrying on the tradition of using Indigenous characters as literary device or backdrop.

Along these same lines, it is also problematic that the mixed-race guide, Sam-Bing, acts as the novel's primary Indigenous spokesperson. As a character who presumably "speaks all dialects" (Yee, *Superior* 75), Sam-Bing is presented as a kind of middle-man who carries messages between populations. Yet, because he is infrequently involved in his "Native village" due to his lengthy and solo trading missions (325), he can also only offer glimpses into the interests and concerns of his mother's people. Indeed, Sam Bing is at times revealed to be ambiguously situated in Indigenous society, as the Indigenous mother of his child and her family are said to have "rejec[ted]" him and "dr[i]ve[n] him away" (327). The lack of Indigenous perspective in the novel is somewhat striking given Yang Hok's occasional admissions that Indigenous peoples are "everywhere," as well as his recognition that Chinese immigrants have contributed to their "poverty and suffering" (201). It, therefore, seems like Yee is relying on Sam Bing's character as a convenient way of gesturing towards Indigenous presence, while also skirting around more complex issues of representation and engagement. Whatever the reason, the novel fails to provide Indigenous characters with a significant voice, leaving the reader to imagine the complexity and diversity of Indigenous cultures and experiences, as well as what enduring and meaningful alliances with Indigenous peoples might look like. The novel hence lays "the groundwork that might make dialogue among anti-racist and [Indigenous] activists possible" (Lawrence and Dua 135), but it also points to how much anti-colonial work remains to be done.

3.10 Final Thoughts

Throughout this chapter, I have examined how Chinese Canadian writers have used the official symbolic history of Canada as a tool for dismantling the racist stereotype of the “yellow peril” and re-masculinizing the Chinese Canadian male body. Previously, critics have pointed out how the creation of “Gold Mountain tales” helped to raise awareness of the “historical contributions made by the Chinese labourers to the frontiers of [British Columbia]” (Chao 55), but they have mostly overlooked their potential limitations. As I have aimed to show, the strategy of reworking white settler nation-building myths has a proclivity to re-enact exclusionary processes that deny the histories and bodies of women, gay men, and Indigenous peoples. The presentation of early Chinese Canadian immigrants as re-conceptualised Western Frontier heroes thus exemplifies the problems of a liberal multiculturalist approach, which continues to invest energy in a dominant, masculinist construction of Canada. In contrast to the valorization of Chinese labourers as “Gold Mountain heroes,” which typifies his earlier work, Yee seeks to explore Chinese Canadian masculinity in alternative ways in his most recent novel, *A Superior Man*. Responding to changes in “the cultural and political landscape,” such as the Prime Minister’s apology for residential schools and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Yee acknowledges the racial diversity of the colonial contact zone (Yee “Lucky Seven”). He illustrates how early Chinese immigration intersects with settler-colonial misogyny, Indigenous dispossession, and environmental destruction. Significantly, a relational approach to the novel highlights its complex portrait of Chinese-Indigenous relationships, calling attention to how racialized identities have been produced and managed relationally in a white settler-colonial state. However, while this novel marks a significant shift from the political imagination of “Gold Mountain heroes,” it continues to demonstrate a limited engagement with Indigenous peoples

and their struggles with land-theft, violence, and genocide. Significantly, then, the novel's challenge to Yang Hok—to do better, to expand his vision, and change—lingers, encouraging Chinese Canadian writers and activists to further build interracial friendships and alliances, fulfil debts and obligations, and address how “settlement of Indigenous lands, whether by white people or people of colo[u]r, remains part of Canada's nation-building project” (Lawrence and Dua 135).

Chapter 4: Disrupting the National Frame: A Postcolonial Diasporic (Re)Reading of SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* and Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children*

4.1 Background

Growing out of the anti-racist movements of the 1980s and 90s, Asian Canadian Studies has emerged as a field of inquiry that attempts a wide-ranging critique of mainstream Canadian history, society, and culture. Thus far in its development, the field has relied upon a strategy of constructing a “collective” Asian Canadian identity for political reasons (Chao 18). As Larissa Lai remarks, the formation of Asian Canadian Studies called for “a kind of strategic essentialism in Gayatri Spivak’s sense” (Lai 5); it has advanced “as if” a stable Asian Canadian identity exists in order to bolster the visibility and recognition of marginalized experiences (5). With the goal of re-writing Canadian history and exposing racist policies, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Japanese Canadian Internment, and the Komagata Maru Incident, Asian Canadian critique has tended to unfold within a nationalist framework (Lee and Kim 7). That is, it has largely focused on local processes of racialization and marginalization, positioning the nation-state as the primary interlocutor of the Asian/alien body in Canada. As the field increasingly becomes drawn into the academy, however, critics have noted some possible limitations of this framework. One such limitation is that the focus on national politics, and the promotion of citizenship and belonging as political goals, runs the risk of reinforcing a reductive liberal pluralism which cannot “shake up the systemic historical conditions and...ideologies of normativity that have produced racialized subjects and minoritized cultures” (Kamboureli, “Reading Closely” 64).

In exploring ways to expand on the Canadian national frame, Lily Cho has posited that Asian Canadian Studies could be situated more clearly within a postcolonial diasporic paradigm. Such a paradigm, she contends, could generate insights into how the construction of Asian-ness in Canada is deeply connected to Asian-ness elsewhere (“Asian Canadian” 188). Indeed, Cho

points out that there is a need to “think about the formation of the Canadian state through imperialism and colonialism,” and see Asian Canadian history within a wider, global context of capital and labour migration (188). Focusing specifically on Chinese Canadian communities, Cho illustrates how a “diasporic perspective” can highlight the links between Chinese migration and British imperialism (186). That is, a diasporic perspective can consider how early Chinese immigrants to Canada came from South China, where the Opium Wars “had disrupted the local economy [and] provid[ed] much of the push for emigration” (Stanley 56). Furthermore, it can stress how many of these immigrants were indentured workers, imported via the coolie trade which burgeoned in British Hong Kong after the Atlantic slave trade went into decline (Peter Li 20). Importantly, then, a postcolonial diasporic paradigm can productively complicate the history of Asian Canadians by acknowledging that this history is not only shaped in the Canadian context; rather, it is part of a larger history of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism.

If Cho’s arguments gesture to the benefits of a global, historical, and comparative framework, Larissa Lai’s book, entitled *Slanting I, Imagining We*, emphasizes the perils of relying too heavily on a fixed notion of Asian Canadian identity. Lai argues that the tactic of strategic essentialism has become seriously problematic due to the pressures of “state incorporation” currently informing Asian Canadian Studies (6). Underlying these pressures is an investment in liberal multiculturalism that reinforces static notions of racial and national difference, and works to “recirculate the logic of colonialism in newly embodied forms” (23). This logic becomes all the more insidious given the current circulation of model minority discourses, which tacitly reproduce Orientalist images of “Asians” as perpetual outsiders and potential threats to the nation. Indeed, model minority and “yellow peril” discourses are closely related; both describe Asians as “hyper-industrious labour machines” and highlight the precarity

of Asian claims to citizenship and belonging (Phung, “Are People” 294). As Lai points out, the 2010 *Maclean’s* article entitled “Too Asian” illustrates how “the trope of the ‘yellow peril’” has been reinvigorated in the national imaginary (Lai 17). The article, which proposes that “white students” feel intimidated by the perceived work ethic of “both Asian Canadians and international students” (Findlay and Köhler 76), not only presents a homogenizing construction of “Asian-ness,” but defines it as “the foreigner-within,” always external to national belonging (Lowe 5). Indeed, since the article portrays Canadian-born and newly-arrived “Asians” as uniformly making “sacrifice[s] of time and freedom [that ‘whites’ are] not willing to make” (Findlay and Köhler 76), it points to an Orientalizing process—a process which Lisa Lowe rightly describes as “endlessly fixing and repeating stereotypes” (Lowe 19). That is, the *Maclean’s* article exposes a colonial era East-West binarism that continues to underlie normative conceptions of Canadian identity.

In response to the reinvigoration of Orientalist stereotypes of “Asian-ness,” I propose that the politics of reading presented in my chapter is particularly important. I examine two canonical Chinese Canadian texts—SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* and Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children*—from a postcolonial diasporic perspective. Widely recognized as literary “milestones,” these texts have been credited with creating “mainstream critical attention” and paving the way for other Chinese Canadian writers (Chao 93). While SKY Lee and Denise Chong are often discussed in Asian Canadian Studies, however, the theoretical approach to their texts is typically framed by implicit oppositions that privilege a modern Canada over a traditional China. This approach takes its cues from an identifiable plot structure that not only appears in these two texts, but in women’s texts more generally in the 1980s and 90s (Bow 71). As Leslie Bow explains, the recuperative model of feminist criticism, which was influential at that time,

promoted the “belief that to restore the gendered...subject’s voice is to restore...her worth” (71). The narrative depiction of a “subject’s movement from silence to voice with a future-oriented, salutary effect on a succeeding generation” was hence a common organizing structure in women’s writing (71). Bow notes, for example, that the “coming to voice” plotline appears “with varying degrees of significance” in the United States and other English-speaking countries (72). The inherent problem with this structure, however, is that its underlying progressivism requires “women’s oppression to assume an air of pastness” (72). Moreover, when this structure interacts with stories of first-generation immigrants and their Western-raised children, it can reify East-West distinctions by projecting Orientalized difference onto the parents and linking the children’s acculturation with increased freedom and autonomy. That is, it can position the East as backward, repressive, and “excessively genderist,” while also equating the West with modernization, liberty, and self-fulfillment (72). This chapter thus investigates two popular Chinese Canadian novels in order to explore an interaction between feminist and nationalist discourses, which tacitly associates gender equality with Westernization. It considers that this interaction has particular resonances in Canada, where racial discussions are inflected by liberal multiculturalism.

Because *Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Concubine’s Children* follow a familiar narrative trajectory—charting a daughter’s struggle to overcome the past and find her own “voice”—it is not surprising that some critics have harmonized the depictions of generational struggles with dominant narratives of the nation’s liberal progressivism. As Roy Miki observes, one of the reasons these texts have received so much critical attention and “institutional approval” is that their developmental narratives seem to confirm the nation’s transformation into a more liberated, multicultural state (230). That the novels have been interpreted in this way is

evident in various commentaries. Mari Peepre comments, for instance, that the daughter-narrators of these novels are caught between two disparate “realities”—they are “*pulled back in time*” by the “the extremely oppressive patriarchal rule” of their immigrant-mother’s culture, and “*pulled forward*...by the seemingly liberal and egalitarian values...of their North American host culture” (81, emphasis added). Likewise, Lien Chao suggests that the novels signal a “coming to voice” of Chinese Canadian women, who have found the courage not only to confront the “century-long” history of racism in Canada (17), but also to challenge the “sexism” of “traditional male-oriented Chinese culture” (29). Partly due to their feminist plot structures, therefore, these novels have been read as expressing a progressive notion of history, one that does not necessarily contest idealistic notions of Canada’s multiculturalism or the colonial binaries of East and West. Shifting away from this reading, this chapter calls attention to moments in the novels where the daughter-narrators create distance from, and thus complicate, the underlying progressivism of their narratives. I argue that these moments destabilize the ostensible authority of the third-person presentation of the family stories, and I clarify that these stories are told from a Westernized, subjective, and historically-situated perspective. Moreover, I show how these moments foreground the blind-spots, interests, and motivations of the daughter-narrators; they undermine the idea that the family stories are complete or accurate, and effectively create openings for intervening dialogue. By viewing these novels from a postcolonial diasporic perspective, this chapter seeks to disrupt the focus on the daughter-narrators’ apparent search for “a new sense of integrated [Chinese-Canadian] identity” (Peepre 80). As my re-reading hopes to illustrate, it is possible and necessary to emphasize textual moments of ambivalence and elision—moments which generate insights that unsettle the colonial era East-West binarism and go beyond the overtly national frame that the novels appear to uphold.

4.2 A Postcolonial Diasporic Perspective

A postcolonial diasporic approach to *Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Concubine's Children* places the family histories of the daughter-narrators within a larger context of Chinese movement and migration. Whereas a more conventional, nationalist perspective tends to focus on the arrival and acculturation of Chinese immigrants, “including the problems of prejudice and discrimination directed toward [these immigrants],” a postcolonial diasporic perspective considers the historical connections between “the sending and receiving societies” (Cheung and Bonachich 1, 2). In other words, this perspective sets the stories of Chinese immigration to Canada against a global backdrop, underscoring how the “push” and “pull” factors of immigration are interrelated. Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich point out that these “push” and “pull” factors arise from a logic of imperialism and capitalist development. As they explain, this logic creates “two conditions, the displacement of colonized peoples and the requirement of more labour in the capitalist economy” (2); these conditions “result in pressure for people to migrate as workers to more advanced capitalist countries” (2). From this standpoint, it becomes clear that several factors in the nineteenth century set the stage for Chinese immigration to Canada, including the increased “‘opening’ of China by Britain following its victory in the [first] Opium War,” the demise of the Atlantic slave trade, and the need for labour in the far-flung colonies of the British Empire (Shelley Lee 39). These factors hit southern China especially hard, and between 1840 and 1900, around 2.5 million people “left for the Americas, the West Indies, Hawaii, Australia, New Zealand, Southeast Asia, and Africa” (40). Early Chinese Canadian migration was then a part of a “mass exodus of dispossessed” people (Cho, “Asian Canadian” 188). However, since the emerging coolie trade preferred “Chinese men [as] a source of cheap, vulnerable labour,” this mass exodus “was essentially a male activity” (Sandra Chu 393). The

result was a distinct “sex imbalance” amongst early Chinese migrants in which men far outnumbered women (399).

Viewing the novels of SKY Lee and Denise Chong from a postcolonial diasporic perspective helps to illuminate the imperialistic and economic dimensions of Chinese migration that form the background of these localized family stories. Both novels locate their narrative beginnings at the turn of the twentieth century and describe unfolding events that occur after an initial phase of Chinese Canadian immigration. This initial phase was marked by the international coolie trade—and more specifically by the recruitment of large numbers of male Chinese labourers to build colonial projects in British Columbia such as the Cariboo Wagon Road in 1863 and the Canadian Pacific Railway in the early 1880s (Peter Li 21). Wong Gwei Chang in *Disappearing Moon Café* and Chan Sam in *The Concubine’s Children* are the forefathers in their respective novels and constitute a second wave of Chinese immigrants. Both are born after the disturbances of the first Opium War and come to Canada after the diasporic passages for male Chinese labourers have been well-established. Thus, it makes sense that the novels’ daughter-narrators, who are looking back at their localized family histories, would have a hard time seeing the more deeply-rooted factors contributing to their forefathers’ immigration. Moreover, since these forefathers were able to circumvent immigration barriers and bring spouses to Canada, their localized family histories illustrate a relatively rare reality, which also obscures capitalist activities and global patterns. For example, Lee’s narrator, Kae Ying Woo, only briefly mentions that Gwei Chang came to Canada because his extended “family in China needed to eat” (6), while Chong describes that Chan Sam came because “the land” in China had grown “so tired, so crowded” (18). Both of these daughter-narrators suggest that their male ancestors were chasing a “Gold Mountain dream” (43); yet neither discusses this dream as a

“phenomenon of developing international networks...and the rise of economic and political imperialism” (Shelley Lee 36). Nonetheless, this global context still haunts these novels, surfacing in implicit ways. For instance, in Lee’s novel, Gwei Chang’s search for the bones of the diseased railway workers is symbolic of a process of having to “dig”—to sort through layers of historical information—to find traces of previous generations. Moreover, since the bones will be returned to family members in China, they point to a history that cannot be contained in the Canadian national context. Furthermore, in Chong’s novel, her references to Chan Sam’s father who sojourned in America, and his brother who went to Cuba by way of indenture, gesture to how early Chinese Canadian migration is connected to a series of diasporic movements and migrations arising from global imperialism and capitalist development.

Reflection

One aspect of my grandmother’s stories that surprises me is how little she was able to tell me about previous generations. For example, she knew very little about her grandfather outside of his name, occupation, and home-village. How could my grandmother be so seemingly remote from Lee Woy, the first of her family to come to Canada? I wonder if my grandmother, because she was so focused on narrating a localized family history, had a hard time understanding and incorporating her grandfather’s complex movements and affiliations, which were intimately linked to global migrant networks. What seems apparent from her stories, however, is that there was a discernable difference between her grandfather and father. Whereas her grandfather’s family strategies and business networks required him to travel frequently between countries, her father’s strategies and networks demanded that he be clearly situated within Victoria’s Chinatown. As Adam McKeown explains, critics often underestimate how such factors, which are informed by imperialist and capitalist developments, determined the “intentions and possibilities” of early Chinese migrants (10). These intentions and possibilities were even more limited for Chinese women, who “[d]ue to cultural mores and economic barriers” could not “come to British Columbia independently” (Adilman 56). Tamara Adilman elucidates that “single women” who arrived in British Columbia were usually those that could repay Canada’s head tax through paid labour: “young girls who were purchased to be servants to merchant families...and tearoom waitresses” (56). This global perspective provokes me to question how some themes and issues are not easily acknowledged in nation-based narratives. To what extent does the postcolonial diasporic context get buried across generations? How was my grandmother’s family shaped by global conditions and connections, even if she was not fully aware of these influences?

Letter from Grandma

Unlike my grandfather, Lee Woy, who went back and forth between Canada and China, my father was raised in Canada. In a lot of ways, Victoria was all he knew, and he never talked about going back to his home-village.

Of course, I don't know that much about my parents. I don't even know how they met. There are a lot of stories, but couldn't tell you which is true. One story is that my father saw my mother working on a ship that was passing through Victoria; even though she was gaunt and covered with dirt, he could see past her rough exterior and distinguish her beauty. Another story is that he saw her while visiting the house of another merchant in Chinatown; she was the housemaid charged with the care of this merchant's children. Personally, I believe the second version more than I do the first, but there is no way of knowing for sure.

In advocating for a postcolonial diasporic framework, however, I am not suggesting that an awareness of Canada's history of racial discrimination of Chinese Canadians is not crucial to understanding these novels. Rather, I propose that this awareness is enriched by a global perspective that reveals how Canada's racialization of "the Chinese" drew upon an archive of colonial ideas "created elsewhere" (Stanley 73). As Timothy Stanley notes, the production of racialized Chinese and Canadian difference was strategic; it was not restricted to the Canadian nation, but relied upon both British and American Orientalisms, discourses which constructed and polarized "the East" and "the West" (73). These discourses helped Canada to construct "the Chinese" as an object of Western understanding, "at once 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha 101). In the 1870s, "resettler men from Britain and eastern Canada excluded men from China from the emergent Canadian state system" (Stanley 74), and so Chinese Canadian history begins, in many ways, with the nation's embracing of Orientalist traditions, positioning "Canadian" in opposition to "Chinese." These traditions, furthermore, also viewed Chinese women as objects of prurient interest, defining them as either "victims" of Chinese patriarchy or "prostitutes," but always threats to "racial purity" (Sandra Chu 395). These Orientalist tropes helped to justify immigration barriers and "further reinforced the sex

imbalance within the Chinese-Canadian population” (399); they entrenched the notion that “the Chinese” were “sojourners,” not meant “to settle in Canada” (396). This racialized logic created an imagined sense of community and nationalism by suggesting that, if “the ‘Chinese’ were inferior, foreign, and alien,” then “there was another ‘race’ ...in Canada that [was] superior, native, citizen” (Stanley 77). A global perspective supplements and nuances nationalist understandings of Canada’s racialization of “the Chinese” by revealing how the nation developed its civic boundaries through an opposition to “the East,” a phantasmic site imagined as strange, corrupting, and unchanging. This global perspective, which explores how Orientalisms operate, becomes all the more vital given the current circulation of model minority discourses, which subtly re-invoke colonial East-West comparisons and re-animate the stereotype of the “yellow peril.”

These Orientalist ideas of “the Chinese,” which are bound up in notions of “Canadian-ness,” have a tendency to surface in feminist texts such as *Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Concubine’s Children*. As Aiwah Ong observes, feminist writing has difficulty countering the East-West distinctions embedded within national narratives, as it is “haunt[ed]” by “Western imperialist definitions of colonized populations” (par. 3). Indeed, in using Western standards of individualism and agency as “the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural others,” feminist writing can suppress the complexities of non-Western histories and cultures (Mohanty 19). Transnational feminist theory has consequently warned that the desire to give women “a voice in history” can be shaped by an imperialist formation in which feminists view non-Western women as needing to be saved from Indigenous patriarchal traditions and imagine “voices” for these women accordingly (Spivak 297). In the Canadian context, this warning about the limitations of the recuperative project has relevance for feminist texts dealing with first-

generation Chinese immigrants and their Canadian-raised children. This relevance is heightened due to Canada's history of using Orientalist tropes of Chinese women to restrict immigration. Chinese Canadian writers are hence in danger of reproducing, to some extent, these strategies of description and understanding. Moreover, feminist texts, which use the depiction of mother-daughter struggles as a way of understanding gender oppression, mobilize a developmental narrative structure. In this structure, "a previous generation of women's experiences serve as a foundation, albeit a traumatic one, authorizing a better future" (Bow 71). Both *Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Concubine's Children* follow this basic trajectory, seeming to link "the hope of generational transmission ('You will inherit a better life because of my suffering') to a positive message of Western acculturation ('In the West, I am free of family obligation and gender constraint') (72). That is, they associate "China" with a repressive past, and "Canada" with a progressive future. Nonetheless, in my analysis, I call attention to textual moments that disrupt this feminist plot structure. I show how these moments destabilize the East-West stereotypes and progressivist notions which are embedded within these family stories. This chapter is interested, then, in the ways that the daughter-narrators create openings to highlight the mediated and uncertain nature of their stories and make spaces for postcolonial diasporic insights and readings.

Reflection

It is perhaps understandable that my grandmother's stories are organized around her male ancestors. Generally speaking, discussions of Chinese Canadian history have tended to focus on "the effects of the head tax on Chinese male migrants" (Sandra Chu 389). As Sandra Ka Hon Chu observes, this tendency is partly because Chinese Canadian "men have found it easier to articulate" their experiences of racism (409). More specifically, these men can claim a "cognizable harm" through their having to pay the head tax (410). Chinese Canadian women, on the other hand, were just as affected by immigration barriers, but often in a more "oblique" manner (409); "[i]n short, Chinese women [were] discriminated against in terms of the head tax because they did not...have the capacity to pay it" (410). The head tax resulted in two dominant conditions: first, the forced

separation of women in China from their partners in Canada; and second, the creation of a “harsh environment” in Canada, where “the few Chinese women” who did immigrate to Canada felt increased “sexual and reproductive pressure” (402). Indeed, the head tax fostered an “extreme” sex imbalance, which not only added to the isolation of Chinese women in Canada, but also rendered them more dependent on men (405). Feminist writing is, therefore, needed to draw attention to the female migrant experience. Yet, such writing also needs to be wary of Orientalist tropes, which portray Chinese women as outside of Western norms—as either corrupting “sexual servants” or passive “domesticated appendages” (411). In other words, feminist writing should avoid uncritically investing in a Western “moral framework” and viewing Chinese women as objects of prurient interest (411).

Letter from Grandma

This morning, I was struck by a sudden thought. It occurred to me that in all the letters I’ve written you before, I’ve talked mostly about my father. He was an important man—well respected in Chinatown, even if he was a bit of a gambler. But I haven’t told you about my mother.

My mother was much younger than my father, maybe twenty years younger. She was his second wife or his concubine. He had another family, a wife and two daughters that he had brought over from China, you see. He was merchant class, and it was common for men like him to have more than one wife. Only, in China, he would never have met, and never have married, my mother. She was of a much lower class than him...My mother never spoke of her life before she got married; she never told me about who she was or where she was from. Maybe she thought that I wouldn’t understand. And I guess she could have been ashamed.

4.3 (Re)Reading Disappearing Moon Café

Located in the novel’s present moment of 1986, Kae Ying Woo, the daughter-narrator of *Disappearing Moon Café*, reflects on four generations of the family’s history, imaginatively re-creating scenes that explore, in particular, the “passion and fierceness” of her female ancestors (SKY Lee 145). In linking the details of these women’s lives together and seeing their pasts as intrinsically part of the “same past,” Kae considers that she is doing more than just “telling a story of several generations” (23, 189). To her mind, she has access to, and thus can speak for, her ancestor’s experiences; as she puts it, she is “one individual thinking collectively” (189). It is an idea that critics, focusing on localized racialization and marginalization processes, have reiterated in their treatment of the novel. For instance, Lien Chao concentrates on how the novel

reveals a “historical reality,” articulating a “collective self” or identity that is ostensibly shared between “community and individuals” (93). Like Kae, this criticism postulates that younger generations can express a “common narrative of the community’s experience” (Patricia Chu 6). However, this approach, which emphasizes the Canadian nationalist context and assumes a cause-and-effect relationship between the community and literature, also relies upon a seemingly stable notion of Chinese Canadian identity. Although this suggestion constitutes an empowering political gesture, it also views Chinese Canadian literature as a reflection of, or reaction to, the social conditions imposed on Chinese Canadians (Xiaoqing 8). Moreover, the insistence on a Canadian national context for understanding this literature leaves ideas of “Chinese identity” or “Chinese-ness” mostly unexamined (Kambourelli, “Reading Closely” 64). Such readings of *Disappearing Moon Café* have thus tended to overlook the complicated ways in which the novel is written and taken for granted its rather narrow representations of “traditional Chinese” beliefs and customs (Chao 99). It is hence important to note how the novel cannot simply be contained within a Canadian national frame that focuses only on local racialization processes. In this chapter, I argue that the novel performs a contradictory movement, one that allows for postcolonial diasporic interventions. On one hand, I highlight how the text deploys a feminist “coming to voice” narrative to claim a sense of “Canadian-ness” and position Kae as a speaking, knowing subject. Yet, on the other hand, I explore textual moments that create opportunities to interrogate this narrative form and question Kae’s authority. Therefore, I contend that, while the novel inscribes an image of Chinese Canadian female subjectivity, it also uncovers how this image upholds Westernized notions of individualism and agency and relegates non-Western women to a subordinate realm.

Reflection

Reading my grandmother's stories, I am conscious of how they could easily be molded into a feminist "coming to voice" narrative; my great-grandmother could be construed as woefully constrained by Chinese cultural traditions, and my grandmother could be seen as breaking free of these traditions and gaining increased freedom in Canada. In other words, my grandmother's stories could be shaped to "validat[e] a progressive notion of history by situating degrees of gender freedom as the chief indicator of differences between China and [Canada], 'back then' and now, 'feudal' and modern thinking" (Bow 98). With this consciousness, I realize the need to highlight moments in which my grandmother recognizes her mother's agency and self-sufficiency in running her family household. These moments challenge the notion that my great-grandmother exhibited "qualities of [feminine] embeddedness" typically associated with "the East" (97). Rather, my great-grandmother is revealed to be a dynamic individual, who acted decisively to protect and nourish her children and herself. For example, I interpret the fact that she kept her "real name" hidden as a sign of her commitment to divert immigration authorities and keep her family safe. Moreover, I think her refusal to speak about her past points to layers of her personality and experiences, which my grandmother had no access to, and thus could not speak to.

Letter from Grandma

The more I think about it, the more I can't explain it. I'm not sure why I've told you so much about my father—because in so many ways I didn't really know him. He only spent one or two nights a week with us, and the rest of the week he spent with his other family. On the other hand, I spent almost every single day with my mother. In every practical sense, she's the one who raised me—she kept me clothed and fed, which wasn't easy during the Depression era, you know.

But then again, I can't even tell you my mother's real name—her immigration papers were forged, and the name listed on her head tax certificate was false. This is what many Chinese women had to do; they had to take on different names and identities just to enter the country. Yet, my mother would never reveal to anyone, not even to her closest friends or family, who she really was. And that made her very unusual, I think.

In the context of the 1980s and 90s, when *Disappearing Moon Café* was both written and published, recuperative feminism was prominent. As Patricia Chu explains, recuperative feminism offers a narrative model for "imaginatively transforming" female protagonists into recognizable national and agentic subjects (3). In particular, the "coming to voice" narrative structure adapts the trajectory of a bildungsroman (6); it depicts a search for self in which the protagonist begins in alienation and seeks integration into a larger social order (12). Bow elaborates that, in mother-daughter narratives, this search for self also includes "transcending a

maternal legacy” and family stories “are offered as a corrective to the present” (Bow 71, 94). *Disappearing Moon Café* draws upon this structure by featuring a daughter-narrator engaged in a recuperative project as a way of finding “self-help” (94). The narrative conflict, which is described in the novel’s first chapter, is steeped in feminist excavations of traditional versus modern values. Kae is introduced as a Chinese Canadian woman grappling with the ways that a traditional family structure has failed to make her happy. She is a thirty-six year old “investment research analyst” experiencing an “identity crisis” brought on by the difficult delivery of her son (SKY Lee 122, 191). As Kae explains, her “close scrape with death” has caused her to “rethink” her life (21). She has realized that getting married and having children has not fulfilled her, and she has started to question the belief that “it is important to keep a family strong and together” (20). Kae’s epiphany complicates the idea that she can speak for a collective, as her reflections upon family life indicate that she is interested in developing an individual, not a communal, sense of identity. Indeed, Kae describes herself as a woman seeking “enlightenment” (20), coming into a feminist consciousness in which she sees herself as a self-determined individual with the ability to choose her own future. In contrast with her non-Western forebears, Kae stakes out a space for herself, in which she can claim a sense of both national and feminist belonging. However, to do so, she adopts Western individualism as a universal and inherent good, participating in an intersection of national and gender discourses which implicitly rely on Orientalist tropes.

Reflection

In sharing her childhood recollections, my grandmother often tries to piece together a backstory for her mother. For example, while recalling a few visits to the Mahs, an affluent family in Victoria’s Chinatown, my grandmother speculates that her mother once worked for the family as a domestic servant. This speculation partly explains my grandmother’s subtle irritation in describing how her mother seemed so obsequious

towards the Mahs. I believe my grandmother felt confused and embarrassed by the idea that her mother had been a servant. Indeed, her confusion and embarrassment would, to some extent, be understandable given the prevalence of Orientalist discourses portraying Chinese female servants as submissive and exploited “slave-girls” (Adilman 58). As Tamara Adilman explains, the Women’s Missionary Society in Victoria was influential in maintaining this stereotyped image of Chinese women and girls (58). Nonetheless, Adilman stresses that, despite the stereotype, Chinese female servants “were not uniformly mistreated,” and, in fact, some reports suggest “many of these girls were quite as well cared for, if not better treated, than domestics in European homes” (58). That being said, it remains uncertain if my great-grandmother even was a servant for the Mahs. Her deference to the well-to-do family could simply have been social etiquette or strategic networking.

Letter from Grandma

When we were little, my mother would sometimes take us to see a family called the Mahs—she would spend hours getting us ready and telling us to be on our best behaviour. They lived in a big, three-story house on the outskirts of Chinatown... She wanted us to show them respect and treat them like family, even though we *knew* they weren’t related to us. You see, I think they’re the ones who brought her over from China. I think that she worked for them or that they arranged for her immigration papers. She always acted so polite and deferential towards them...I used to think of them as her “fake family.”

A specific construction of “the East” is integral to the workings of the feminist structure organizing the novel’s presentation of the family stories, one that bolsters an image of a democratic and progressive “West.” This construction of “the East” emerges through Kae’s desire to break away from the family, whose demands are positioned as an impediment to her individual development. For instance, she expresses frustration at her “chinese [sic] parents” for pushing her to achieve “excellence” and to trust in “the natural and orderly progression...of things” (20). A strict “Chinese” upbringing, Kae suggests, has taught her to suppress her own needs and passions, and attempt to be “perfect all the time” (20). In portraying her parents as conservative and somewhat controlling, Kae locates herself within a kind of repression-liberation scenario, where her own freedom depends on a distancing between her and them. The divide between Kae and her family, moreover, resonates with East-West distinctions, falling along a

crack between Chinese and Canadian, collective familism and competitive individualism, patriarchal custom and female autonomy. By implicitly linking Western individualism to women's autonomy, Kae frames her decision to tell her family's stories—despite her mother's injunction to keep the stories within “these four walls”—as a moment of empowerment (23). Thus, the novel begins with Kae assuming a representative authority against her family, who are to some extent depicted as too secretive, perhaps too stereotypically “Chinese,” to be speaking, knowing subjects. This narrative beginning situates Kae as “a willing native informant,” or what Bow defines as an insider to local “Chinese” culture who is also knowable within a Western conceptual framework (78). It is this situation that provides Kae with the permission to speak for her family, for her informant role requires that she translate her family's “Chinese” difference into explanations that are “accessible and acceptable to ‘mainstream’” Canadians (Patricia Chu 16).

Lending weight to Kae's apparent ability to speak for her family is not just a sense that she is closely acquainted with “Chinese” culture, but also a belief that she is, as a woman, intimately connected to the experiences of her female ancestors. Indeed, at times, Kae explicitly appeals to this belief, suggesting that all the women in her family have endured “women-hating worlds,” and their “lives, being what they are, are linked together” (SKY Lee 145). Such appeals work to diminish the cultural distance between Kae and her immigrant foremothers through a feminist “politics of sameness” (Banerjee 72). As Amrita Banerjee explains, this politics is a basic premise of Western feminism, promulgating a conviction that the female bond transcends borders “based on cultural, racial, national, and other differences” (72). Kae appears to adopt this borderless feminist perspective when she acts as an omniscient narrator who has admission into the inner thoughts and feelings of three previous generations of Wong women. For example,

when Kae first introduces her “dumb great-granny,” Mui Lan, she is able to describe not only how Mui Lan appeared to other people in the community, but also how Mui Lan privately reasoned and made decisions (SKY Lee 31). Through these descriptions, the great-grandmother materializes as a fairly transparent and disagreeable character (23). While Kae notes with sympathy how Mui Lan felt disoriented in “Gold Mountain” without a “society of women,” she also holds her great-grandmother to task for apparently becoming “icy,” calculating and demanding (26). More specifically, Kae implies that Mui Lan’s desire to have a grandson and continue the family lineage, the “golden chain of male to male,” is linked to a wish to “ma[k]e her suffering felt far and wide” (31). In this representation, Mui Lan’s adherence to village “customs and traditions” is framed as a conscious choice—a choice Mui Lan makes not because she is embedded in different ways of being and thinking, but because she wants to inflict pain and “bitterness” onto other women (27, 31). This framing effectively transposes an unfamiliar cultural system into a more familiar image of the female “tyrant,” who is pictured as vindictive and actively complicit in patriarchy (31). Also, it allows Kae to bypass more complex questions of cultural conflict and generational gaps, and instead focus on her family history as a series of lessons derived from the individual “mistakes,” or unfortunate “choices,” her female ancestors made (131).

Reflection

Unlike Kae, my grandmother does not act as an omniscient narrator in her stories. For the most part, she acknowledges that she cannot explain her mother’s motivations and emotions. Nonetheless, in some cases, my grandmother shows an impulse to portray a more personal and undisclosed side of her mother. While this impulse is understandable, it can also manifest in potentially problematic ways, especially when my grandmother attempts to describe this side of her mother in terms of traditional Chinese beliefs.

Letter from Grandma

One thing that I can tell you about my mother is that she loved Chinese operas—I mean, she really loved them. For a wedding gift, my father had given her a collection of

phonograph records, and she would listen to the opera records over and over again. I remember, she knew all the words and could even sing along. Now, I don't know a lot about Chinese operas, but I think they tell stories about Chinese myths and legends—they teach lessons about virtues like persistence, honour, and duty. Yet, it also seems to me that they are about the difficulty of living up to these virtues. Maybe that's why they appealed to my mother; they spoke to a part of her that she kept secreted away.

Reflection

On one hand, the letter excerpt above reveals a poignant memory, which my grandmother uses to acknowledge the qualities she admires most about her mother—her mother's perseverance, dignity, and dependability. On the other hand, the excerpt demonstrates the risks involved when Canadian-born daughters attempt to gain access to the inner thoughts and feelings of their immigrant mothers. In particular, these attempts often rely on simplifying gestures, implicitly drawing on Orientalist tropes that portray unfamiliar cultural systems as fixed and knowable within a Western conceptual framework.

As I have mentioned, Kae's treatment of her family stories follows an example of the feminist recuperative project, which puts emphasis on perceived similarities between women, "at the expense of sacrificing differences to large extent" (Banerjee 72). Within this project, various "borders that mark the specificity" of a cultural identity "almost become barriers to any discourse of [women's] 'liberation'" (72). Kae's strategy of abstracting Mui Lan from the intricacy of her village beliefs and inscribing her within the concerns of Western individualism is, therefore, a common trope within feminist writing (Ong par. 2). Nonetheless, transnational feminists have pointed out that this strategy, which assumes that other cultures can be subsumed into a Western conceptual framework, perpetuates a kind of "reductive fallacy" that cannot acknowledge "actual heterogeneities and discontinuities between women" (Banerjee 72). Perhaps the gravest effect of this reductive fallacy is that it assimilates the experiences and vocabularies of non-Western women into that of privileged, Westernized women (72). That is, it carries out a discursive form of colonialism by maintaining existing structures of privilege and domination. From this perspective, it becomes clear that Kae must impose her own cultural assumptions on her female

ancestors, in order to make their lives connect. Her version of the family history is a sort of gender analysis, in which her immigrant great-grandmother and grandmother are analogously interpreted as conforming to patriarchal norms, because they are “coward[s],” too afraid to take “risks” and challenge the status quo (SKY Lee 41). While this analysis assimilates much of the alterity of her ancestors’ lives, it also provides Kae with a story that inspires her to quit her job, leave her marriage, and become a writer. In a couple of ways, then, Kae’s relation to her family stories is problematic: first, because her ethnographic lens largely disregards cultural and historical differences; and second, because her representation of her female ancestors serves as a self-consolidating project. Yet, in textual moments that emerge in between her family stories, Kae draws attention to her blinkered perspective and questionable motives. These moments work to accentuate and disturb the narrative workings and stereotyped assumptions undergirding the beliefs and practices of feminist writers like Kae.

One key moment that emerges in this context occurs just after Kae’s introduction of Mui Lan. Following her characterization of the great-grandmother as “a grasping woman” whose reasons for wanting a grandson are “pesky,” Kae takes time to evaluate her “own motives” (29, 31). Kae asks:

Why do I need to make this ancestress the tip of the funnelling storm, the pinnacle that anchored chaos and destruction close to earth? Why do I need to indict her? Why not my grandmother, say? Both are dead. Actually, both are to blame (if you like that kind of thing), but since I’ve ended up paying dearly for their deeds, and I know of others who’ve paid with their lives, isn’t it my privilege to assign blame, preferably to the one I understand the least, the one farthest away from me and from those I love. (SKY Lee 31-32)

By interjecting these self-conscious comments, Kae underscores that she is orchestrating and “embellish[ing]” her family stories for her own purposes, mainly her contemporary quandaries over identity (136). To substantiate her suggestion that her current pain is part of an “old pain” (179), she needs a family narrative that portrays her current crisis as a consequence of “choices” made three generations before her birth. As Kae indicates, she needs to “assign blame.” Thus, Kae imaginatively positions Mui Lan as the source of her family’s “great chinese [sic] tragedy” (179); it is what Kae later calls “a mean writer’s trick” (181). Furthermore, Kae concedes that her narrative representation of her great-grandmother and grandmother requires no consent, as “both are dead” and have no power to represent themselves. Here, Kae seems to apprehend that, by rendering her female ancestors as fictional characters, she is committing a kind of appropriative violence. Even so, she reasons that this is her “privilege”—to rebuke “the one[s] she understands the least” for ostensibly causing her pain. Textual moments like this foreground Kae’s self-interested logic, pushing readers to question her credibility and challenge her familial accounts. These moments also provide openings that allow for postcolonial intercessions, calling attention to how privileged feminists, like Kae, “frequently seek to establish their authority on the backs of non-Western women, determining for them the meanings and goals of their lives” (Ong par. 2).

Ultimately, the novel’s textual moments, which highlight Kae’s self-seeking interests and motivations, combine to destabilize the progressive, national conception of history implicit in its feminist “coming to voice” structure. On one hand, the novel conforms to this plot structure, culminating in a more “liberated” subject. Kae even seems to affirm this hope in her effusive claim that “after three generations of struggle, the daughters are free!” (SKY Lee 209). Yet, on the other hand, there is much within the text that works to counter this overtly liberal message. For instance, glimpses into Kae’s writerly tastes reveal that she is structuring her family history

according to a “love [of] melodramas” (138). Kae’s inclination to infuse her storytelling with excessive emotions and exciting events surfaces in her continual descriptions of her ancestors’ “livid passion[s]” and “rage” (155, 179). Kae herself acknowledges this tendency to “romanticize” her forebears (145). In some ways, Kae’s focus on melodrama serves to parody feminist narratives, which often use emotive techniques to convey universalizing notions of female bonding (Bow 92-93). Certainly, when she proposes that “the perfect title” for her family saga is the “*House Hexed by Woe*,” readers are meant to view Kae’s proclivity to amplify and embellish as bordering on ridiculous (SKY Lee 208). Her envisioning of “an enticing movie poster with a title like *Temple of Wonged Women*” is similarly intended to cast doubt upon the idea that Kae is “the resolution to this story” (209). In effect, the novel is calling attention to the artificial nature of Kae’s version of family history. While Kae uses a feminist plot structure to devise a compelling teleological narrative, textual moments like this disturb the progressivist trajectory. These moments ask if it is realistic to contend that Kae has “been called upon to give meaning to three generations of life-and-death struggles” (210). Moreover, they create a space for thinking about how Kae’s investments in Western feminism disguise an unpleasant ideology of separatism. In order for Kae to embody a modern form of individual freedom, and claim a sense of national and feminist belonging in “the West,” she must first create a lasting division between her and her female ancestors. That is, Kae establishes herself as “free” only in contrast to her non-Western forebears, or those whom she considers “unfree.”

Reflection

Within my grandmother’s stories, she relates extraordinary moments where she recognizes her mother as a woman of adaptability, strength, and agency. These moments effectively work to displace my great-grandmother from the flattening realm of Orientalist understanding, troubling the idea that she neatly fits within existing stereotypes for early Chinese Canadian women. The moments also question the progressivist trajectory inherent in feminist “coming to voice” narratives and disrupt the

expectation that my Westernized grandmother is more free or capable than her immigrant mother.

Letter from Grandma

Thinking back, I feel terrible about the way that we—my siblings and I, that is—behaved towards my mother. I mean, we were awful. When we started going to school, we would come back home and talk to one other in English; we did it on purpose, because we thought my mother couldn't understand. Can you imagine? At the time, we thought we were playing a game. But now, I can see that we were kind of taunting her. We didn't realize that she was working all of the time or that she might have emotions like loneliness or home-sickness. All we knew was that she was different from the world we were learning about at school.

Anyway, you know what? One day, we were speaking English to one other—oh, we were giggling away, probably avoiding some chore or another that we'd been asked to do—when my mother came into the room and interrupted us. In a loud and frightening voice, she said, "Stop it." And then she told us that she could understand every word that we were saying. We were terrified and hung our heads in shame. To this day, I'm not sure how she did it—I'm not sure how she learned to speak English. She listened to the radio and she was a keen observer. Maybe that's how she did it.

4.4 (Re)Reading The Concubine's Children

Published four years after *Disappearing Moon Café*, Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children* follows a similar, feminist plot structure. Like SKY Lee's daughter-narrator, Kae Ying Woo, "Chong positions herself as the contemporary point of view" (Chao 104). From this perspective, she traces three generations of the family's matrilineal history, exploring, in particular, the relationship between her immigrant grandmother, May-ying, and her Canadian-born mother, Hing. Nonetheless, unlike Kae, Chong does not describe her motivation to explore the past as a personal crisis; rather, she suggests her retelling of the family stories is a way of helping her mother, who "still hurt[s]" from "her sad history" (Chong 269). This stated premise produces a fairly conventional, chronological narrative, which runs from May-ying's birth in China in 1907 to Chong's current subject-position in 1987. As Chong explains in the "Preface to the First Edition," she narrates "the story" from an "omniscient" point of view to present her

ancestors in a “the most fair and honest way [possible]” (xi); only “the truth,” she implies, is necessary to restore “a painting” of the past (xi).

Chong’s approach to presenting her family history has been widely praised by critics focusing on a Canadian nationalist context and localized experiences of racialization. As discussed above, such a framework tends to assume the existence of a “collective” identity that enables younger generations to speak for the community’s “common” experience (Patricia Chu 6). This assumption is evident in critical appraisals that applaud Chong for her “collectively-based” writing practices (Chao 107). Specifically, this criticism commends Chong’s “nuanced and historicized perspective” (Ty 37), reasoning that the perspective sheds light on “a history of racist exclusion and betrayed promises” (Gunderson par. 7). Eleanor Ty, for instance, contends that, “by collecting information and writing [the novel], Chong is able to repossess her grandmother’s body” and “recuperat[e]... her grandmother’s life stories” (52). Likewise, Chao asserts that Chong’s depiction of May-ying as an “independent modern woman” symbolizes an “awakening of Chinese Canadian women” (113, 114). As Kamboureli points out, however, this notion of recuperation “is inscribed by the same teleology and progressive thinking [as] modernity” (“Diaspora and Modernity” 369). Chong effectively recuperates “the past in order to put it ‘behind’ [her],” implying that Canada is now “free of racialization” (369, 366). Michele Gunderson similarly recognizes that, “in some ways,” the novel risks “reinforcing...multicultural discourses in Canada,” which claim that racism has diminished (par. 16). Building on these interventions, this chapter demonstrates how the novel conforms to national discourses by relying on East-West distinctions to establish May-ying as a strong, “liberated” Chinese Canadian woman. It shows how Chong creates a comparison between Huangbo, the acquiescent “first wife” in China, and May-ying, the determined “concubine” in Canada, to support the view

that May-ying was an “independent spirit” (Chao 113). I contend that this comparison, while it affirms May-ying as an agentic subject, relegates Huangbo to a subordinate role. Moreover, Chong’s representation of her Chinese relatives as naïve, tradition-bound, and family-oriented works to endorse her Canadian family as more educated, modern, and “free.” Therefore, I argue the novel risks harmonizing Chinese Canadian experience with dominant narratives of Canada’s liberalism and progressive development. Yet, my analysis also uncovers textual moments within Chong’s narrative that highlight her constrained perspective and create opportunities for postcolonial insights, which disrupt the East-West binaries and claims of Canada’s liberal multicultural progressivism the novel seems to maintain.

Reflection

While my grandmother recounts a story in which my great-grandmother boldly insists on having her own home, my mother complicates this story by explaining that my great-grandmother went to the Women’s Missionary Society’s Chinese Rescue Home. Though details of this event are limited, both my grandmother and mother agree that, at some point, my great-grandmother left my great-grandfather and did not return until he provided her with her own living space. On one hand, my grandmother sees this story as an indication of my great-grandmother’s strength and agency. On the other hand, my mother interprets the story as a sign of great-grandmother’s weakness and passivity. My mother’s interpretation is partly a response to the influential “‘victim’ discourse” upheld by the Women’s Missionary Society, a discourse that saw Chinese women as needing to be “rescued” from Chinese patriarchal traditions (Ikebuchi 54). As Shelley Ikebuchi points out, however, white women had “an investment” in this discourse, as it “accorded them a certain degree of power and prestige” (43). It is hence problematic to assume that the Chinese women who visited the Rescue Home were, in fact, “victims” (54). Ikebuchi suggests, for example, that many women visited the Home for strategic reasons; they wanted to learn “English ways” that might advance them socially and “benefit them materially” (44). Ikebuchi’s insights make me more inclined to believe my grandmother’s version of my great-grandmother as a woman who navigated her circumstances with adept authority. Yet, I also have to avoid the temptation of reading my great-grandmother as participating in the great Canadian narrative of female individualism and liberation. Interestingly, my great-grandmother—because her stay at the Chinese Rescue Home was short and because she ultimately went back to her husband—would have been labelled as a “bad woman” (Ikebuchi 55). Ikebuchi explains that the Home’s records are replete with descriptions of “bad women” and “bad mothers,” Chinese women who “refused help” or did not fully conform to the institution’s Westernized expectations for gender and marriage (55).

Letter from Grandma

Yes, my father had two wives. The first wife and her daughters lived in Victoria too, but I don't know much about them. Our two families were kept apart; we didn't interact with each other. My father would divide his time between our two households.

It didn't start out this way; my father wanted the first wife and my mother to live together in the same house. But I think he underestimated how hard it would be to have this traditional arrangement in a non-traditional setting; also, he underestimated my mother if he thought she would fall into the role of a subservient wife. Growing up, I heard stories about how my mother threatened to leave my father—she wanted a place of her own. And that's why our family ended up living in the Lee building.

One of the reasons the novel has received significant critical attention is because of its narrative of gender progress, which represents May-ying as a pre-feminist woman who becomes increasingly free, or enlightened, upon her arrival in Canada. In this narrative, China emerges as the primary location of women's suffering, while Canada comes to embody opportunities for women's choices. When reflecting on May-ying's arranged marriage to Chan Sam, for example, Chong describes that, "[May-ying's] rebellion was useless; in the Confucian way of thinking, a girl has no authority of her own. She does as she is told. The choice was that or suicide" (10). Here, Chong replicates a common assumption within Western feminism, which associates women's oppression with "the feudal [views and practices] of Confucianism" (Rosenlee 1). As Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee points out, this assumption reduces "a complex intellectual tradition" to a transparent "sexist ideology," and perpetuates "the imperialistic sentiment of the superiority of Western ethical theories" (2). This selective image of Confucianism helps to construct traditional 'Chinese' family structures as antithetical to May-ying's self-actualization, and so characterize her immigration to "the West" as a movement toward modernization and freedom. Canada appears in this framework as a symbol of "the future" linked to breaking down family obligation and increasing women's self-determination. It is an idea that Chong develops by constructing "liberation" in terms of access to the capitalist economy, and placing emphasis on May-ying's

ability to make money in Canada. By stressing her grandmother's role as the principal "wage-earner in the family" (Chong 95), Chong presents May-ying as claiming an independence and "taking her rightful place in a man's world" (133). May-ying's tendencies to gamble, wear men's clothing, and have extramarital affairs are hence interpreted as signs of May-ying "making a statement that she was...a woman who made her own living...and could do as she pleased" (133). Importantly, this image of May-ying as a proto-feminist has been embraced by some critics, who regard Chong's narrative as "free[ing] one woman from being wronged by the temple of patriarchy" (Chao 105). However, like Chong, these critics appear to equate women's liberation with the achievement of a Westernized, masculine definition of autonomy. This conception of liberation not only upholds individualism as a universal norm, but also requires a projection of so-called "feminine" qualities, such as self-denial and embeddedness, onto Chinese culture.

Built into the feminist structure of Chong's novel is a necessary construction of "the East" as a non-feminist Other. Ong elucidates that this non-feminist Other aids in the assertion of the feminist self by signifying all that the feminist self is not (par. 2). For Western women "looking overseas, the non-feminist Other" is typically represented via a figure of "the non-Western woman" (par. 2); this figure works to affirm the subjectivities of Westernized women "while denying those of non-Western women" (par. 13). In *The Concubine's Children*, this dynamic plays out in Chong's depiction of May-ying as a self-determined and "liberated" individual. More specifically, May-ying's personal progress is predicated upon the effacement of her "Chinese" counterpart, Huangbo. Huangbo's main function in the novel is to emphasize May-ying's individuality; she is May-ying's character foil. While Huangbo is presented as "plain, quiet, [and] unassuming" (Chong 23), May-ying is described as challenging the

patriarchal status quo with her “quick temper” and “driven” personality (9, 70). Indeed, Chong surmises that Huangbo “was no match for May-ying”: her “gentleness” made her “ripe for taking advantage” and May-ying found it “eas[y to] outwit her” (48). The politics surfacing in these representations serve to construct May-ying as an ideal agent of immigration, worthy of citizenship in “the West” due to her individual qualities. Huangbo, on the other hand, is framed in essentialist terms indicative of discourses on “the East” as unchanging, feminine, and inferior. This dichotomy between “East” and “West” is reinforced by Chong’s association of Huangbo with “the body” and May-ying with “the mind.” Unlike May-ying, Huangbo is portrayed as not having “the mind for learning to read and write” (49); her “broad and strong shoulders” suggest that she is meant for menial labour, not mental activity (49). These distinctions between May-ying’s capacity to act and Huangbo’s fixed passivity set up a national hierarchy, favouring Canada over China, progress over tradition, modernization over feudalism. It is a hierarchy developed by Chong’s privileging of paid labour as the route to women’s empowerment. In foregrounding May-ying’s ability to make wages and send remittances to China, Chong effectively renders Huangbo’s role in the family secondary. That is, Huangbo’s labour of tending the rice fields and raising May-ying’s daughters is backgrounded in order to allow for the valorization of May-ying’s participation in wage labour as “pivotal” (Chao 113).

Reflection

Reading Chong’s novel, I am sensitive to the representation of Huangbo as passive and inferior, as I am aware that my great-grandmother could similarly be portrayed. Like Huangbo, my great-grandmother’s labour was primarily within the domestic sphere and revolved around child-rearing. Moreover, she was in a non-Western polygamous marital situation. Due to these factors, my great-grandmother could be framed in stereotypical ways, conforming to Orientalist discourses about “the non-feminist Other” (Ong par. 2). Nonetheless, I contend this framing is unfair and inadequate, not only because it devalues unpaid labour within the home, but also because it valorizes individualism as the main indicator of skill and agency. The inadequacy of this framing is revealed in a story about how my great-grandmother used her own healing methods to treat my grandmother’s

scalded foot. Showing dexterity in her care-giving role, my great-grandmother refused the recommendations from a Western doctor and clung to her own knowledge. I am struck by the power of this refusal. Certainly, in this story, she appears more resourceful and assertive than Orientalist constructions of non-Western women can acknowledge.

Letter from Grandma

One of my earliest memories is scalding my foot in a pot of hot water. The Lee Building was cold and drafty. To warm our apartment, my mother would boil pots of water and place them on the floor. One day—I think I was as young as three years old—I climbed a chair to reach for something, and when I stepped down, I put my foot right into a pot of hot water. It was painful! It was almost too much to bear; I was howling and howling. My mother was frantic; she insisted that my father take me to see a Western doctor. Only, much to her surprise, the Western doctor wanted to amputate my foot. My mother couldn't accept this diagnosis; she asked my father for some opium water, so that she could treat my foot herself. She made various ointments and applied them to my foot; she also pushed me around in a baby carriage for several months. Yet, slowly but surely, I got better. I still have my foot because my mother wouldn't give up on me.

The backgrounding of Huangbo's labour is perhaps most evident in Chong's representation of Huangbo, and her "side" of the family, as a draining obligation "siphon[ing]" emotional and material resources away from May-ying, and her "side" of the family (Chong 289). After relating the travails of her mother's childhood, for instance, Chong determines that Hing grew up "in a shadow of sacrifice" (295). By stressing a notion of sacrifice, Chong ignores more inclusive concepts of family and shared responsibility, and instead suggests that Hing was wrongly disadvantaged due to collective ties. This portrait of the family conforms to an imperialist model by discussing the "sides" of the family as separate entities, and emphasizing a center-to-periphery trajectory that conceals more mutually influential exchanges. As discussed above, May-ying's "freedom" depends upon Huangbo's shouldering of reproductive duties, such as subsistence farming, housework, and childrearing, in China. This exchange, however, goes mostly unrecognized, in order to present that "Chinese side" as more decidedly dependent on the "Canadian side." Indeed, Chong sometimes implies that her Chinese relatives are somewhat needy and grasping. When Chong depicts her visit to China, for example, she highlights an

anxiety that her “poorer Chinese relations...car[e] less about blood ties than about the foreign-made [goods]” that she and her mother can bring (274). It is an anxiety that permeates her descriptions of her relatives’ living arrangements: what her uncle and aunt regard as “the grandeur” of their family’s house, Chong views as “a storeroom, its inventory only junk” (2). To her mind, the abode is claustrophobic and possibly unsanitary, infiltrated by farm animals and mosquitoes (286). This illustration of China leads Chong to conclude that her mother “ended up the luckier of her siblings,” and that “Canada” was May-ying’s “best gift of all” (295). The effect of this narrative outcome is ultimately to celebrate Canada as a land of opportunity, where Chong’s “side” of the family has flourished and “struggle[d] free of the familial obligation and sacrifice that bound the Chinese side” (301). This outcome serves to validate dominant conceptions of “the East” by reinforcing a connection between economic liberalism and opportunities for self-fulfillment as the inevitable result of Western acculturation and modernization.

Nonetheless, there are several moments within the novel in which Chong underscores the Western-ness of her perspective, as well as her inability to fully understand “China.” These moments, which occur mostly in the novel’s last chapters, threaten to rupture the narrative’s surface of neutrality and reveal its ideological investments. For instance, talking about her childhood, Chong signals the foundational influences that have shaped her impressions of Chinese culture. She admits:

The Chinese side was a mystery to me. The first book I read about China was one my mother borrowed for me from the library when I was eight years old. What I remembered most about *Moment in Peking*, a tome of more than 800 pages, was that women and girls, blamed for their own misfortunes, routinely committed suicide...All that seemed beyond

the reach of reality to me. To me, China was what was left behind when the boat carrying my grandmother, pregnant with my mother, docked in Vancouver. (253)

In describing “China” as a place of “mystery” located beyond her comprehension, Chong reveals a reliance on Orientalist discourses, which often construct “the East” as the West’s mysterious, duplicitous, and dark Other. These terms show that Chong is translating Chinese culture in light of her own Westernized sensibilities, a process that necessarily places emphasis on contrast and difference. Also, Chong’s admission that she first learned about Chinese culture from the novel *Moment in Peking*, published in 1939, points to further limitations of her perspective. The novel, which was written by US- and German-educated author Yutang Lin, is largely interested in “giving his Western readers a highly personal and individual outlook” on China (Dian Li 401); it “does not claim to be objective or exact” (401). Indeed, this novel, with its narrow definitions of “Chinese wisdom” and promotion of Western ideals, has itself been criticized for its “strong strain of Orientalism” (402). Thus, Chong’s suggestion that *Moment in Peking* truthfully portrays how Chinese “women and girls...routinely committed suicide” is problematic, calling into question the credibility of her views. Finally, when Chong concedes that, for her, “China was what was left behind,” she gestures to the teleological logic organizing her family narrative, a logic that assumes China is “stuck” in the past, while Canada is somehow “ahead.” As Kamboureli underscores, Chong’s narrative suggests that “the past...has no bearing on her present,” and that Canada “inhabit[s] a space and time already ‘beyond’ race” (“Diaspora and Modernity” 369, 366). Textual moments like this draw attention to Chong’s subjective reconstruction of the past, creating opportunities for intervening perspectives and postcolonial critiques that challenge the East-West binaries bound up in notions of liberal multiculturalism and “Canadian-ness.”

Reflection

One of the stories my grandmother loved to tell was about seeing her parents kiss goodnight. Just days before my grandmother died, in a brief moment of wakefulness and clarity, she told me the story one last time. She really wanted me to understand that her parents were in love. Undoubtedly, the story has had a lasting impression on me; it has helped me to see my great-grandmother as a multifaceted and spirited women. Moreover, the touching story illuminates how Orientalist narratives about early Chinese Canadian women as “passive” or trapped” by family obligations are steeped in stereotypes, reducing complex lived experiences to clichés.

Letter from Grandma

One time—I’ll never forget—I saw my mother and father kissing. It all happened late at night, when I was supposed to be sleeping; I crept out into the hallway and saw my mother and father standing by the front door. My father was getting ready to leave, and my mother was handing him his coat. I felt like I was intruding; I knew I was seeing something I wasn’t supposed to see. After my father had put on his coat, he wrapped his arms around my mother, and they kissed warmly on the lips. Now you might think I’m being romantic or whatever. But I’m telling you I grew up with the feeling that my parents were in love. Or at least, I never doubted that there was a lot of emotion that was going unsaid. That’s what I want you to understand about my mother—her intelligence, warmth, and resiliency. I believe it was a gift that she passed down, and it’s alive in you.

4.5 Final Thoughts

As critics have suggested, feminist “coming to voice” narratives, such as *Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Concubine’s Children*, contribute to an important recuperation of women-centered stories, challenging the gender imbalance of much historical and sociological literature on early Chinese Canadian immigrants (Chao 89). Nonetheless, these narratives “have their own systems of signification,” systems which operate to depict and privilege certain modes of thinking and being as exemplary of the nation (Patricia Chu 11): they are not “transparent ethnographic documents” (11). Rather, the genre has a proclivity “to equate feminist consciousness and agency with first world [Westernized] women and fatalist or passive positions with third world [non-Western] women” (21). The unfortunate consequence of treating these narratives as corrective, sociohistorical documents is thus that the project of “making experience visible” often precludes critical examination of these systems of signification themselves. In this

case, critical approaches to *Disappearing Moon Café* and *The Concubine's Children* have tended not to thoroughly challenge to the implicit binary of a traditional China against a modern Canada embedded within their feminist plot structures and progressive trajectories. It is consequently important to consider that, while such texts may participate in contesting a history of institutional racism in Canada, they also risk tracing a genealogy of increasing equality—a genealogy that conforms to pre-existing cultural narratives of a gender-enlightened, “free” West against a backwards and repressive East. This chapter, by shifting away from a nationalist critical framework, has aimed to focus attention on the possibilities for postcolonial diasporic interventions in these writers’ creative, and often subversive, interactions with feminist narrative models and conventions. It has located textual moments in which the novels’ daughter-narrators create distance from, and thus complicate, the underlying notions of national and progressive history structuring their presentation of the family stories. In so doing, it has engaged with ongoing debates within Asian Canadian Studies, which underscore the limitations of strategic essentialism and advocate for re-locating discussions of Asian Canadian narratives within a global context of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism. These debates continue to gain significance due to the increasing institutionalization of Asian Canadian Studies and the current circulation of model minority discourses. Against this backdrop, this chapter has not only sought to further an understanding of the implied commitments of feminist narratives, which can reconcile ideas of racial “difference into the national landscape through gender” (Bow 114), but it has also endeavoured to reveal the possibilities for innovation and resistance within this genre.

Chapter 5: Mobile Paradoxical Spaces: Mixed Race Subjectivity in Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill*

5.1 Background

In addition to paving the way for the formation of Asian Canadian Studies, the anti-racist movements of the 1980s and 90s produced a critical awareness of racialized subjectivity and experience in Canada. This critical awareness is reflected in discussions of Fred Wah, who prior to the mid-1990s, was regarded “primarily as a leader of the Canadian poetic avant-garde” (Yu 18). Partly in response to the “energy arising from” anti-racist movements (Lai 1), however, he was increasingly identified “as a writer of Asian descent,” and his work was “incorporated into the emerging category of Asian Canadian literature” (Yu 17, 19). The relatively late “discovery of Wah as an Asian Canadian writer” has contributed to two distinct approaches to his work (19). As Lily Cho observes, critics have tended either to appreciate Wah’s writing for its “advances of avant-garde formalism” or to view it as an “ethnographic or sociological reflection of diasporic Asian identity” (*Eating* 137, 135). In other words, critics have concentrated on the experimental form *or* ethnographic content of Wah’s writing, allowing for comparatively little engagement with “the ways in which race intersects with form” (135). Cho’s observation highlights the need “to attend to the imbrication of form and content” (135) and carefully consider “the difficulty of conceptualizing a racialized subject outside of the bounds of European subjectivity” (137). Indeed, in her reading of Wah’s *Diamond Grill*, Cho underscores how the poems viscerally describe quotidian occurrences, situating “the body as a crucial site of memory” (150). She contends that the poems’ formal innovations evoke the body’s sensual responses, such as grief and longing, which “move inward not only through the body, but also between generations and across communities” (148). This chapter builds on Cho’s arguments by examining the intersections of race and poetic form, and exploring the body as a generative site of inquiry in

Diamond Grill. Nonetheless, while Cho treats Wah as a Chinese diasporic subject, I emphasize his mixed-race positioning. Drawing inspiration from Critical Mixed Race Studies and transnational feminism, I offer additional insights about the meanings and effects of the body in Wah's poems. In particular, I demonstrate the ways that the poems invite an understanding of how racialized perceptions of the body shape the performative choices, and thus the opportunities for strategically subversive movements, amongst mixed race subjects.

Although some critics have investigated the topic of mixed race in *Diamond Grill*, my analysis departs from these investigations by paying close attention to the significance of the body. In shifting away from theories of the hybrid and focusing on the body, my approach is informed by Critical Mixed Race Studies, where scholars have noted that hybridity discourses are frequently disconnected from the diverse, embodied realities of mixed race subjects. Julie Matthews, for example, elucidates how hybridity discourses, due to their "rationalisation and abstraction" (42), can neglect "the actual conditions under which" racialized bodies are brought into being (48). Intervening in debates about "whether passing for white is fundamentally transgressive or conservative," she clarifies that "passing, like hybridity," can produce "different effects when worked through different bodies in different places at different points in time" (48). She urges for context-specific interrogations to think through how different, "light-skinned" and "dark-skinned," bodies performing in different situations "make for dissimilar intensities of experience, orders of resolution and transgression" (48). Taking Matthews' call for context-specific interrogations seriously, this chapter underscores how *Diamond Grill* portrays racialized perceptions of the body as producing significant variances in mixed race experiences. In particular, the poems depict how light-skinned Fred Wah Jr., who can "pass," develops divergent racialized performances and coping mechanisms than his darker-skinned father, who cannot

“pass.” Moreover, I use Matthews’ insights about the limitations of hybridity theories to help explain how critics like Cynthia Sugars and Julie McGonegal, who use ideas of the hybrid to analyze *Diamond Grill*, have interpreted “passing” as either transgressive or conservative, without fully considering the ambiguities entailed by such a racialized performance. Whereas Sugars highlights how the mixed race subject’s “passing” as white problematizes “what an authentic Canadianness might mean” (“Negative” 30), McGonegal stresses how “passing” reinforces whiteness, promoting “the congealment of racial hierarchies” (par. 13). Thus, I stress how more discussion is needed to comprehend how “passing” can generate both effects, depending on the situation. By exploring “the embodied and material counterpart” to hybridity theories (Matthews 52), my aim is to uncover the performative tensions undergirding mixed race experiences and organizing Wah’s poems.

Accordingly, the first part of this chapter assesses how *Diamond Grill* locates the mixed race body as a contested ground, capable of accommodating multiple demands and playing out various identities. The poems, in describing the body’s awareness of being in “particular geographies” (Cho, *Eating* 150), dramatize the ways that mixed race subjects enact situated practices to respond to changing everyday conditions. As Minelle Mahtani emphasizes, such conditions include “perceptions of racial ambiguity,” where the subject’s performance depends upon how the body is interpreted (217). Paradoxically, the subject is required to perform into the available role in order to create a space to navigate and resist racialized meanings. The poems thus illustrate a variety of patterned behaviours and improvised gestures, which are performed by different mixed race subjects, and which challenge racially essentialist narratives, even while they may also reinforce them. With their flexible and multifaceted form, the poems accentuate the contradictory meanings and effects of these racialized performances. Joining up diverse

moments of experience, and allowing heterogeneous elements to cohabit and negotiate, *Diamond Grill* encourages multiple interpretations, signaling how dissimilarly racialized bodies have different performative possibilities for mobilizing spaces within an oppressive racial grid.

The last part of this chapter continues to examine the poems' complicated staging of the body. Taking up Mahtani's "spatial" framework of "mobile paradoxical spaces," it considers how *Diamond Grill* conceives of belonging as "always in transit or on the move" (Mahtani 177). Importantly, this framework turns "away from the inside-outside model of exclusion" that necessitates a binary discussion of "white Canadian" versus "non-white Other," and instead, "allow[s] for a vision of the interconnectedness between [multiple and] supposedly discrete entities" (168). As a transnational feminist who examines how mixed race subjects contest and recreate the category of the nation, Mahtani offers a way of moving beyond the inside-outside model for understanding mixed race experiences—a model that, she emphasizes, is "a tired one," bringing to mind images of being "marginal," "liminal, and "in-between" (167). This "popular imagery" suggests not only a tendency to concentrate on the seemingly "out of place" and "problematic nature" of mixed race, but also a perpetuation of the dualistic white/non-white structure of Canadian multiculturalism (167). Alternatively, the concept of mobile paradoxical spaces relies on notions of "mobility and simultaneity," calling attention to numerous points of connection between variously racialized groups, and mapping out where the mixed race subject feels "in place" (172). This kind of approach reveals how the "forces that shape everyday life" produce affective and material conditions, which offer opportunities to form coalitions, "affections and affinities" across differences (168). Attention to these affective and material conditions adds meaning to Cho's argument that Wah's poems are especially attuned to the body's "gestures and longings" (*Eating* 156). I argue that, in addition to revealing visceral

connections between Fred Wah Jr., his father, and other Chinese diasporic subjects, these gestures and longings disclose productive spaces of sensitive awareness and connection-making between differently racialized groups. So, in my analysis, I engage with previously neglected moments in the poems, where the father, Fred Wah Sr., is portrayed as actively negotiating strategic sameness with various racialized subjects, such as Doukhobor and Japanese families. These moments of interracial affiliation highlight the potential for cross-racial alliances and mirror larger developments, such as “the coalition between Chinese and Japanese Canadians that lead to the emergence of the category of the Asian Canadian in the 1980s and 1990s” (Yu 21). Nonetheless, the fluidity and continuity of the poems also underscores the transitory, context-specific nature of such alliances, which are not “natural,” but always consciously created and negotiated.

5.2 Racial Performativity

While hybridity theories have “proliferated” over the past few decades, offering “new vocabularies” and strategies to challenge racially essentialist narratives, these theories have tended to speculate in abstract terms without paying close attention to specific locations and bodies (Matthews 45). Scholars working within Critical Mixed Race Studies have consequently emphasized the importance of considering “what hybridity forgets and forgoes” (44) and overcoming the “reticence to explore...bodies and intermixtures” (45). Taking inspiration from these scholars, this chapter draws on racial performativity theories, as “a useful set” of concepts, to investigate how constructed racialized categories both delimit and make possible subversive practices of embodiment (45). Like these scholars, my performative framework is less concerned with “discursive imperatives” (Mahtani 209), and more interested in specific bodily acts and gestures that “create self and space” (213). As Mahtani explains, this focus allows for a greater

appreciation of how “[r]esistance to racist discourses” is enacted by “bodies in spaces” and “articulated in different ways in different places” (222). Further, by accounting for issues of racial ambiguity, this conception of racial performativity acknowledges how “the ability to perform particular identities” hinges upon “others’ readings of phenotype” (218). Incidents of resistance hence manifest differently for “light-skinned” and “dark-skinned” mixed race subjects, as “it is only through articulations of racial categories that racist dialogues and thoughts are disrupted” (219). In other words, mixed race subjects are often obliged to assume the racialized roles that are assigned to them in order to gain a space to challenge racialized meanings. Tina Chen explains, for example, that racial performativity, like passing, denotes a paradoxical movement: “it can be undertaken as a way of disrupting pre-existing categories of identity even as it maintains [these categories] as a powerful way of understanding subjectivity” (16). In examining racialized performative acts in *Diamond Grill*, therefore, my aim is to illuminate this paradoxical movement, showing how the poems locate the body within specific contexts and interactions, and complicate any fixed or transparent interpretation.

Significantly, Wah’s poems foreground notions of performance both in content and form. Through their descriptive portrayals of everyday happenings, the poems “retrac[e] the body’s movement in space” (Cho, *Eating* 152), and explore “a concrete and subjective form of remembering” (147). This complex staging of the body not only eschews “seemingly abstract and objective [forms of] remembering” (147), it also participates in a politics of location, revealing how the mixed race subject embodies a plurality of identities and responds to various racialized readings. As Mahtani stresses, the way the body is read alters the “definition of the situation,” shaping the performative strategies available “to subvert the constraining forces of category reduction” (222). One way that the poems illustrate this intricate dynamic, where

situations shape performative options, is by offering two distinct mixed race perspectives, that of Fred Wah Sr., the dark-skinned father, and Fred Wah Jr., the light-skinned son. As I demonstrate, the portrayal of the father and son as undergoing dissimilar processes of racialization encourages an understanding of how different constraints produce different bodily actions and subversive opportunities. Yet, since the poems are always grounded within a particular time and place, the alternating perspectives provide no pristine position of resistance; rather, they emphasize the complicated conditions under which strategies of resistance emerge, creating insights into the enactment of racialized identities in their situational specificity. The effects of enacting these racialized identities, furthermore, are shown to be multilayered and contradictory. The poems, with their innovative and versatile form, underscore the idea that racialized performances are not open to straightforward interpretations. Instead, by combining elements of lyricism and prose, and weaving together diverse moments in time-place, the poems stress notions of ongoing tension and negotiation. Repeated images and phrases create emphasis, while also postponing definitive interpretations. Gaps between the poems gesture to spaces of indeterminacy and opportunity, outside of the racialized grid. Not presenting a singular or coherent narrative, *Diamond Grill* is itself a kind of body, exemplifying performative possibilities and encouraging multiple readings and meanings.

By continually returning to images of skin colour, the poems invite reflection about how the mixed race subject's ability to perform particular identities depends upon racialized readings of the body. Over the course of the poems, the juxtaposition of the dark-skinned father and light-skinned son calls attention to the role skin colour plays in shaping socio-spatial mobility and performative strategies. Even though father and son are both mixed race, they undergo divergent racialization processes, in part due to their different bodily appearances.

Reflection

Because I do not have the “visible hieroglyphs,” including “yellow or brown colour [skin]” and “black hair,” typically associated with “Chineseness” (Ty 3), I have not undergone the same process of racialization as my mother and grandmother. As Eleanor Ty explains, having “these hieroglyphs” in the Canadian context often means being perceived as a “‘visible minority’ ...marked as racially different, rendered obvious, vulnerable, non-major” (5). One of the greatest privileges of having a lighter-skinned complexion is that I can “pass” as white. Consequently, I have not had to experience what it feels like to have people around me “only react to the Asian hieroglyphs on [my] body” (9). My grandmother, on the other hand, possessed the “bodily attributes,” such as darker skin and “slanty” eyes,” that “indelibly” identified her “as Other, as Oriental” (3). As I got older, my grandmother told me stories about her growing up during the Chinese Exclusion Era—stories that helped me to realize that I had a choice about claiming “Chineseness,” while my grandmother had no such choice. Yet, when I was very young, I do not remember noticing that she looked dissimilar from me. Certainly, my grandmother never made any bodily comparisons that made me see our differences. Rather, I remember learning about race at school, from hearing people talk unreservedly about how I did not look like my mother and grandmother, about how I did not “look Chinese at all.” My own personal experiences have thus contributed to my belief that race is a “regulatory fiction” (Mahtani 237)—it only exists once one becomes aware that it does, in the context of racist attitudes and structures.

Excerpt from Journal

When I was a little girl, I didn’t question why I went to my grandmother’s house on the weekends. To me, it just seemed normal. My grandmother enjoyed my company, and I enjoyed hers. Besides, I didn’t want to stay at home with my parents and older siblings. Around them, I was a burden, an extra step, a body that had to be packed along to soccer games, track meets, or whatever. It was much better for me at my grandmother’s house. Among other activities, she took me to the library and taught me to read. One of our favourite games was writing stories together; she’d create one line of a story, then I’d create the next.

Those were innocent days, when my grandmother was the most important person in the world to me. It didn’t occur to me that, from the perspective of others, she might appear different from me, or I different from her.

Many of the poems explore how the father’s “brown skin” (Wah 17) contributes to perceptions of his body as less legitimate. For example, the son often considers his father’s experience of returning to Canada after spending several years in China. The son notes how the prevailing “paranoia of the Chinese Immigration (Exclusion) Act” causes immigration officials to view Fred Wah Sr. with suspicion (Wah 10). Labelled as a “Chinese” migrant who “can’t be

trusted,” “he’s jailed in the immigration cells in Victoria, B.C., on Juan de Fuca Strait for three months while his parents try to convince immigration officials to let their son back in” (10). This poem, with its geographical specificity, suggests how being perceived as non-white, especially in the context of racist legislation, means being confined to the parameters of white society. Moreover, subsequent poems highlight how Fred Wah Sr.’s racialization as “a Chinaman” restricts his labour opportunities, like those of other “Chinese” subjects, to lower class and service sector jobs (17). As the son surmises, his father navigates “his way around the country by knocking on the kitchen doors of Chinese restaurants” (17). Pondering how his father is limited to racialized roles and spaces, the son wonders if being in “immigration jail” and working in “Chinese restaurants” inspires Fred Wah Sr. to “buckle down” (17):

So that’s what [my father] says or thinks, doesn’t he? Buckle down, have a family of your own, slip memory under each day’s work, under your brown skin, under the buckle, the belt. Tuck away questions. Just put your nose to the grind. (17)

In this passage, the repeated image of “buckling down” infers a connection between the racialized “brown” body and constrained socio-spatial mobility. It also tacitly communicates a level of violence and coercion through its reference to “the belt”: the father is obligated to fill the role of the subservient and labouring “Chinaman” and enact performative strategies from that position.

In contrast to his father, the son is portrayed as having a greater capacity to move between spaces and perform various roles because of his light-skinned complexion. As Mahtani contends, mixed race subjects with light skin often experience more “fluidity in terms of their racial ambiguity,” which allows them to choose from a “wide[r] range of racialized identificatory options” (218, 222).

Reflection

My ability to “pass” has meant that I have mostly moved through spaces “unnoticed,” enjoying the greater “socio-spatial mobility that light skin affords” (de Leon 393). The times that I have encountered racializing comments and bodily scrutiny have usually been in the proximity of my mother or grandmother—when others have learned of my mixed race subjectivity.

One of my most troubling childhood memories is of being questioned by a teacher about “what I am.” After seeing my mother dropping me off at the school, this teacher had become curious about “my background.” Regardless of her intentions, I remember feeling distinctly uncomfortable; I had not yet developed a way to respond to her kind of inquiries.

Excerpt from Journal

Until I started elementary school, I’m not sure I understood anything about race. I don’t remember thinking, for example, that I looked different from my mother or grandmother. But once I started school, I think I heard it all the time. In particular, I remember my second grade teacher, Mrs. Warren, asking me where my father was from. “You’re mother’s Chinese,” she pondered, “but where’s your father from?” I didn’t know, and so I froze. “England or France?” She asked, “He’s Caucasian?” And I got even more confused because I had never heard that word before. That afternoon, I went home and asked my mother. That’s when I learned that both my parents were born in Canada. Also, Caucasian means white, “you know, like the colour of his skin.”

Reflection

My research into Critical Mixed Race Studies suggests that my experience of being questioned about “what I am” is shared by many mixed race subjects. Pointing to “an intrusive practice of reading mixed race bodies,” for example, Jillian Paragg argues that “the ‘what are you’ question” shows a deeply ingrained need “to situate people of mixed race...in the schema of [a racialized] world, which in the Canadian context operates within binaries of white/non-white” (26). Comments like “but you don’t look Chinese” thus reveal the ongoing influence of racialized categories, as well as expectations that bodies and “races” line up in predictable ways (28). Furthermore, in her studies, Sharon Chang emphasizes how comments like “you look more white than Chinese” have a “profound” effect on mixed race children, “socializing them around race” and teaching them what others would prefer them to be (79). In my case, I think my encounter with the teacher taught me that it was probably better just to “pass” and avoid uncomfortable questioning.

Indeed, Fred Wah Jr. admits that, even as a child, he is aware that he does not “look Chinese” due to his “pretty white” skin and “fairly blond” hair (Wah 39). Here, the image of “pretty white” is reminiscent of Conely de Leon’s observation that, in Canada, “light skin and beauty

are imagined as spatially connected to...respectable white spaces...whereas dark skin and, therefore, ugliness are [associated with] reject[ion]" (de Leon 392). The poems reiterate, in different ways, how Fred Wah Jr.'s light skin renders his body ambiguous, affording him opportunities to perform whiteness and gain access to spaces closed off to his darker-skinned relatives. His passing thus implies the constructed nature of racial categories, which are not fixed or discrete. For example, Fred Wah Jr. describes a process of "becom[ing] as white as I can" (98) through school activities, such as "hav[ing] a lot of good friends, play[ing] hockey and trumpet" (39). His descriptions reveal not only how whiteness is acquired gradually through time by enacting daily performances, but also how it is tied to "stronger social networks" (de Leon 391). Several times throughout the poems, the father is depicted as "alone" in comparison to the son, who makes friends easily (Wah 71, 144); "passing" provides greater social capital and mobility. However, Fred Wah Jr.'s ability to "pass" also depends upon his denial of those friendships and behaviours that would identify him as "Chinese." Recalling how "Nelson's Chinese population" increased "in the early fifties," he recounts how "teenaged Chinese kids" formed "a basketball team" (136):

And they're good, too. Fast, smart. I play on the junior high team and when [their] team comes to play us, I know a lot of the Chinese guys. But my buddies at school call them Chinks and geeks and I feel embarrassed and don't talk much with the Chinese kids. I'm white enough to get away with it and that's what I do. (136)

Despite performing the same actions as Fred Wah Jr., "the Chinese kids" are unable to move freely through white spaces. Light-skinned Fred Wah Jr., on the other hand, is not subjected to racism, even in the presence of racist schoolmates. Like other mixed race subjects who "pass," he evade the "threat of...racism and rejection" through his inclusion in white social networks (de

Leon 396). So long as he distances himself from those “considered too dark, too dirty, too inferior, or too unworthy to associate with” (397), Fred Wah Jr. can maintain his semblance as white. As I discuss later, this act of “passing” has both conservative and transgressive qualities—though it risks reinforcing light-skinned privilege, it can provide opportunities to disrupt this privilege.

Reflection

Reading *Diamond Grill*, I can particularly relate to the poems about the son playing sports as a daily performance to make friends. Indeed, the adolescent perspective that shapes these depictions of “passing” is very familiar to me. As a young person, my greatest wish was to blend in, which meant not talking openly about my mixed race positioning and, at times, even tacitly colluding with white racism. I think sports were appealing to me because they provided ready-made “teams” or circles of friends. I also believe that my mother nurtured my interest in sports. After all, her family had used their athletic ability as a way of gaining socio-spatial mobility; my great-grandfather had used his tennis skills to join a white country club. So, my desire to “pass” and play sports most likely intersected with my mother’s desire to prove her Canadian-ness and racial acceptability in some ways.

Excerpt from Journal

By the time I was in junior high-school, my hometown, Richmond, had transformed with an influx of wealthy immigrants from Hong Kong. Every day, I heard racist comments about “the Chinese” taking over neighbourhoods, flaunting their wealth, driving up real estate, and causing car accidents. I remember it happening all the time, all around me, but what could I do about it? I wasn’t particularly concerned. As a tall and awkward teenager, I was only really worried about fitting in.

Well, one afternoon, my mother was driving me and some girlfriends to a volleyball game. Our van was slowly navigating the high-school parking lot, when a woman stepped out in front of us: My mother slammed on the brakes; the woman turned to look at us. Stone-cold. She pointed her finger at my mother and shouted, “Go back home.” Stunned silence, until my mother brushed it off. “Geez,” she sighed, “Don’t know what that was about.”

The van was on the move again. I don’t believe I said anything; I was too embarrassed, worried about what my girlfriends might be thinking. But now, when I think about it, a feeling swells inside my chest. I wish I could go back and do something. At the very least, let my mother know that I saw it too, and it was wrong.

Reflection

Just as the poems depict Fred Wah Jr. as doing, I moved into a more critical stance towards racism as I got older. I frequently feel guilty about my behaviour as a young person. However, my sense is that many young mixed race subjects feel “pressure” to “fit

in” and “pass” (Sharon Chang 139). Sharon Chang observes, for example, that “it is often wrongly presumed that lightness and whiteness in racial mixing remove discriminating experiences,” and as a result, mixed race children do not “receive well-informed instruction necessary in forming resistant racial identities” (139). Without clear alternatives, these children are likely to “pass” as a way navigating racialized settings, and sometimes they will have to endure the pain of “silently witness[ing] racism against their family of colo[u]r to do so” (139).

Nonetheless, some of the poems describe situations where Fred Wah Jr. is unable to “pass” as white due to his connection to his father. In these situations, the son experiences restrictions on his socio-spatial mobility and has to contend with disciplinary interventions on his bodily performances. For example, Fred Wah Jr. describes an occasion at “elementary school” where his teacher insists that “his racial origin is Chinese, [because] that’s what your father is” (Wah 53). This occasion, which is repeatedly referenced, impresses Fred Wah Jr. with the importance of “Race, race, race...No matter what, you’re what your father is, was, forever” (36). His ability to perform whiteness is precarious as others police the boundaries of racial categories. Tellingly, once others realize who his father is, they start to view his body differently. Fred Wah Jr. remembers how “a local lumber baron” sends his daughter “away to Spokane” to prevent her from dating “a Chinaman” (39). The lumber baron, who had previously “put up with” Fred Wah Jr., has become convinced that the young man is an unacceptable boyfriend: “It just can’t work...you’ve got sneaky eyes and I don’t want my daughter seeing you any more so don’t let me catch you around here again and no more phone calls either” (39). The lumber baron’s changed perception of his daughter’s boyfriend is reinforced by the contention that the body provides clues as to Fred Wah Jr.’s racial place in society—a contention that illustrates Mahtani’s point that “phenotypical traits” are “continually being analyzed” (220). After being racialized as “Chinese,” moreover, Fred Wah Jr. loses his access to the lumber baron’s home, a space of white privilege and upward mobility. On other occasions as well, he notes how his

bodily movements are curtailed by the possibility of being labelled as non-white. For instance, while “sleigh-riding” with “a bunch” of friends, he “turn[s] into a smart aleck and yell[s] out something jerky” to a bus driver “trying to [take his vehicle] up the hill” (Wah 101). The bus driver, in turn, informs Fred Wah Jr. that “he knows who my dad is and he’s going to tell him what I’ve done” (101). Later that night, the son receives a harsh lesson about how racialized “Chinese” bodies have to behave. When his father “gets home,” the son not only gets “a spanking,” but:

a good talking to about how I can’t fool around out there when my father’s a business man, a Chinese business man, and I’d better not talk back like I did today, to anyone, particularly when they’re white, because it all comes down on him, my father, and our family has to be careful...don’t ever think you’re so smart if you think that hurts wait until you try horsing around like this again and I’ll give you a good reason to cry. (101)

Presenting what is presumably an angry parental rant, this passage lacks punctuation except for those moments that emphasize the vulnerable position of the father as “a Chinese business man.” Here again, a connection is made between the racialized body and restricted mobility. This connection is also implicitly violent, as the son returns to the image of “the belt” when he admits that “the colour of [his father’s anger] is black and blue” (102). At times, Fred Wah Jr. is forced to recognize the painful implications of race.

5.3 Contradictory Movements

An understanding of how the dark-skinned father and light-skinned son experience differing degrees of racial ambiguity helps to explain how these mixed race subjects develop divergent performative strategies to create and negotiate space. Indeed, Chen describes how racialization involves “always already constructed identities [being] thrust upon [subjects],”

necessitating these subjects to “tak[e] on those roles in order to subvert them in...moment[s] of [strategic] performance” (90). My analysis thus considers those movements and behaviours that follow processes of racialization, examining how the father and son respond to the ways their bodies are interpreted by others. However, in exploring the potential for subversive acts, I am attentive to Mahtani’s warning that mixed race subjects can never “attain a complete freedom of creative racialized expression” (214). Thus, I acknowledge how father and son enact paradoxical movements, which simultaneously rely on and challenge racialized categories. Significantly, racial perceptions of Fred Wah Sr.’s “brown” body mean that he is positioned in the role of “Chinaman,” yet he also responds to this positioning in ways that create transgressive opportunities. At the Diamond Grill, in particular, Fred Wah Sr. exploits the racialized image of the labouring “Chinaman” who is “addicted” to gambling (Wah 62). For example, he is depicted as subtly gaining the upper hand while playing a betting game, called “timber,” with the town’s “nickel millionaires” (123):

[The white] store owners and insurance men...start out betting just for coffee but no one can stand to lose so the stakes go up. [My father] taunts them with jokes about their luck, he loves it. Digging his right hand into his change pocket he’ll rattle the coins and challenge the boys to another round...They can’t resist. (123)

While supposedly assuming a subordinate role, Fred Wah Sr. entertains his customers to keep them “com[ing] back,” as well as “pocket” some extra money (29). As the son comments, his father brings home the winnings “with his proud gambling smile and wink to us kids that he could do that, bluff each day past those white guys and always have jingle jangle high jinks deep into his right pocket for his family” (124). Fred Wah Sr.’s act of “bluffing,” moreover, is “serious” in that it earns enough funds to subsidize Fred Wah Jr.’s university education (124);

that is, it contests racialized restrictions by facilitating an upward social mobility that otherwise would not be possible. At the same time as this performance takes advantage of the white businessmen, however, it risks accommodating, and so further entrenching, their racist stereotypes. Fred Wah Sr.'s practice of playing timber thus highlights what Chen calls as "the dilemma" of racial performativity, demonstrating "the circumscribed conditions under which strategies of resistance for [racialized] subjects emerge" (16).

This acknowledgement of the father's bodily performances and their contradictory effects highlights what is often overlooked in more abstract readings of hybridity. As Matthews contends, hybridity theories often "shift [the] focus from the body," neglecting to account for the complex spaces where embodied practices are employed (44). Mahtani also elaborates that one result of not considering "the production of racialized meanings in the spatial" is the premature celebration of the subversive potential of racialized performances (Mahtani 211). This "optimistic" tendency, which can be identified in extant criticism of *Diamond Grill*, suggests that mixed race subjects have "performed an escape from racist discourses" (214). For example, in her analysis, Sugars emphatically affirms the subversive nature of a speech that the father gives to a group of white businessmen at the Lions Club. Arguing that Fred Wah Sr. "explode[s] the divide between east and west" (Sugars, "Negative" 36), she engages with the following poem:

When he hears himself say *sloup* for soup he stops suddenly and looks out at the expected embarrassed and patronizing smiles from the crowd. Then he does what he has learned to do so well in such instances, he turns it into a joke, a kind of self put-down that he knows these white guys like to hear: he bluffs that Chinamen call soup *sloup* because, as you all know, the Chinese make their cafe soup from the slop water they wash their underwear and socks in. (Wah 66, emphasis as cited)

Sugars stresses how Fred Wah Sr.'s "self put-down" is a kind of "performed masquerade" that "undercuts the power hierarchy embedded in [racialized] constructions," as he "mimic[s] western stereotypes of the Chinese" (Sugars, "Negative" 36). While I agree with Sugars that Fred Wah Sr. enacts a strategic racialized performance, I emphasize how this performance remains shaped by the racist conditions and constraints of his circumstances. In this tense situation, where the father is positioned as "a Chinaman" and is in danger of being openly ridiculed and excluded, he has limited flexibility to subvert this positioning. Given these circumstances, Fred Wah Sr. makes the best performative choice that he can: he "plays up" the subordinate role, giving the white businessmen what they "like to hear," so that he can maintain his "business connections" and inclusion at the Lions Club (Wah 65). Fred Wah Sr.'s ability to "bluff" thus mobilizes a space within an oppressive racialized grid. Not unlike the racialized performances that Mahtani describes, his "bluffing" increases his capacity to "engag[e] with, dea[l] with, and mov[e] through social meanings" (Mahtani 216). However, his "bluffing" does not allow him to avoid white ideas of "Chineseness." Like other racialized acts, his performance is "contaminated by dominant racial norms" (214), making its meanings both complicated and paradoxical.

While some accounts of hybridity produce what Matthews calls premature and "dematerialised...celebrations" of "transgressive strategies" (44), others inadvertently overlook, and so diminish, these strategies. As Mahtani explains, another consequence of "not investigating space" is the unintentional devaluation of the "rich and creative" performances that mixed race subjects enact in their attempt to "ge[t] on and ge[t] by in a racialized world" (240). This tendency can also be seen in criticism of *Diamond Grill*. For example, in her reading of how the poems "imagine hybridity differently by mobilizing the hyphen," McGonegal outlines a definition of "cultural contestation and negotiation" that implies that the father's actions are less

meaningful than those of the son (par. 1, par. 14). In particular, McGonegal identifies “the hyphen with the kitchen doors in the Diamond Grill restaurant,” arguing that these doors—which “separat[e] the domain of labouring Chinese [workers]...from their white...clientele”—“can either stand oppressively still or be opened with a surge of subversive noise” (par. 11). By associating the doors with racial borders, this analysis contends that moving through the doors “discreetly” is an indication that the subject has “internalize[d] the...discomfort and the disruption to which his racial mixedness gives rise” (par. 12). Thus, only those acts that “boisterously” and “noisily” confront racial categorization are accorded subversive potential (par. 14). While McGonegal’s argument offers insight into the complex movements of the light-skinned son, which I address later, it does not engage with the creative and disruptive stances of the dark-skinned father. In suggesting that “racially mixed subject” upholds the status quo when he “moves through the doors unobtrusively,” McGonegal intimates that the father cannot be “developed into an instrument of opposition,” for he is the one who is repeatedly depicted as moving in this manner (par. 12). As I have stressed, however, “fluidity” in choosing racialized performances is available to some mixed race subjects more than others. The father’s concern over “disturb[ing] the customers” can thus be seen as a sign of his more constrained positioning, not his submission to racially oppressive conditions (Wah 21). McGonegal’s conceptualization of the hyphen hence shows how “theoretical formations” can “obscure potentially promising explorations of subversion,” especially among those bodies that are more restricted and subtle in their movements (Mahtani 212). As Mahtani maintains, “strategies of covertness” are “a necessary tactic at times due to vulnerability to racist attacks....a factor that rarely permits the luxury of direct confrontation” (230). In this case, the father’s practice of “bluffing” should be recognized for its ability to “discreetly” navigate and contest the racialized terrain. Investigating

racial performances in their embodied, situational specificity helps to acknowledge, for a diversity of mixed race subjects, the ability to make choices despite the conditions that limit the options available to them.

Although McGonegal's theorization of the hyphen neglects to engage with the father's performances, it does provide a perceptive lens through which to explore the son's practice of "passing." More specifically, in highlighting how Fred Wah Jr. can become complicit in "dominant white" racism when he remains "quiet and immobile," McGonegal points out how "passing" plays on an idealized condition of whiteness (par. 13); it risks re-investing in racist assumptions, unless it mobilizes "affirmative gestures" to acknowledge, rather than deny, connections to "racially marginalized groups" (par. 13). My analysis thus stresses how several of the poems suggest how the son's ability to "pass" not only grants him access to white spaces of privilege, but also invites him to participate in racist acts based on his assumed whiteness. For example, in a poem examined earlier, Fred Wah Jr. stands by while his "buddies at school" taunt "the Chinese guys" on a basketball team (Wah 136). In this moment, the son has an opportunity to enact an intervention, but instead he decides to stay static and silent; he conceals his friendly association with the "Chinese guys" and reinforces a binary understanding of racial identification. By not intervening on behalf of the basketball players, Fred Wah Jr. shows how "passing," when it is deployed merely to secure privileges associated with whiteness does little to disrupt or undermine processes of racial categorization.

Reflection

It is hard for me to admit, but my "passing" has sometimes required that I distance myself from those relationships that mean the most to me. As a teenager, especially, I did not always proudly acknowledge my connections to my mother and grandmother, and this reality shames me. The memory, which is described in the journal excerpt below, is especially difficult, I think because it shows a moment of complicity with a racist act based on my assumed whiteness. Why did I laugh along with the girls of my basketball

team? They seemed to think it was funny that my mother could be my mother—she is “Chinese” and I am “white.” By laughing along, I effectively confirmed their binary way of thinking; in a way, I believe I contributed to their racialization of my mother.

Excerpt from Journal

More high-school memories. On the basketball team, for example, is a popular girl called Jamie—long blond hair and blue eyes. Not even lying when I say that her last name was “White.” Everyone liked her, wanted to be her; she was confident, funny, encircled by friends.

Anyway, my mother was always around—a “sports mom.” She drove the players to “away” games, ran the concession stand during “home” games. That sort of thing. Always around.

One day, Jamie finally made the connection that it was my mother who was helping out the team. Her shocked expression: “Lindsay, that’s your mom?” Yeah, I’m half-Chinese. “Really?” Yeah, that’s my mom. “I knew she was Chinese, but I didn’t know you were.” Laughter from the team. I think I laughed too. But, why was it funny? I keep coming back to the memory, like what was that all about?

Reflection

Drawing on interviews with several families, Sharon Chang observes that “light/white appearing” mixed race children “live in very close proximity to whiteness [and] face the difficulty of holding valued relationships” with racialized family members (139). How can “discordant dynamics and disconnects exist even within loving families?” (139). She answers, “Because they exist beyond the family, are systemic and socially predetermined by the racist world we live in” (139).

Yet, other poems demonstrate how Fred Wah Jr. learns to take advantage of these opportunities, using his perceived whiteness to move in transgressive ways. For instance, describing an exchange at a pretentious, “tight-lipped high muckamuck reception,” one poem shares the following experience (Wah 165):

listening to the whining groans of an old-fart pink-faced investor worried about the Hong Kong real estate takeover, a wincing glance as he moans that UBC has become the University of a Billion Chinks, tense shoulder scrunch as I’m introduced, with emphasis on the name Wah. (165)

Here, in a space of white privilege, Fred Wah Jr. acts strategically, refusing to partake in what the investor assumes would be a shared sense of outrage. While Fred Wah Jr. could have ignored the investor, he enacts an intervention, emphasizing his last name to interrupt impressions of him that are based on his bodily appearance. This meaningful revelation of his mixed race positioning illustrates what Mahtani terms a “race bend[ing]” performance that prevents “the potential for...an uninterrupted racist speech” (228). Like other “race benders,” Fred Wah Jr. manages to “appropriate the space of the encounter” and “shock the person who had made the racist comment into silence” (228). In contrast to his previous failure to acknowledge the basketball players, Fred Wah Jr. thus develops his “passing” to destabilize a racist space, becoming “a source of discomfort” and facilitating “a momentary crisis of racial meaning” (233).

Much like the father’s ability to “bluff,” the son’s capacity to “pass” is shown to be a complicated racialized performance, which responds to readings of phenotype and produces contradictory effects. As Mahtani emphasizes, “the ability to enact racial performativity [does] not mean that [mixed race subjects can] avoid racial essentialism” (214). Indeed, in charting a difficult process where the father and son undergo divergent racialization processes, the poems illustrate the paradoxical ways that racialized identities are assigned to their bodies; they are required to perform into different roles to generate space and negotiate racialized meanings. Although previous criticism has tended to either prematurely celebrate or inadvertently diminish the father and son’s performative tactics, I stress the ways that these tactics are both delimited and made possible by their difficult circumstances. The result of these circumstances is that a fixed or “transcendent” method of resisting racialized “category reduction” is not possible (Mahtani 239); to some extent, improvised embodied practices are necessary, and complicity with pre-existing categories is inescapable. Incidents of subversion consequently manifest

differently for light-skinned and dark-skinned mixed race subjects. As I have argued, the father's positioning as "a Chinaman" constrains his movements and necessitates discreet performances to protect him from racist attacks. On the other hand, the son's ability to "pass" offers him increased socio-spatial mobility, creating opportunities for race-bending performances and direct confrontation. In both cases, the father and son can at times appear to challenge racialized assumptions and at others reinforce them. The poems hence put emphasis on movement, revealing how racial performativity involves active and tense negotiations. One poem, in particular, suggests the importance of persistently challenging boundaries: "They swing and they turn, gate of to and gate of from, entrance and exit, the flow, the discharge, the access, the egress... These are the gates and you can kick them open or walk through in silence. Same dif" (Wah 164). This poem implies that the contrasting actions of the father and son are both meaningful; the real danger, it infers, is becoming too immobile and abiding the imposed rules of racialization. The poems' emphasis on movement carries significance in the context of "ongoing conditions of racial oppression" (Lai 114). As Larissa Lai explains, "think[ing] about identity as a mobile space... is important because it does not require the truth of any essence in order to be productive" (125). Rather, by shifting the focus from "being" to "doing," the poems foreground performative possibilities, refusing essentializing tendencies towards fixity, and showing how the consequences of negotiating racialized positions are not open to straightforward interpretations.

Through their inventive and multifaceted form, the poems in *Diamond Grill* draw attention to the indeterminate and contradictory effects of racialized performances, inviting multiple readings and conveying the need for continuing action. Constantly moving between different spaces, times, and racialized positions, the poems juxtapose and intertwine the father and son's experiences, making their meaning less fixed and more complex. Indeed, similar to

“[t]he journal journey” described in the opening poem, *Diamond Grill* “avoid[s] a place to start—or end” (Wah 1), and instead, seeks to preserve its “edges. Some hazy margin of possibility, absence, gap” (1). Here, the reference to “edges” suggests a desire to have “sharp” defences, while the image of “hazy margin” gestures to spaces outside of the racialized grid. These poetic allusions help to explain why the text lacks conventional narrative structures. Poem after poem appears without transitional link; also absent is a consistent authoritative voice to connect event to event. In this way, the poems resist conforming to expectations for an official, linear history, which progresses forward in time.

Reflection

Often times, when I share my mixed race experiences with other people, their responses show a tendency to try to minimize or deny the continuing existence of racism. This personal experience of having people “duck and deny” conversations about race (Sharon Chang 123) corresponds with Paragg’s observation that, in Canada, “the centrality of multiculturalism,” and its discourses of racial progress and inclusivity, has made it difficult for people to see “the limited and [exclusionary] racialized landscape” (26); many want to believe that issues of racial inequity are safely in the past, definitively “over.” I think being mixed race has made me more willing to recognize how racist beliefs and structures permeate every level of society, including our families.

Excerpt from Journal

My father’s side of the family was always a mystery to me. I grew up without ever knowing my father’s father; I assumed he was dead. But then, when I got older, I found out my grandfather was a racist, who disowned my father when he married my mother. So, that’s why I never met him; he didn’t want to meet me. My father shrugged his shoulders, “He was a bad man, Lindsay, a drunk. A violent drunk. Not a good man, at all.”

Only thing is, when I tell other people this story, a lot of them don’t believe me. Really, a racist? Disowned your father because of your mother? When was this, in the seventies? No, can’t be. Surely, “it” was over by then, whatever “it” was.

The gaps between the poems effectively point to empty spaces where this form of history cannot account for the shifting and ambiguous performances of racialized identities. Instead of providing conventional structures, the poems offer recurring images and phrases to create a

provisional sense of continuity. Allusions to “edges,” for instance, repeat in several of the poems, suggesting how racialized performances adapt to changing situations. At one point, the father’s movements are described as “Some kind of dance; patterned yet yielding at the edges, room for subtle improv” (Wah 37). This repetition of “edges,” as a poetic device, works to challenge notions of fixity and linear progression, showing how images and phrases cannot be read the same way twice; like embodied performances, they are always taking on additional meanings and possibilities, depending on their context. The poems thus assume a series of creative and disruptive stances, which contest “appropriation” or “be[ing] inducted into someone else’s story, or project” (Wah 125). One poem, in particular, expresses the son’s commitment to evade “the sacrosanct great railway imagination dedicated to harvesting a dominant white cultural landscape” (125). In this way, he expresses a desire to avoid what Lai identifies as a national “politics of incorporation” (Lai 112), which attempts to “harvest” racialized experiences to promote an ahistorical, de-politicized discourse of multiculturalism—a discourse which maintains static categories of representations. Opposing this kind of incorporation, the poems produce accounts with flexible boundaries; not closed or complete in the conventional sense, they extend discussions of racialized experience into the future. Interpretations and meanings of the poems are consequently difficult and multiple by design. Far from charting a simple journey between two fixed points, *Diamond Grill* advocates a mode of navigating racialized terrains, focusing not on how to “be,” but on how to “do” and keep “doing.”

5.4 Mobile Paradoxical Spaces

To further appreciate the embodied aspects of *Diamond Grill*, which explore the ways that performances are enacted to traverse racialized boundaries, this section of my chapter draws on Mahtani’s framework of “mobile paradoxical spaces” (167). As Mahtani explains, this

framework uses a “spatialized vocabulary” to call attention to negotiated “affinities and affections” across differences (167) and provide “a more accurate account of how [mixed race subjects] move in the social world” (168). Significantly, the concept of “mobile paradoxical spaces...turn[s] away from the inside-outside model of exclusion” that requires a “dichotomous” discussion of “white Canadian” versus “non-white Other,” and instead, facilitates an examination of “complex social relations” between various racialized positions (168). Though the inside-outside model has been dominant in Critical Mixed Race Studies, Mahtani stresses how it has implicitly replicated “the basic binary structure” of Canada’s multicultural discourses, as well as maintained images of mixed race subjects as “out-of-place,” “marginal,” and “in-between” (167). Offering an alternative approach, the framework of mobile paradoxical spaces highlights “the more complicated and unconventional alliances that mixed race [subjects] forge outside of ties to their” racialized communities (167). What makes this approach particularly suited for my reading of *Diamond Grill* is that it focuses on notions of process and movement, theorizing “belonging as movement rather than static positionings” (176). Thus, it presents a “critique of...the fixities [generated by racialized] categories,” showing how “productive spaces...are created out of a desire [for] connections” (168). By emphasizing this desire for connections, and engaging with previously neglected moments in the poems, my analysis builds upon Cho’s contention that these poems are attuned to the body’s “gestures and longings” (*Eating* 156). More specifically, I assert that, in addition to revealing deeply-felt connections between father and son, family and Chinese diasporic community, these gestures and longings point to networks of support, sympathy, and solidarity, which work across differently racialized communities. As Lai articulates, acknowledgement of these networks of “inter-racialized relations” is needed to illuminate “coalitional connections” born not through substitution or appropriation, but through

recognition of commonality in struggles (93, 114). I argue that the coalitional connections portrayed in the poems not only uncover everyday “barely hidden relations of marginalized people to one another” (118), but also reflect larger developments, such as the alliance between Chinese and Japanese Canadians that lead to “the politicized and practiced subjectivity understood as Asian Canadian” (112). Yet, by emphasizing the poems’ fluid and open-ended form, my analysis also considers how such coalitional connections are not fixed or “natural,” but always strategically created and negotiated.

While Cho’s analysis elucidates how the poems’ representation of “smell-taste experience” uncovers visceral connections between the father, son, and wider Chinese diasporic community (*Eating* 149), my reading interprets how the poems’ portrayal of embodied racialized performances reveals “the potential for strategic sameness” and “forging coalitions through difference” (Mahtani 201). In particular, I consider how the “shared longing” for community that Cho identifies (*Eating* 154) points to a space of sensitive awareness, which can also recognize other racialized communities and their similar, but not identical, experiences of discrimination and marginalization. Like Cho, I contend that Wah’s poems reveal how the “Chinese” community is “bound” not by authenticity, but by “a craving” for connection (154). For example, when the father is depicted as “walk[ing] into a Chinese restaurant where [he] isn’t known,” his affinity with the racialized “Chinese” workers is not immediate, for they “eyeball” him with some skepticism (Wah 122); rather, to create a space of sensitive recognition, the father moves in a strategic way by adopting an “easygoing” attitude and displaying an interest in “mutual acquaintances” and shared experiences (122). The poems thus allow for “a fuzzier sense of Chineseness” (Cho, *Eating* 141-2) embedded within bodily performances and negotiated similarities. Moreover, I argue that the poems’ focus on “movement [as] inherent in forging

belongings” (Mahtani 174) opens a way for appreciating how the father also “creat[es] alliances with others...transcending socially constructed lines of difference” (167). He occupies mobile paradoxical spaces by building numerous points of connection and “refus[ing] to locate [himself] within a [single] space” (Mahtani 174). One poem, in particular, describes how the father develops an unexpected bond with “a whole bunch of Sons of Freedom” who are imprisoned at the local jail (Wah 45). Tasked with feeding the vegetarian Doukhobors, the father is depicted as taking large “takeout orders” to the “temporary outdoor compound” where they are being held (45). Instead of affirming dominant racialized divisions and merely performing a perfunctory job, the father appears to take additional care in seeing that they enjoy their meals, as he “keeps running back [to the cafe] for more salad oil” (45); sometimes, he also “stays up” at the compound and “eat[s] with them” (45). The father’s actions suggest what Mahtani terms “a special affinity with another because of their similar experience” (Mahtani 204). Having both been detained in jail, the Doukhobors and the father have a “site of similarity” (201) through their shared experience of confinement. This site of similarity nurtures a sensitive connection, motivating the father to offer gestures of sympathy and support, even though he does not deny their difference. Throughout his interaction with the Doukhobors, the father “thinks they’re pretty strange[, but] he gets along with them [anyway]” (45). As with other inter-racialized relations portrayed in the poems, this moment illustrates the kind of “local embodied practices” that comprise mobile paradoxical spaces (Mahtani 175), fostering everyday unconventional alliances that move across social cleavages.

Reflection

Even though interracial alliances emerge out of “daily existence” (Mahtani 168), I believe their significance should not be reduced to simplistic celebrations of liberal multiculturalism; these alliances take work and involve risks. For example, I see my grandmother’s befriending of a Sikh man, named Mr. Singh, in the early 1960s as quite a

bold move. By forming an affiliation with a man who would have been stereotyped as dangerously different, my grandmother disregarded dominant racialized divides and fostered a supportive relationship through difference. Most likely, their overlapping experiences of racial harassment at work provided a point of similarity, which they subsequently nurtured into a lasting bond.

Excerpt from Journal

After the provincial government lifted the legislation barring Chinese Canadians from becoming professionals, like lawyers and teachers, my grandmother went to university to get a teaching licence. Eventually, she got a job as a math teacher at a high school located in a less desirable, lower-income neighbourhood. As one of the only racialized teachers at the school, she was targeted for discrimination; she told stories, for example, of “naughty” students calling her nasty names and occasionally keying her car. Maybe that’s why she felt an immediate connection with Mr. Singh, the science teacher. As a practicing Sikh who wore a turban, Mr. Singh was also targeted for discrimination. My grandmother and Mr. Singh developed a long lasting friendship. I remember visiting Mr. Singh’s house during the summer and picking blueberries in his family’s garden. Also, a few times, my grandmother took me to Mr. Singh’s temple, where we had to take our shoes off and cover our heads before going in. I believe she wanted me to be curious about the perspectives of others. When my grandmother retired as a teacher in the mid-1980s, she had worked for more than twenty years at the same school alongside Mr. Singh.

In addition to “mapping everyday manners of being” that produce sympathetic connections between multiple and differently racialized groups (Mahtani 174), the poems offer an understanding of how these everyday manners contain the seeds of a political vision for solidarity in difference. More specifically, in describing how the father responds to the internment of Japanese-Canadians by deliberately hiring “JC girls to work at the Diamond” (Wah 77), the poems point to the cross-racial coalitions that characterize the emergence of the category, Asian Canadian. The father’s resistance to racialized divisions is highlighted by his willingness to see commonality in struggles and establish a point of contact across difference. When he takes decisive action to provide “Miko and Donna Mori” with “wages and room and board” (77), he demonstrates his awareness of how race-based discriminations intersect; he effectively bridges the separations between Chinese Canadians and Japanese Canadians, which

have been fostered and managed by the Canadian nation-state. Indeed, these separations are acknowledged in a poem when the son confides that:

[t]he cooks in the cafe don't like it at first. [They] have some animosity towards Japanese, my dad explains, because the Japanese occupied China. And [because] the Chinese had been singled out for head tax and exclusion from immigration but not the Japanese. (Wah 77)

By recognizing how relations between Chinese and Japanese Canadians have historically been characterized by conflict and animosity, the father shows that he understands the cooks' misgivings. His concern is not to deny differences between the two groups, but to prioritize similarities produced by their parallel experiences. As Lai stresses, "both Chinese Canadians and Japanese Canadians have suffered at the hands of the Canadian government," and this reality generates "coalitional terms" to work together (25). An everyday demonstration of these coalitional terms, the father's invitation to "Miko and Donna Mori...[to] become an integral part of life in the cafe" (Wah 77) gestures to an "actionable solidarity," which is rooted not in fixed or "natural" connections, but in strategic movements and negotiated belongings (Lai 125). The contextualized, provisional nature of this solidarity is emphasized in the poems' fluid, open-ended form, which constantly moves between diverse, contradictory experiences taken from different moments in time. Conveying notions of motion and incompleteness, this multifaceted form underscores a need for ongoing engagement and mediation. Thus, while the poems offer a sense of the conscious link between Chinese and Japanese Canadians, they also suggest how this link is always in flux—multifaceted, changing, and contingent.

By presenting opportunities to examine how the father forges mobile paradoxical relationships with others, the poems invite appreciation of how racialized histories intersect with

one another in complicated ways. Such an appreciation is productive not only in disrupting the dominant dichotomy of “white Canadian” versus “non-white Other,” but also in revealing coalitional connections made through sensitive awareness of commonality in struggles. The father’s sympathetic gestures toward Doukhobor and Japanese families create an understanding of how these connections involve recognizing sites of similarity, while not denying points of difference. Importantly, Lai explains that this kind of understanding, which does not smooth over the “messiness of coalitional identification,” is required to prevent “coalitional banners” like Asian Canadian from becoming de-historicized categories for “easy packaging and easy management” (113); she advises that highlighting “coalitional roots” and tensions is one way of keeping this “dange[r] at bay” (114). Nonetheless, while the poems portray various instances of interrelations between racialized communities, they neglect to depict any concrete, embodied relations between Chinese and Indigenous Canadians. This absence of Chinese-Indigenous relations is surprising given the poems’ frequent allusions to Canada as a colonial “contact zone,” a space where peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with one another and establish ongoing relations (Wah 69). Yet, the only sustained discussion of Chinese-Indigenous encounter or alliance is through the Chinook Jargon term, “high muckamuck” (68). Appearing as an abstract trace of previous friendships and affinities, “high muckamuck” repeats in several of the poems and gestures to once well-established Chinese-Indigenous trade networks. To be sure, some of the poems imply that “Grampa Wah,” who is depicted as frequently using the Chinook Jargon term, participates in these networks when he “comes to Canada in 1892” (Wah 5). Describing the grandfather’s experiences, for example, one poem slips into a stream-of-consciousness, producing poetic images that hint at Chinese-Indigenous interaction: “pretending love forgotten history braided gender half-breed loneliness

naive voices degraded miscourse racist myths” (7). Here, images of a “braided,” “forgotten history” tacitly illustrate how Chinese Canadian immigration is interwoven with the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. The “forgotten” nature of this history is emphasized by the son’s admission that, as a child, he mistakenly believed that his grandfather’s use of “high muckamuck” was just him “sliding Chinese words into English words” (68); only years later does the son realize that the grandfather is “using Chinook [J]argon” (68). This admission indicates the extent to which the grandfather, as well as the father, have disavowed their previous connections to Indigenous peoples. Thus, in contrast to the mobile paradoxical spaces that the father is portrayed as occupying in relation to differently racialized communities, the absence of active connections to Indigenous communities makes visible a larger trend of “forgetting” a history of Chinese-Indigenous relationships—a history in which Chinese Canadians are deeply indebted to Indigenous peoples.

Through the connotations attached to the term “high muckamuck,” the poems intimate the self-interested motivations undergirding this “forgetting” of Chinese-Indigenous relationships. For example, one poem explains how “high muckamuck” derives “from *hyu muck-amuck*, originally among First Nations meaning plenty to eat and transformed through the contact zone into big shot, big time operator” (68-69, emphasis as cited). The transformation of “high muckamuck,” which follows a process of colonization, signals a significant shift in values, away from communal goals of having enough to eat and towards more individualistic goals of accumulating of capital and prestige. This implication is highlighted through the grandfather’s use of the term. The son explains that “Grampa Wah”:

exclaims high muckamuck...when he gets all spiffed up, arranging his hanky to pouf out of the breast pocket of his suit, angling his tie into a full Windsor, fixing his diamond

cuff-links and shaking his arms so the shirt-sleeves fill out smooth, sticking the gold nugget tie pin through the layers of the tie and shirt, brushing some lint off his trouser leg as he stands to reach up for his best felt hat. (69)

This detailed explanation suggests how the grandfather greatly desires is to attain white respectability, a respectability which de Leon stresses is “a particularly valued space of thriving...commerce and wealth” (de Leon 395). By making a display of symbolic capital—through his diamond cuff-links and gold nugget tie pin—the grandfather effectively shows his adoption of a colonial mindset; he has turned away from his previous connections with Indigenous communities and moved closer to white norms and values. The father, as well, is depicted as conforming to white standards in a problematic effort to achieve legitimacy and recognition. For instance, one poem illustrates how the father progressively assumes a contested position vis-à-vis the Indigenous population:

he’s twenty three years old and working in a small cafe...he picks up enough English and cafe-business smarts to move back to Swift Current within a year and by 1936 he’s wearing a suit and tie and taking in every Swift Current Indians home game he can. (Wah 19)

Here, the racist underpinnings of the team’s name, and the father’s positioning as a spectator, imply the distanced stance he has assumed towards the oppression of Indigenous peoples; he no longer recognizes “the shared histories and common experiences of exclusion that have shaped [Chinese Canadian and Indigenous] communities” (Mawani 202). Thus, the poems illustrate Malissa Phung’s observation that a pervasive “forgetting” or disavowal of “historical debts and mutualities” has taken place (Phung, “Reaching” 32); she emphasize that this “forgetting” typifies “the socio-political realms that Chinese settlers navigate to this day” (32). The absence

of contemporary Chinese-Indigenous relationships in the poems thus highlights the need for anti-racist strategies to become aligned with decolonization struggles. In a way, the silences and empty spaces between the poems can also be seen as pointing to the undeveloped potential of Chinese-Indigenous alliances, asking how looking back at the past can generate new possibilities for moving forward into the future.

In a comparable way that empty spaces and silences appear around the representation of Chinese-Indigenous relations, they also emerge around the portrayal of Chinese-Black relations. The virtual absence of Black Canadians in *Diamond Grill* is concerning, as it further suggests how Chinese Canadians have become implicated in a self-interested, colonial mindset, which promotes competing claims to recognition and resources, as well as supports white standards and norms. Nonetheless, while Black Canadians are all but absent in the poems, one small but significant scene takes place in the United States, where the father is described as being “intrigued by all the black people in Buffalo” (Wah 71). While this singular reference may seem misplaced, and therefore relatively meaningless, in a text that otherwise steers clear of depictions of Chinese-Black relations, what follows intimates a damning indictment of the “rules” against interracial friendships and coalition building. The son explains that, during this visit to Buffalo, the father “play[s] cards a lot—hearts” with the son and his friends (71); though father “gets really into it,” “one night the game blows up because he misunderstands one of the rules. We all side against him and his ire rises. At times like that he’s alone” (71). The juxtaposition of this card-playing scene with the father’s observation of Black people in Buffalo implies a recognition of the dangers of traversing the unspoken rules of racial categorization, which leads to racialized subjects “sid[ing] against” (71) other racialized subjects, as well as to a concomitant sense of isolation among racial communities. Against this image of isolation and accompanying anger,

also witnessed in the father's adoption of a colonial mentality vis-a-vis Indigenous people, Wah holds up moments of inter-racialized interaction and affiliation as largely undeveloped, but potentially productive, sites of cross-racial sympathy and solidarity.

5.5 Final Thoughts

This chapter has examined the complex intersections of race and poetic form in Wah's *Diamond Grill*. Against what Cho calls a tendency to assume "transparency to the racialization of Wah's writing" (133), it has explored the ways the poems situate the body as a paradoxical site of racialized performance. Shifting away from "the abstraction" of hybridity theories (Matthews 42), my analysis has drawn on Critical Mixed Race Studies and underscored the importance of considering perceptions of racial ambiguity and their embodied responses. An emphasis on context reveals how the father and son undergo divergent racialization processes and rely on different performative strategies to navigate the racialized terrain. These performative strategies show how the father and son are aware of how their bodies are being racially read and, at times, try to subversively disrupt these readings. Furthermore, with their multifaceted form, the poems indicate how such performances are contradictory and fraught, producing both conservative and transgressive effects. Finally, by using Mahtani's spatialized framework of mobile paradoxical spaces, I have attempted to demonstrate the mobility of father's positioning among other and differently racialized communities. Negotiating strategic sites of sameness with these communities, the father forges numerous points of connection and gestures to the everyday formation of interracial networks support, sympathy, and solidarity. This understanding of the father's actions helps to emphasize the coalitional roots of categories, such as Asian Canadian, and prevent these categories from becoming "over-simplistic or too essentialist" (Lai 125). Yet, the father's inability to recognize and extend strategic sameness to

Indigenous and Black communities is deeply problematic, raising important questions about the participation of Chinese Canadians in a colonial mindset, which disavows historical debts and interdependencies, and contributes to the continuing practices of anti-Black racism and displacement of Indigenous peoples.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In August 2015, my grandmother became very ill and, within a few weeks, passed away right before her ninetieth birthday. Even though I could see that her health was declining, I was in denial that she could die. I remember sitting by her bedside, day after day, and holding her hand. She would slip in and out of consciousness and often awaken quite disoriented. She would ask questions about when and where she was—inquiring about her parents, husband, and others who had died many years ago, she seemed adrift in time and space. Then, two days before her death, she had a moment of clarity. She woke up knowing my name and wanting to have lunch with me. For the first time in a long while, she got out of bed and sat in her reading chair. “Lindsay,” she said, folding her hands in her lap, “I’ve got so many stories to tell and so little time.” Leaning back in her chair, she began telling stories about her childhood in Victoria’s Chinatown, stories that I had heard before, but with different nuances and points of emphasis. On that day, in particular, her storytelling seemed shaped by themes of love and persistence; it was as though she was trying to reassure me that our affectionate bond could never be broken. Several times throughout the writing of this dissertation, I have thought back to that day as source of strength and inspiration. Indeed, in exploring how stories about the past can help to make sense of the present and prepare for the future, my dissertation is, in many ways, dedicated to honouring and cherishing the memory of my grandmother. While I have tried to remain mindful of the potential limitations of (re)presenting and engaging with stories about early Chinese Canadians, I have also aimed to highlight the importance of envisioning new methods to do so—methods which foster Asian Canadian conversation and critique, as well as challenge Orientalizing East-West binaries and white settler colonial myths.

Central to the creative-critical enterprise of this dissertation has been an effort to bring my grandmother's stories into dialogue with a canon of Chinese Canadian narratives. While my grandmother's stories have helped me to reflect upon a family history that begins with my great-great-grandfather's immigration to Canada in 1874, my investigations of Chinese Canadian narratives have allowed me to trace how this canon has been imagined and produced. In highlighting the anti-racist movements of the 1980s and 90s as influential in the formation of Asian Canadian Studies, and paying heed to the dialectic relationship between past and present Chinese Canadian writing, I have endeavoured to think through various kinds of creative and critical approaches, or what Larissa Lai calls "liberatory practices" (Lai x). In particular, I have drawn insights from postcolonial and transnational feminist frameworks to (re)examine allusions to family secrets and ghostly hauntings in Chinese Canadian autobiographies, constructions of masculinity in contemporary myths of "Gold Mountain" heroes, representations of mothers and daughters in Chinese Canadian feminist "coming to voice" narratives, and, finally, the depictions of mixed race subjectivity and racialized performance in Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill*. My efforts to explore the effects of Canada's colonial encounter, consider the lived imbrications of race, class, gender, and colonialism, and understand the relation between past and present, should be understood as part of a larger, ongoing project in Asian Canadian Studies. By shifting focus away from earlier goals of gaining visibility and claiming national belonging, and situating my discussions more clearly within the contexts of global imperialism and local colonialism, I hope my dissertation contributes to current critiques of the nation's claims of liberal-multicultural progressivism, as well as anti-colonial and anti-racist strategies of resistance and coalition-building. In foregrounding my own social location, furthermore, I hope my dissertation has moved away from scholarly objectivity and responded to Miki's call for creative and critical

methods that “provoke uncertainty and indeterminacy” (100), and intimate the continuing process of negotiating colonization and racialization.

My intention in (re)visiting canonical Chinese Canadian texts throughout my dissertation has not been to diminish or undermine the important contributions these texts have made to anti-racist movements and the establishment of Asian Canadian Studies. On the contrary, my aim has been to show their enduring relevance by exploring them in new and alternative ways that highlight their complicated, open-ended aspects. Indeed, I have been concerned to point towards possibilities, rather than move towards closure. As Lai asserts, any anti-racist politics that identifies itself with the “end” of oppression becomes misleadingly optimistic and prematurely celebratory, denying “the discontinuities, reversals, and aporias in experience, self-understanding, self-sameness and in writing, as well as the ongoing [nature of] racisms and injustices” (7). If we are to continue (re)thinking what the category of Asian Canadian “can *do* rather than what it *is*” (92, emphasis as cited), then, allowing for “an ambulant motion between past and present” is necessary to constantly “make the liberatory subject anew” (127). Toward that end, combatting the widespread amnesia propagated by liberal multiculturalism and acknowledging the persistence of colonial formations and racializing processes are crucial projects, which I have undertaken here. By focusing on the idea that the past remains inseparable from the present and exploring the ways that multiple histories and subject positions intersect and unfold in relation to one another, I have tried to highlight the potential for recognizing how experiences are different but linked—a potential that holds out the promise of forming cross-racialized coalitional connections. Moreover, I have attempted to make my dissertation’s creative-critical endeavour self-reflexive. Thus, the emphasis throughout my dissertation on the multifaceted, contradictory positioning of Chinese Canadian subjects in the white settler colonial

state, along with an insistence on eschewing official, linear versions of national history, demonstrates my desire to participate in ways of thinking that open spaces for alliance building and encourage further investigations of the past to (re)vision the future.

Significantly, the desire to keep drawing from the past to (re)imagine the future has personal resonances for me, especially when I remember the last day that my grandmother told me stories. Indeed, this day haunts me as a powerful reminder of the deep and complex entanglements of the past in the present. In many ways, I believe my grandmother's stories are gifts, which continue to provide me with generosity and insight, and which imbue me with a sense of response-ability to actively remember and resist the dominant "will to forget." For me, this response-ability is also a form of love, requiring me to continually return to and (re)interpret her stories, always (re)assessing my blind spots. In other words, this response-ability is an ongoing act, a constant working through rather than a final coming to terms. My sincerest wish, therefore, is that this dissertation speaks to this response-ability and attests to its location close to my heart.

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