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In *Diasporic Representations*, Feng examines the stratification of various diasporic subjectivities through closely reading fiction by Chinese American women writers of different social and class backgrounds. Deploying a strategy of “attentive reading,” Feng engages the intersecting issues of historicity, spatiality, and bodily imagination from diasporic and feminist perspectives to illuminate the dynamics of deterritorialization and reterritorialization in Chinese American novels in this transnational age. The authors studied include Diana Chang, Edith Eaton, Yan Geling, Nieh Hualing, Gish Jen, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Aimee Liu, Fae Myenne Ng, Sigrid Nunez, Han Suyin, and Amy Tan.

Pin-chia Feng is Professor of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Chiao Tung University and President of the Association of English and American Literature of Taiwan, ROC. Her previous books include *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston* (1998).

The LIT book series *Contributions to Asian American Literary Studies* is an international forum for the interdisciplinary discussion of Asian American literary studies. The interactive processes of the creation of Asian American cultural studies impose new strategies of reading characterized by a continual call to reorientation and a new conditioning of the determinants of meaning. Moreover, contextualizing the Asian American experience in literature demands a wide theoretical framework from within which to analyze particular texts. Hence, the series editors, Rocío G. Davis (City University of Hong Kong) and Sämi Ludwig (UHA Mulhouse), encourage specific readings that show the richness, complexity, and diversity of Asian American literary production through critical and theoretical lenses that focus on a great variety of writers and genres.

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Diasporic Representations

Reading Chinese American Women's Fiction

Pin-chia Feng

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For Amy Ling, a kindred spirit

And my loving parents

Acknowledgements

This book project was written over a period of ten years, during which time Asian American literary studies has developed and changed tremendously. My own way of thinking about the field has been transformed and reshaped by these shifts and transformations as well, and this evolution has helped structure the project.

My engagement with Asian American literary studies started in the late 1980s in a class of feminist literary criticism with Professor Susan Stanford Friedman in which I wrote a paper on Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Susan has been my professional mentor and role model ever since.

It was through Susan that I had the good fortune to have the late Professor Amy Ling to help me with my doctoral project in which I did a comparative study of works by Kingston and Toni Morrison. Amy was inspirational to me in many ways, especially the persistent and patient way in which she dealt with institutional prejudices while trying to set up Asian American studies programs on different U.S. campuses. Years later, when I was an administrator in a science and technology-dominated campus, I was able to deal with many obstacles with the same kind of persistence and patience. I was overwhelmed and greatly honored when Amy called me her "kindred spirit" in one of our epistolary exchanges. This book is dedicated to her hard work and academic achievement.

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Introduction

On A Colored Sky

Writing in the feminine. And on a colored sky. How do you inscribe difference without bursting into a series of euphoric narcissistic accounts of yourself and your own kind? Without indulging in a marketable romanticism or in a naïve whining about your condition? In other words, how do you forget without annihilating? Between the twin chasms of navel-gazing and navel-erasing, the ground is narrow and slippery. None of us can pride ourselves on being sure-footed there.

Trinh T. Minh-ha
Woman, Native, Other

This book investigates some of the diverse traditions of Chinese American women's fiction by exploring different gendered representations of Chinese America. Employing a strategy I call "attentive reading," I engage primarily with the intersecting problematics of historicity, spatiality and bodily imagination from a diasporic perspective as represented in selected novels. In his *Imagining the Nation* (1998), David Leiwei Li divides Asian American literature and criticism into three phases: the ethnic nationalist phase of the 1960s and 1970s; the feminist phase of the 1970s and 1980s; and the phase of heteroglossia after the 1980s (186). Each of these three phases corresponds to specific aesthetic precepts and criteria as represented in critical and literary texts. This project will study Chinese American women writers active in the heteroglossia phase and examine how each attempts to define a Chinese American diasporic identity against the backdrop of transnational migration. Despite Li's contention that the poststructuralist uses of difference and diaspora represent "an unsuccessful challenge to the continuing condition of Asian American exclusion and abjection within the United States" (202), I believe that the concept of diaspora can be useful if we pay special attention to historical nuances in the formation of Chinese American cultural and political identities. As R. Radhakrishnan rightly puts it, "the diaspora is an excellent opportunity to think through some of these vexed questions: solidarity and criticism, belonging and distance, insider spaces and outsider spaces, identity as invention and identity as natural, location-subject positionality and the politics of representation, rootedness and rootlessness" (232). Combined with a feminist perspective, a diasporic approach can further illuminate the dynamics of what Deleuze and Guattari call deterritorialization and reterritorialization in the literary creations of Chinese American women in this transnational age.

Even with its assumed collectivity, Chinese America nevertheless has never enjoyed a unified identity and has been reinvented repeatedly with each influx of new immigrants. Thus, Chinese American history and literary production is always already diasporic. The divergent roots and different routes underlying the formation of Chinese America resulted in not one but multiple traditions that must be considered when we wish to discuss the literary works of Chinese American women.

In terms of theorization of women's literary tradition, Elaine Showalter in her study of the literary tradition of British women novelists from the eighteenth century and onward contends that "when we look at women writers collectively we can see an imaginative continuum, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems, and images from generation to generation" (*A Literature of Their Own* 11). She also divides "the female tradition" into three overlapping stages—"Feminine, Feminist, and Female" (13). Showalter's seminal work, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977), provides a useful framework for reflecting on women's writing within a particular national and cultural context. Considering the diverse historical and social stratifications of Chinese American women writers in the diaspora, however, it can hardly be said that there is a unified literary continuum capable of being neatly divided into different stages or phases corresponding to a discrete historical timeline.

Initially, to comply with the conception of literary tradition, I planned to provide a distinctive historical framework from which I would attempt to construct a quasi-historical perspective on the history of women of Chinese descent in America, including stories of the American-born generation descended from the Cantonese-speaking and mostly working-class immigrants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as recent immigrants with more diverse geographical origins and oftentimes middle-class backgrounds. However, in the process of writing, there was a shift in my critical cartography. Alongside my original focus of historical representation, there emerged persistently "intrusive" problems concerning spatiality and the body. Michel de Certeau has put it this way: "Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice" (115). And the visible differences of Chinese American women, what Eleanor Ty in *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives* (2004) terms "visible hieroglyphs" (3)—"a set of bodily markings, which include particular accents, a way of moving, culinary habits, and other cultural practices that are fetishized as Asian" (4)—inevitably and indelibly mark and shape these writers' subject formations as well as their textual representations. And yet coupled with this hypervisibility is the persistent racial myopia of the dominant society which renders the minority subject socially invisible. As Amy Ling pointed out decades ago, the push-and-pull of visible difference and social invisibility attest to the subjects' state of being trapped

“between worlds” (*Between Worlds* 20). “At certain times in history,” Ling observes, “the racial minority person in the United States has been a non-person—politically, legally, and socially—and these traditions also die hard” (*Between Worlds* 20). Anne Anlin Cheng theorizes this symptom of “white racial melancholia” in spatial terms: “[T]eetering between the known and the unknown, the seen and the deliberately unseen, the racial other constitutes an oversight that is consciously made unconscious—naturalized over time as absence, as complementary negative space” (16).¹ Relegated to the “negative space,” the minoritized subject becomes a haunting body that scripts the spectral drama of American history.

Thus, at every turn of my historical inquiry, I encountered the question of space—real and imagined, somatic and symbolic—and bodily imagination that haunted me in the fashion of Toni Morrison’s rememory in *Beloved* (1987). I came to an important, albeit not exactly original, understanding after a prolonged struggle: The problematics of history are intimately and intricately involved with that of spatial and bodily imagination. That is one of the reasons why Morrison chooses to open her monumental remembrance of American slavery with the address of a former slave. “124 Bluestone Road” is a haunted house that brings together all the violence of the antebellum institution of slavery and racial tension during the period of Reconstruction. It is also a physical space that a former slave can tentatively call home. Moreover, Sethe’s scarred and ravished body—with the chokecherry tree on her back and the stolen milk—also becomes the most vivid image embodying the horror and trauma of the Black diaspora. Hence history, space, and body are intricately and inevitably intertwined in the project of representing a minority subject. Supported by this understanding, I turn to study the different politics of representation of a select group of Chinese women writers in the diaspora and the traditions behind them.

Situating Asian American Literary Studies

To better situate this project in the context of Asian American literary studies, a brief overview of some of the critical works done in this field is useful. Taking a nationalist stance of the civil rights era, in the introduction to the memorable anthology *Aiiieeeee!* (1974) the editors set to define what is Asian American literature and sensitivity and opened up a fertile ground for debates and future studies. Nearly a decade later, Elaine Kim’s *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*

¹ White racial melancholia refers to the way in which the dominant white culture simultaneously rejects and is attached to the racial other. Cheng bases her analysis of the enigmatic paradox of seeing/not-seeing in the racial encounter upon the paradigmatic texts of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (15-16).

(1982), the first book-length study of Asian American literature, addressed the creative efforts in English by Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino American writers, focusing “on the evolution of Asian American consciousness and self-image as expressed in the literature” (xi). The publication of two more ground-breaking monographs in 1993, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* and King-Kok Cheung’s *Articulated Silence: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa*, marked the appearance of works of criticism devoted exclusively to the study of Asian American literature in the 1990s. Whereas Wong’s work investigates the intertextual relationship existing in the corpus of Asian American literary texts through a systematic exploration of four prominent themes—food, the double, mobility, and play, Cheung takes issue with the dominant (white) feminist discourse for privileging speech and devotes her study to the thematic and rhetorical use of silence as a method of articulation in the works of three Asian American women.

Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (1997), David Li’s *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent*, and Sheng-mei Ma’s *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* (1998) are three more critical studies that focus on issues of immigration, citizenship, and the American nation-state. Lowe stresses that an understanding of the nature and history of Asian immigration to the United States is essential to interrogating the racialized political economy of the nation. Li, addressing the similar issue of Asian American nationalism and citizenship, analyzes what he calls “Asian abjection” as “a form of denied Asian American articulation that serves to immobilize the race—and culture-specific national embodiment of the Asian American” (8). Ma, meanwhile, concentrates on issues of immigration and delves into the textual representation of Asian American immigrants and the particular form of “immigrant schizophrenic.” David Palumbo-Liu’s *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (1999) is an exemplary work of Asian American culture and literary studies that combines sociohistorical research, cultural criticism, and literary theories to analyze the position of being Asian/American. Here the slide in between indicates the split, unstableness, and the constant reconfigurations of Asian America: “As in the construction ‘and/or,’ where the solidus at once instantiates a choice between two terms, their simultaneous and equal status, and an element of undecidability, that is, as it at once implies both exclusion and inclusion.” Hence Palumbo-Liu contends: “‘Asian/American’ marks *both* the distinction installed between ‘Asian’ and ‘American’ *and* a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement” (1).

In *The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity* (2000), Sheng-mei Ma deploys “four metaphors of physical postures/states”

to highlight four moments of cultural encounter between Asian Americans and the mainstream society: “*clutch of rape* in imperialist adventure narratives of the 1930s and 1940s; *clash of arms* or martial metaphors of the 1970s and beyond; U.S. multicultural *flaunting* of ethnicity; and global postcolonial *masquerading* of identity” (xv). Providing important sociohistorical background to the study of the development of Chinese American literature since its emergence in mid nineteenth-century America, Xiao-huang Yin’s *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s* (2000) covers the multiple voices of Chinese American writers. In *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Struggles of Authorship in Asian America*, also published in 2000, Patricia Chu examines how Asian American writers use and revamp the tradition of *Bildungsroman* to foreground their treacherous position in the United States and the urgent need of “material, cultural, and spiritual survival” (4). One of Chu’s contributions to the study—which she herself identifies as “the first extended literary study of the *gendering* of Asian American narratives of assimilation”—is of particular relevance to this current project (4).

Theoretical methodologies and thematic approaches in the study of Asian American literature become increasingly diversified in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Adapting the Freudian model, for instance, in *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (2001) Anne Anlin Cheng coins the term “racial melancholia,” which is “both the technology and the nightmare of the American Dream,” to theorize “racial grief” as a symptom as well as “an analytic paradigm responsive to the material and imaginative realities of racial dynamics” (xi). In *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (2003) Kandice Chuh deploys a deconstructive framework of analysis and argues for “a turn toward subjectlessness” in defining Asian American (13). Chuh contends that citizenship and subjectivity always enjoy centrality in the knowledge production of Asian American studies, and yet “subjectivity itself, alone, cannot remedy injustice” (10). Thus, Chuh suggests that Asian Americanists should move away from the insistence on subjectivity and use subjectlessness “as a conceptual tool” to reflect on “the need to manufacture ‘Asian American’ situationally” and to practice a kind of “strategic *anti-essentialism*” (10). For this critic, this kind of deconstructive attitude highlights the importance of difference in identity, enables us to “imagine otherwise” and to interrogate the ideological underpinnings and discursive stability of national identity in the United States. In *Beyond Literary Chinatown* (2007), Jeffrey Partridge utilizes reception theory to study “the dynamic relationship between reader expectations of Chinese American literature and the challenges posed by recent Chinese American texts to the assumptions of readers” (ix). According to Partridge, “the literary Chinatown phenomenon” refers to the Eu-

ro-American reader's "fetishization of Chinese Americans as objects of exploration and ethnographic intrigue" (8). To respond to "the literary Chinatown horizon of expectations" and to go beyond this cultural ghettoization, Partridge argues, many Chinese American authors choose to write back and contradict "the expectations of the reading public" (16).

Monographs adopting thematic approaches to explicating Asian American texts are also abundant in the new millennium. For example, Leslie Bow's *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion: Feminism, Sexual Politics, Asian American Women's Literature* (2001) analyzes the ways in which female sexuality and racial difference are connected with the themes of seduction and betrayal in works by Asian American women that "both signify and interrogate political alliance and ethnic collectivity" (8). Exploring the interconnections of dirt, race, female bodiness, and the global context in Asian American women's writing, Monica Chu in *Filthy Fictions: Asian American Literature by Women* (2004) contends that "the subtle and overt references to Asian Americans as filthy" in contemporary Asian American fiction serve to counteract and reject "an Orientalism rooted in Yellow Peril rhetoric" (4). Rocío G. Davis combines the thematic study of childhood with a generic investigation of life writing to foreground the literary perspectives in the construction of ethnic selfhood and cultural memory in *Begin Here: Reading Asian North American Autobiographies of Childhood* (2007) and argues that "Asian North American memoirs of childhood are challenging the construction and performative potential of the national experience, particularly in the experiential categories of epistemology and phenomenology" (1). Wenyng Xu's monograph on literary representations of Asian American foodways, *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* (2008), investigates the relationships between food and identities in terms of gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, as well as the diasporic context. Anita Mannur in *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (2010) also uses food as a vector of critical analysis and focuses on examining "food as an enunciative space" for race, class, labor, and culture in South Asian American popular culture and literature (24).

This highly selected list of critical studies clearly demonstrates that Asian American literary studies has progressed steadily in many directions over the past four decades. Yet it seems to me that something is lacking in the list above. Although Chinese American women authors—such as the luminous Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan—have consistently figured prominently in many of these critical texts, there is no single work dedicated exclusively to the study of their writings and literary traditions, with the exception of Amy Ling's *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (1990). Ling's ground-breaking book is best described, in its own terms, as a feminist archeological attempt to retrieve "buried" texts by women writers of

Chinese descent, beginning with the Eaton sisters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and continuing onto the 1980s. Already in her recovery of neglected texts, Ling has adopted a diasporic perspective by including literary works with a Chinese focus, as well as those dedicated to representing lives in the United States. Taking a similar diasporic approach, my project mostly addresses the works of Chinese American women authors created in and after the 1990s, with a special emphasis on the variegated traditions behind these fictional works. By analyzing texts created in the phase of cultural and linguistic heteroglossia, I want to carry on the legacy of this courageous forerunner who dedicated her life to the study of Chinese American women's literature and to further expand the scope of Ling's study into the new millennium.

Attentive Reading

While dealing with different diasporic specificities, however, I do not want to impose a unified critical framework aside from my consistent feminist concerns with female subjectivity. This may seem reactionary or even a sad personal drawback or inadequacy. Yet I am by no means suspicious of the present "race for theory," in Barbara Christian's terms, nor do I subscribe to the idea that dire consequences result from encounters between theory and minority literatures. On the contrary, I believe in the importance of theory and rely heavily on its insights in my search for personal and professional illumination. At the same time, I also believe in Susan Stanford Friedman's "text-centered approach" (*Mappings* 12). In fact, in post-Barthesian and Foucauldian discourse, everything and anything is textual and can be read and reread, interpreted and reinterpreted, based on these theorists' powerful readings of cultural and historical signs. At the core of my critical stance is the insistence on "attentive reading" and I propose to adopt and adapt different theories as the reading progresses. In other words, I am suggesting an empathetic way of reading and using theories by paying close attention to the historical and cultural nuances of each text.

In advocating attentive reading, I certainly share the belief in "language as the ultimate form of power" of reader-response criticism (Tompkins xxv). Jane Tompkins aptly summarizes the evolution of the practices of reader-response critics and their political conviction in these terms:

Relocating meaning first in the reader's self and then in the interpretive strategies that constitute it, they assert that meaning is a consequence of being in a particular situation in the world. The net result of this epistemological revolution is to re-politicize literature and literary criticism. When discourse is responsible for reality and not merely a reflection of

it, then whose discourse prevails makes all the difference. (xxv)

Literature is political and carries with it ethical responsibility. Hence Wayne C. Booth calls his version of reader-response criticism “*ethical criticism*,” in which the practice of literary criticism is tantamount to character-building. Ethical criticism is “the discussion of what stories do to the ethos of those who respond to them with full attention (*ethos* is the Greek word for ‘character’; its meanings include but go beyond what we call personality)” (289). A veteran literary critic, Booth believes that the practice of close inspection of the nuances of literature affects our understanding of the world around us and help (re)construct our character. I cannot agree with him more. When it comes to reading literary texts by ethnic minorities, moreover, there emerges a whole new meaning that can be added to Booth’s definition of ethical criticism. Responding “with full attention” to the many layers of geographical and historical contexts in minority stories creates a certain ethical position for the reader. In another sense of the etymological origin of *ethos*, being attentive to a literary text creates a “habitat”—an accustomed place and home-like space—for the practitioner of ethical criticism and, I believe, the text that she or he reads. Thus, attentive reading becomes a form of ethical criticism that can create an important linkage between *ethos* and *ethnos*.²

Attentive reading, however, is more than just a rephrasing of the reader-response approach and its emphasis on participatory engagement with texts. Attentive reading is in fact a reading strategy derived from the long history of exclusion—which leads to silence and repression—that constitutes and defines Asian American women’s struggle for representation. Hence, the practice of attentive reading requires us to pay close attention to the material histories of racial, sexual and class struggle, which are often rendered abject in official records of national history. As Eleanor Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht note in their introduction to *Asian North American Identities Beyond the Hyphen* (2004), “the sense of ‘otherness,’” or the “sense of not being quite like the dominant, white majority, as a direct or indirect result of structural inequities imbedded in laws regarding immigration, citizenship, and labor, plays a large role in defining who Asian North Americans are”; hence conceptualizations of Asian North American subjectivity “have been informed and framed by discourses from many fields such as politics, labor,

² In his discussion of American multiculturalism within the context of pedagogy, Jay Gregory also addresses such a connectedness: “A focus on ethics can strengthen the process of creating mechanisms that do justice to the competing claims of different cultural groups. It can also make for affiliations between individuals who in their everyday lives often differ with each other and within themselves....In the agency and decisions of the ethical subject, the competing demands between the universal and the particular seek their only practical justice. The ethnic and the ethical will have to recognize each other in this territory of competing demands, a territory that includes the classroom” (630)

law, and immigration” (3). The complex and complicated histories in the formation of Asian North American identities render any single critical theory inadequate when we want to examine the literary production coming out of Asian North America.

The practice of attentive reading also highlights the importance of the aesthetic in Asian American literary studies. For all their political and cultural significances, Asian American literary texts should not be read as sociological documents but primarily as artistic creations. As Davis cogently puts it, “[t]o address only the cultural project of writers is to elide important aesthetic choices and ignore the carefully wrought formal investment of the authors who are clearly writing in a context of literary and cultural criticism” (*Begin Here* 3). In her introduction to *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing* (2006), Sue-Im Lee rightly points out that aesthetic is “a missing category of analysis” in Asian American literary criticism (5) and there is an urgent need to invigorate “a complementary perspective between cultural materialist and formal modes of analysis” (7). We should, as Kandice Chuh suggests, develop “critical methods and attitudes that attend to the literariness of ‘Asian American’” (27). Attentive reading—paying close attention to literary traditions, generic and formal innovation and/or bending in a given text—provides precisely such a needed “complementary perspective” to re-locate the aesthetic in Asian American literary discourse.

In *Articulate Silence* King-Kok Cheung deploys the idea of “attentive silence” to analyze Canadian Japanese writer Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* and argues that “[t]he gaps in the narrative demand from the reader a heedfulness that corresponds to the narrator’s attentiveness” (129). The idea of attentiveness is both culturally specific in the Japanese immigrant community and something that is historically constructed because of the experience of Japanese Internment in North America during the Second World War. Attentive reading, in this sense, is a practice rooted in Asian culture and North American history and defined by the heavy memory of diasporic routings. We need to activate the affects of empathy to properly tease out the multiple layers of psychic and physical pain that underwrite the history of peoples of Asian descent in North America to create a kind of affective bonding with them. Hence, attentive reading allows us to analyze the complex process of negotiating “an affect-identity”—as Jeffrey J. Santa Ana calls it—in the new millennium of neoliberal capitalism and postethnicity.³

³ Santa Ana describes the process in the formation of such an ethnic affect-identity: “Vacillating between identifying with anxiety-driven assimilation into consumerism, on the one hand, and historical ties to immigrant ancestors or ethnic forbearers, on the other, the minority subject in American ethnic writings mediates commodified euphoria in postmodernism and historically based pain in material relations: a dialectical process from which an emotionally based identity—an affect-identity—emerges” (25).

Moreover, attentive reading is of great importance to non-Western and bilingual academics such as myself. On more than one occasion, my fellow Chinese Americanists (in both senses of the term) have been questioned for our deployment of Western theoretical paradigms in our analysis of Chinese American texts. We have been challenged to develop indigenous (meaning Chinese or Taiwanese) theories in our line of research. Although I strongly reject the implied sense of proprietorship, this is not a challenge that can or should be overlooked. Attentive reading, I submit, allows us to mobilize our own specific cultural experience to attend to textual specificities and mark out culturally specific positions at the same time.

Representing Chinese American Women

Returning to my concern with Chinese American women's literary traditions and representations, the most difficult task for Chinese American women throughout their history has been to find a speaking location in a racist North America and sexist immigrant community. As historian Gary Y. Okihiro points out, "Asian American history is replete with the deeds of men. Women constitute a forgotten factor in Asian American history. They have 'no name'" (65). Like the aunt who has been excommunicated from the family because of her sexual transgression in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), these "no name" women await their female descendants to break silence and "devote pages of paper" to them (16). Reading beyond the generic confinement of memoir writing, Kingston's delineation of this "homeless" woman can also be read as a racial allegory of the exclusion and/or suspension of citizenship suffered by the racial minority.

Showalter is certainly correct in pointing out that "any minority group finds its direction of self-expression relative to a dominant society" (*A Literature of Their Own* 11). In fact, the very presence of any minority group depends on the legal management of mainstream society. The first recorded presence of a Chinese woman setting foot on the United States is that of Afong Moy, who was "imported" in 1834 as an exhibit item for New York's American Museum. The purpose of her appearance in America was "to display how different a Celestial lady looked from the Western women" (Huping Ling 1). From the very beginning, therefore, Chinese American women were exotic objects to be gazed upon, out of pure scopophilia. Chinese American women, as well as African American women, have been deployed for centuries as points of reference to define white womanhood on the basis of an ideology of difference. Furthermore, Chinese women were not welcomed if they did not enter America as anthropological curiosities. Within the general practice of excluding Chinese immigrants, for instance, there have been gender-specific exclusion laws aimed particularly at Chinese

women, based on the gross generalization that all Chinese women are immoral.⁴

As a display item, Afong Moy had no voice of her own; neither had most of her “daughters” for the next century. If we follow Alice Walker’s suggestion and search through our mothers’ gardens for female literary predecessors, we inevitably find the Chinese American maternal plot rather barren.⁵ This lack of literary models is a result of so very few early Chinese American women being literate in Chinese, let alone well versed enough in English to compose literary works. To find their voices at all, we sometimes have to resort to oral histories, as Judy Yung, the devoted historian and collector of Chinese American women’s oral histories, has suggested in *Unbound Voices: A Documentary History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (1999).

One of the first Chinese American women writers to gain national attention was Jade Snow Wong, whose *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) not only won her prize money, but also a publicity tour around Asia sponsored by the U.S. State Department (*Fifth Chinese Daughter* viii). This triumph over silence nevertheless suggests a ghostly return of the foremother in an exhibit case. After she succeeded in earning a college degree and winning praise as a model worker, Wong decided to embark on a career in ceramics. In a striking scene, she describes how she displays herself at work in the exhibit window of a Chinatown shop:

Jade Snow has become a wonder in the eyes of the Western world. They declare that she had invented a new mousetrap.

Chinatown was agog. A woman in the window, her legs astride a potter’s wheel, her hair in braid, her hands perpetually messy with sticky California clay, her finished products such things as collies used in China, the daughter of a conservative family, running a business

⁴ In searching for an explanation for the imbalance of sex ratio among the Chinese immigrants of the pre-exclusion period, George Anthony Peffer tries to dismantle a pervasive argument that such imbalance is caused by the joint-family structure in China and the sojourner mentality. Peffer points out that there were legal practices that directly prohibited the immigration of Chinese women in the hope that it would lead to the natural death of the Chinese American community. The Page Law enacted in 1875 that prohibited immigration of Chinese women “for lewd and immoral purposes” was Peffer’s main evidence of this genocidal practice. See *If They Don’t Bring Their Women Here*.

⁵ Amy Ling’s *Between Worlds*, of course, hopes to demystify this sense of bareness by devoting at least two thirds of her book to English writings by Eurasian and émigré women. Her archaeological effort, however, was sadly overshadowed by an initial lack of academic recognition. Ling was denied tenure by the English Department of Rutgers University because the authors she has rediscovered were deemed “third rate” compared to the canonical ones. See her introduction to *Yellow Lights* (1999). Of course, it should be also added that most of the émigré women writers in the study are of the privileged class.

alone—such a combination was sure to fail! (244)

But she did not fail: “After three months, she was driving the first postwar automobile in Chinatown” (245). In spite of the fact that Wong’s entrepreneurial project found its reward in material success, we cannot help but sense a strong streak of commercialism in the way in which she willingly puts herself on display to invite the gaze of both Chinatown and the Western (white) communities.⁶ As a Chinese American exemplar of Protestant values, Wong’s success story is an extreme demonstration of the American national myths of exceptionalism and the work ethic. In a sense, her capitalist experimentation with Orientalist exotica and Christian testimonial brings us straight back to the time of Afong Moy. Although I will offer a more sympathetic reading of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* in the next chapter, at present suffice it to say that in Wong’s autobiography the Chinese American female body is the site of spectacular difference and exoticized scopophilia very similar to what it was like at the beginning of Chinese American history.

This legacy of (self-)exoticizing transformed the Chinese American woman into a decontextualized object of desire and difference, which makes my effort to provide historical and literary contexts for Chinese American women’s fiction even more significant. In my first published academic piece on Chinese American women, entitled “Narrative of Absence: Historical Representation in *Bone*,” I was trying to configure an all-inclusive narrative pattern to accommodate the variety of Chinese American women’s writing. However, publications of creative works in this field, starting in the late 1990s, have made clear that Chinese American women are writing in an increasingly diversified fashion. There is no “center” that can hold all these multifarious texts. Catherine Liu’s *Oriental Girls Desire Romance* (1997) and Mei Ng’s *Eating Chinese Food Naked* (1998), for example, explicitly explore sexualities and different social experiences from various class backgrounds in connection with appraisals of the American metropolitan landscape that are playful and painful by turns. Patricia Chao’s *Monkey King* (1997) touches upon the taboo subjects of incest and child molestation to such an extent that the writing of the novel itself is an act of transgression. It also stands as a direct challenge to the standardized norm of the Chinese American family narrative. While Lisa See’s fictional endeavors consistently attempt to (re)imagine lives of Chinese women across the centuries, her “Red Princess mysteries”—consisting of *Flower Net* (1997), *The Interior* (1999), and *Dragon Bones* (2003) and featuring a Chinese woman detective

⁶ David Palumbo-Liu also comments on this scene: “This gendered, racialized body at work occupies this liminal space, between communities, transacting and enacting the eclipse of the Chinese and the invention of Chinese America, and because of this transactional function it draws the gaze of both worlds” (144).

solving murder cases in the post-Maoist China—significantly demarcate a breakthrough for Chinese American women’s writing in terms of her choice of the thriller genre. In *The Love Wife* (2004) Gish Jen touches upon the important theme of transnational and transracial adoption while exploring the issues of familial relationship, ethnic identity, and racial prejudice. Mixing postmodern renditions of Chinese fables and fairytales and the growing-up stories of a pair of Chinese American twin sisters, Marilyn Chin’s *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009) exercises a fusionist aesthetic that is both comedic and fantastic and charts another route for Chinese American women’s fiction. While the story of immigration is a common theme in Asian American writing, Jean Kwok’s debut novel *Girl in Translation* (2010) presents a unique and insightful portrayal of the sweatshop in New York’s Chinatown and the problem of cultural translation.

Faced with these transformations and transmutations, I find myself reading *Bone* today with a renewed focus and am engrossed in the spatial configuration within the novel. This attention to the spatial motif was also prompted by an encounter on foot with San Francisco’s Chinatown. When I walked Grand Avenue in search of a Chinese American historical museum, Fae Myenne Ng’s passages about the tourist vision of Chinatown in *Bone* inevitably came to my mind. It was when I failed to find the museum that was supposed to be located in the Financial District that I came to a new understanding of the sense of urgency in Ng’s novel. Chinese American history is literally disappearing in front of the challenge of global commercialism—even the museum that supposedly houses legacies of the past is unknown to people in the area. Important aspects that constitute the ethnic minority’s affect-identity are disappearing in a fast pace. Without our attentiveness to these “disappearing acts,” we can easily lose track of the evolution of Chinese America.

Writing/Reading Chinese American Women

The main objective of this project, as stated, is to explore the stratification of different diasporic subjectivities through close reading of fictional works by writers of different social and class backgrounds as well as of diverse linguistic backgrounds. In addition to this introduction, the book includes seven chapters devoted to readings of individual or groups of Chinese American women writers. In Chapter One I explore the tradition of Chinatown literature by writers of the American-born generation, focusing on reading the representation of space and memory in Fae Myenne Ng’s acclaimed first novel *Bone*. Like *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, *Bone* also provides an insider’s view of San Francisco Chinatown; unlike the invitation to gaze offered by her predecessors, however, Ng counteracts such gazing by painstakingly

mapping out the physical and psychological landscapes of her birthplace.

Chapter Two delves into Amy Tan's deployment of what I call the "narrative of transnational haunting" in *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), and *Saving Fish from Drowning* (2005) to discuss her technologies of representing China and Chinese American ethnicity. In all of her novels to date, Tan tends to concentrate on the conflicts and final reconciliations between mothers and daughters and repeatedly invokes Chinese history and landscape to contextualize her portrayal of Chinese American experiences. China, in these texts, is presented as a phantom space haunted by family secrets and a ghostly past, which serves to set off the protagonists' American present. Tan's novelistic creation, in a sense, carries on the tradition of ghost-writing starting from Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, a memoir of a childhood among "ghosts" of all colors.

In Chapter Three I argue that in *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996) Gish Jen is consciously reinventing a comic tradition for Chinese American women's writing through which she may at once acknowledge the importance of matrilineage and introduce a politics of relationality that goes beyond racial confines. With an inclusion of a mother-daughter plot in the novel, Jen dutifully constructs a vertical/generational relationship, which is one of the typical themes of Chinese American women's writing. Yet Jen also creates horizontal communities for her protagonist Mona to go beyond racial, class, and gender boundaries. Nevertheless, the dissolution of the utopian hybrid community, Camp Gugelstein, questions the possibility of racial solidarity. Moreover, through the multiple "switches" of identity of her characters, Jen undermines the essentialist fixture of racial authenticity.

Chapter Four discusses English writings by Chinese American biracial women writers and investigates this tradition of borderlands writing in the context of racial hybridity. Arguing that these voices from the interstices enable transfiguration of racial and cultural landscapes, I explore three generations of biracial women's works—including those by Edith Eaton, Han Suyin, and Diana Chang—with special emphasis on novelist configurations of family narratives in Amiee Liu's *Face* (1994) and Sigrid Nunez's *A Feather on the Breath of God* (1995).

Chapter Five provides a reading of Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's *Joss and Gold* (2001) as an example of narrating national history based on female bodily experiences. From the perspectives of the development of notions of diasporic womanhood, my reading argues that the novel needs to be interpreted in terms of the double national and transnational frameworks. Also central to the novelistic discourse is the problematic issue of interracial relationships both at the political level and at the level of somatic encounters. I argue that in *Joss and Gold* Lim discreetly and unsentimentally uncovers a violent episode of national history and its aftermath in relation to its female

characters and offers us an exemplary feminist text of narrating history through personal lived experience. It also offers us an example of Chinese American women's writing coming out of the historical and cultural contexts of Southeast Asia.

In Chapter Six, Nieh Hualing's *Mulberry and Peach* (1976) is read within the context of Chinese/Taiwanese overseas literature, with particular attention to Nieh's spatial imagination of her protagonists' transnational migrations. Thanks to a well-received English translation that appeared in 1981 and the enthusiastic introduction of Chinese American critics such as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Mulberry and Peach* has managed to straddle the different, yet closely connected fields of Chinese and Chinese American literary studies and becomes the quintessential text exploring the diasporic experience of Chinese American women. Despite the fact that its Chinese original was written in the 1970s, I include *Mulberry and Peach* in the present study because of its pivotal significance in the development of Chinese American diasporic literary expressions. Moreover, in its juxtapositions of three geographical locations—China, Taiwan, and the United States—and variegated genres, the novel becomes a textual example of cultural mixture that characterizes David Leiwei Li's phase of heteroglossia.

I further suggest a remapping of Chinese American literature in Chapter Seven to incorporate texts written in Chinese that pay particular attention to the immigrant condition. An immigrant writer from the People's Republic of China, Yan Geling, becomes my exemplary figure in this effort of redefinition. Her first novel about Chinese immigrant women, *Fu Sang* (1996), travels back in time to rediscover the buried lives of Chinese prostitutes in San Francisco Chinatown from the 1860s through the 1870s. While in *Mulberry and Peach* Nieh writes about her own experiences as a diasporic woman of multiple migrations—from the Chinese mainland to Taiwan and then to the United States—and situates the construction of female subjectivity within specific frameworks of historical temporality and geographical location, in *Ren Huan* (1998), Yan carefully delineates the transnational passage of her first-person narrator whose Chinese American identity is always embedded within and (over)determined by her memory of China.

Unlike Afong Moy, the Chinese American women writers in this study have learned to break through the patriarchal and racial injunction of silence, to invent new strategies to counter the persistent Orientalist gaze, and to claim recognition for their literary and political agency. In short, they have found ways to hold their footing in the "narrow and slippery" ground between "the twin chasms of navel-gazing and navel-erasing" and overcome the difficulties for minority women writers in contemporary capitalist culture that Trinh T. Minh-ha has identified in the epigraph (28). Writing "on a colored sky," they are the inventors and preservers of literary traditions. As such,

this project can never claim a definite completion. There will always be some important texts that have not been read and or need to be re-read, as important ideas continue to develop. My only consolation in that respect is that this book is only a beginning. My commitment to Chinese American women's writing will always keep me searching for new frontiers.

Chapter 1

Representing Chinatown: Space and Memory in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*

Language shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. This confers the tone and bearing of genuine reminiscences. He must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand—like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery—in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding.

—Walter Benjamin
“A Berlin Chronicle”

Our interest in *lieux de mémoire* where memory crystallizes and secrets itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory.

—Pierre Nora
“Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*”

The plot of Fae Myenne Ng's first novel *Bone* pivots around a violent death in a San Francisco Chinatown family. The suicide of the second daughter Ona Leong becomes the narrative drive behind her half-sister Leila Fu's first-person inspection of their family history. The scope of the narrative, however, goes beyond the confines of family trauma and becomes a story about a unique urban space, San Francisco Chinatown, and about Chinese American memory. Written by a second-generation Chinese American woman writer born and raised in Chinatown, *Bone* is a daughter's homage to

her parents' generation,¹ and follows in the train of a long tradition of Chinese American writings about Chinatown, such as Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), Lin Yutang's *Chinatown Family* (1948), C. Y. Lee's *Flower Drum Song* (1957), Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* (1990), and Frank Chin's *Donald Duk* (1991). Yet Ng neither abides by the dominant ideology of assimilation nor adopts a self-Orientalizing gesture in her depiction of Chinese immigrants of the post-Exclusion era and their descendants.² Rather, she strives to strike a balance between aesthetics and politics by presenting Chinatown as a "lived" *lieu de mémoire*, or site of memory; lived, in the full sense of Walter Benjamin's "lived Berlin." Besides distinct class stratification, Ng's "lived Chinatown" is as much a racialized space as a gendered one. As Liam Kennedy points out, much modern and postmodern urban aesthetics and theorizing strive to satisfy "a common desire for urban legibility" (1). It is also my goal to make the spatialization of Fae Myenne Ng's Chinatown—and with it a part of Chinese American history—legible.

My analysis of the spatialization of memory in *Bone* is divided into three parts. In the first part, after a brief discussion of the tradition of Chinatown literature and the politics of representation entailed therein, I explore the idea of "lived Chinatown" and the *flânerie* in *Bone* based upon Benjamin's *recherche* of Berlin. The next two sections focus on explicating the racialized and gendered spatial representations in *Bone*.

Lived Chinatown

One of the central concerns in *Bone* is the representation of San Francisco Chinatown as a space that is intimately connected with the memory of its residents. This concern places the novel well within the tradition of what Mao-chu Lin terms "Chinatown American Literature."³ I want to explore the

¹ While describing her novel to her parents who cannot read English, Ng clearly identifies her intention of writing the novel as an homage to them, "I tell them that the book celebrates the hard work and living that they endured in order to give future generations a better life. It's always very important to them to know that we appreciate their labor." This is quoted from Louis B. Jones's *New York Times* review of *Bone*, in which he records part of his telephone interview with Ng.

² In 1882 the U.S. government imposed an Exclusion Law against the entrance of "idiots," "lunatics" and "Chinese laborers." The law was not repealed until 1943 and only after 1965 when the immigration law changed to select system did the nation witness a dramatic increase in Chinese American population. See Bill Ong Hing's important study about the influence of US immigration legislative practices on Asian Americans, *Making and Remaking Asian America through Immigration Policy, 1850-1990*.

³ Lin's 1987 dissertation, one of the pioneer studies of representations of Chinatown in the post-World War II Chinese American literature, divides this body of literature into groups that include romanticized, stereotypical autobiographies, realistic fiction, historical literature,

ways in which writers of the American-born generation attempt to represent the landscape and mindscape of San Francisco Chinatown from an “insider’s view.”⁴ A search through the primary and secondary materials regarding this body of literature reveals that at least three models of representing Chinatown emerge before the writing of *Bone*: Orientalizing, denigrating, and celebratory to the extent of mythologizing.

Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, one of the earliest efforts by American-born writers to represent Chinatown, has often been criticized for its self-Orientalizing stance. In her discussion of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong summarizes a common complaint against this type of Chinese American autobiographical literature: “Removed from Chinese culture in China by their ancestors’ emigration, American-born autobiographers may still capitalize on white curiosity by conducting the literary equivalent of a guided Chinatown tour: by providing explanations on the manners and mores of the Chinese-American community from the vantage point of a ‘native’” (“Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?” 262).⁵ In Jade Snow Wong’s case, then, the question of representation is not only ideological but also generic. A major argument against *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is that an autobiography of this sort is constituted by very little *auto/self* in it except an imposed group identity. The success story of the third-person autobiographer in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* bespeaks not a personal success, but rather the myth of Asian Americans as “the model minority,” a myth predicated on the ideology of Asian American upward mobility “which serves both as a model for other minorities to follow in the process toward Americanization and as a secondary modeling system for whites” (Palumbo-Liu 157).⁶ The rhetorical stance of the author who declines to give herself a first-person voice ironically confirms this lack of individuality.⁷

Here I would like to digress to consider this important political issue of representation and to communicate a personal conviction. Both critics and writers of Asian American literature grapple with questions of cultural representation, albeit from different positions. One might ask, in a simplistic fashion, is, or should there be, a “correct” way of representing Chinatown

writings of “Chinatown Cowboys,” and the woman warrior identity as represented in Maxine Hong Kingston’s works.

⁴ The trajectory of my research is different from K. Scott Wong’s investigation of how non-resident observers construct conflicting images of Chinatown.

⁵ Wong’s position in the paper, however, is to defend Kingston’s revisionist writing strategy.

⁶ I am quoting from David Pulumbo-Liu’s comment on the Asian/American introjection of the Cold War era in Lin Yutang’s *Chinatown Family*.

⁷ “The gaze of cultural voyeurs” looking for exotic spectacle, Sau-ling Wong points out, “effectively ‘disappears’ the people: every Chinese in its sight is reduced to a specimen of Otherness devoid of individuality and interiority” (“Ethnic Subject” 253).

that takes into consideration issues of authenticity, accountability, agency, and so on? Such a question has plagued Asian American studies from the beginning, initiating countless “pen wars,” as Sau-ling Wong calls them (“Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?” 248). David Leiwei Li rightly observes that Asian American writers face “a condition for double allegiance and double agency,” (*Imagining the Nation* 177) and that the relationship between Asian American authors and their audiences is “one of compulsory representation, a vicarious performance without consent” (181).⁸ While there is understandably no easy way out of this role as an involuntary representative for the writer, I believe as critics we should try to seek a balance between aesthetics and politics without overlooking the changing variables of history. This eclectic position, I would argue, allows us to take a more nuanced approach to Asian American texts, and saves us from the pitfalls of harsh condemnation or undifferentiated celebration.

Reading Jade Snow Wong from this perspective, we can make two observations. First, despite the tendency of self-Orientalization, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was produced at the point when Sino-American relationships had reached a new height because of the political alliance of the two nations during the Second World War, and mainstream American society discovered a new interest in Chinatowns and their Chinese American residents. Hence, the popularity of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* in the 1950s and 1960s had as much to do with the demand of a white readership as it did with the need of a Chinese American author to express herself. Second, in the pre-dawn of 1960s second-wave feminism, Jade Snow Wong’s self-effacing portrayal of her selfhood paradoxically appears to be a way of claiming female independence. Kingston has thus credited this work as inspiring to Chinese American women. At issue here is the persistent gaze of mainstream society that continues to haunt the imagination of Chinese America. The critical issue in terms of politics of representation, then, lies in how Chinese Americans write their subjectivity into being under such a gaze.⁹

⁸ In *Imagining the Nation*, Li dedicates a chapter to the discussion of the problematic agency of ethnic writers and the challenge of representation they are facing. Li starts his investigation of representation by drawing on the insight of Hanna Fenichel Pitkin’s *The Concept of Representation* to explore the concepts of formal, symbolic and descriptive representation and the question of agency. According to Pitkin, there are two formal arrangements of representation: “authorization” and “accountability” (175). What complicates the formalistic views, as Li contends, originates in the problem of “symbolic representation” since “the Asian American writer is in general authorized by a constituency other than his or her own ethnic group but will ultimately be considered a part of it” (177). The insistence on mimetic resemblance and reflection in descriptive representation also severely limits the agency of the Asian American writer.

⁹ I agree with David Pulumbo-Liu that we need to analyze the ideological complexities behind what he calls a “model minority discourse.” Pulumbo-Liu defines model minority discourse as “an ideological construct coexistent not with the texts themselves, but rather desig-

While Wong paradoxically attempts to insert her selfhood within cultural voyeurism, other Chinese American writers try their hands at rehabilitating the space of Chinatown. Yet as long as one is still under the influence of the white gaze, the task of constructing a counter-vision is never easy. As Sau-ling Wong convincingly argues, “rehabilitative representation,” or the representation of Chinatown in a non-stereotypical way, is always “in danger of reproducing the contours of the ‘ethnic experience’ as it has been prescribed” should Chinese American writers continue to center around cultural conflict in their Chinatown tales (“Ethnic Subject” 257). The early Frank Chin, for example, with all his militant and Asian American nationalist sentiment, sees nothing but absences and ruins in Chinatown. In his short stories and plays of the 1970s, as Mao-chu Lin notes, Chin focuses his creative energy on writing about “the ills in Chinatown” resulting from the white supremacist ideology which inevitably erases Chinese American language and culture (*Frank Chin Writes Back!* 43-44).¹⁰

Along with the passing away of the oldtimers, or the immigrant generation, in *Donald Duk* Frank Chin rehabilitates the degenerated Chinatown into a land of regenerative vitality. Chin frames this novel within the fifteen-day count-down toward the Chinese New Year, and interweaves the history of Chinese railroad workers and the legends of *The Water Margin* into the life of contemporary Chinatown through dreams. The reader witnesses the ethnic transformation of the title character, a twelve-year old boy named Donald Duk from a Chinese American Fred Astaire to the Chinese American Black Tornado Lee Kuey. Most importantly, as David Leiwei Li notes, in *Donald Duk* Chin changes “the fictional typography of Chinatown” by crediting it as *the* site of pedagogical authority (*Imagining the Nation* 127). By transforming the image of Chinatown from that of disease into one of vitality, Chin liberates this primary space of Chinese American community from white captivity and endows it with full autonomy. As Li aptly observes, “The anger at the tourist’s colonization of Chinatown’s existential space, so characteristic of his earlier works, gives way to a narrative format of ‘heritage festival’” (132).

At the same time, this celebration of ethnic pride through mythologizing is double-edged, as Chin packages the the narrative as a success story,

nating a model of apprehending, decoding, recoding, and producing Asian American narratives” (396). In model minority discourse, “we find the instantiation of a collective psychic identification that constructs a very specific concept of the negotiations between social trauma and private health, assigning the ways that minority subjects are to ‘mature’ through achieving a specifically prescribed understanding of their place in the national community” (398).

¹⁰ Sau-ling Wong analyzes a story from Chin’s *The Chinaman Pacific & Frisco R. R.*, “A Chinese Lady Dies,” in which Chinatown appears to be populated with dying elderly immigrants and have “no room left to develop a viable Chinese American selfhood” (“Ethnic Subject” 256).

just like *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. This choice of narrative form is particularly ironic considering Chin is one of the most vocal critics of Jade Snow Wong. Furthermore, Donald's gradual initiation into Chinese American ethnicity takes the form of a *Bildungsroman*, the genre *par excellence* of western individualism and enlightenment ideology. It seems that Frank Chin cannot himself evade the danger of rehabilitative representation for all his change of heart toward Chinatown.

In the context of this history of San Francisco Chinatown literature, Ng faces the challenge of how to represent another Chinese daughter's story without falling into the pitfalls of self-Orientalization, denigration, or mystification. At one level Ng strives to present the oldest and biggest Chinatown in North America as a representative site of Chinese American ethnicity; at another, she is preoccupied with the persistent question of stereotypes, about how mainstream society perpetuates an Orientalist vision of Chinatown and how to construct a revisionist spatial configuration.

Sau-ling Wong astutely observes that Ng provides "a viable mode of rehabilitative representation" of Chinatown in her writing ("Ethnic Subject" 261).¹¹ Without Orientalizing, denigrating, or mythologizing Chinatown, Ng enacts in *Bone* the representation of a "lived Chinatown," analogous to Walter Benjamin's "lived Berlin" in his "A Berlin Chronicle." This piece of autobiographical writing is seldom cited among the canon of Benjamin's work, as critics often base their interpretation of the relationships between Benjamin and cities from his writings on Baudelaire and Paris. Nonetheless, "A Berlin Chronicle," inspired by Marcel Proust, offers a theory of memory that is intricately connected with urban space.¹² Benjamin's Berlin is in fact born at the specific intersection of spatiality and temporality. As Graeme Gilloch aptly puts it in his study on Benjamin and the metropolis, "The city [Berlin] is not simply a space remembered by Benjamin. It is, rather, the intricate interweaving of the memory of a particular site and the site of that memory which occupies Benjamin. Remembrance and metropolis become porous; they interpenetrate" (66). We find a similar materialist approach to space and memory in *Bone*, despite the fact that the latter is neither autobiographical in terms of genre, nor chronological in terms of narrative temporal scheme. Reading "A Berlin Chronicle" with *Bone*, I believe, affords us important insights into mapping the relationship between space and memory.

¹¹ Wong points out that for Ng Chinese American life "is not an archetypal battleground but an ever-shifting working alliance of many forces, of which cultural imperatives from the land of origin and from dominant American society are only two; the others include survival instincts, assessments of available resources, individual personality, family history, attachments and aversions to others not based on ethnicity, and not least the human capacity to grow and change" (261).

¹² Benjamin's Berlin writings include "A Berlin Chronicle" and "A Berlin Childhood Around 1900." Here I focus on the former piece.

Benjamin, in fact, also disclaims his remembrance of the past as a writing of autobiography in the traditional sense but “talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities” (*Reflections* 28). Benjamin’s “A Berlin Chronicle” is in fact a materialist representation of the city through recollection. Three of the images he deploys to illustrate the work of memory that are closely connected with spatial imagination stand out: “the fan of memory,” the digging archeologist, and a diagram of life.¹³ The first two images emphasize the significance of excavating details. The diagram of life presents an embodiment of memory that metamorphosizes from “a series of family trees” to a “labyrinth” with endless “primal entrances” (31). Benjamin is first inspired by the Proustian exercise of searching for the minutest particles of consciousness: “He who has once begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside; that image, that taste, that touch for whose sake all this has been unfurled and dissected; and now remembrance advances from small to smallest details, from the smallest to the infinitesimal, while that which it encounters in these microcosms grows ever mightier” (6). Next there comes the persistent archeologist who keeps on digging further and further into these microcosms.¹⁴ The diagram of life that illuminates all his interpersonal relationships comes to Benjamin in a moment of epiphany. Importantly, what first seems perfectly clear and discernable finally turns into a labyrinth with multiple entrances. What is particularly fascinating is that the diagram is lost, which seems to suggest that the satisfaction of gaining a holistic overview of one’s past is forever deferred. One can only return to the unfolding and digging of details to ferret out a preliminary picture of the past in a textual space. Gilloch succinctly comments on the labyrinth motif in Benjamin’s Berlin writings, “the labyrinth of the modern city and that of the work of memory are inscribed in the formal properties of the texts themselves. He presents a labyrinth (the city) within a labyrinth (memory) within yet another labyrinth (the text). To remember the city and to write about it, one must lose oneself in mazes that correspond to the very structure of the metropolis itself” (68).

Just as Benjamin remembers Berlin, the city of his formative years, through disjunctive and minute details of lived experience, Ng’s novel provides a panorama of San Francisco Chinatown in the most personal way. In *Bone* we find the same Proustian insistence on sensory details that will usher

¹³ Gilloch has a somewhat similar observation that in the Berlin writings “Benjamin appears to offer three interconnected models of the relationship between memory and cityscape: city and memory as labyrinth, shock and the *mémoire involontaire*, and the urban archaeologist” (67).

¹⁴ Peter Demetz in his editorial introduction to *Reflections* points out that this digging image implies an allusion to Schliemann and his discovery of Troy (xvii).

in involuntary memory, “the small sounds” in Chinatown (115) and “the old alley sounds” around Mah’s apartment on Salmon Alley (129), for instance, and the same desire to dig into the hidden layers of the past as the narrativization takes on a retrospective trajectory.¹⁵ Ng’s “fan of memory” is a city map: the novel is filled with so many street names that it appears as if Ng is writing different biographies for her characters by linking them to particular places in Chinatown and its vicinity. The streets are further composed of countless shops—butchers and bakers and unseen sweatshops—upon which the livelihood of the community depends. With the unfolding of these details, we become more and more intimate with Chinatown as a lived place with inside stories.

Significantly, the representation of a Chinatown panorama in *Bone* is filtered through the perspective of a female narrator. In the very beginning of the novel Ng deliberately sends Leila on a walk around Chinatown to capture street scenes of this urban space. Her “lived Chinatown” is therefore constructed as the mental mapping of a *flâneuse* who is at once a member of the crowd, and yet psychologically separated from the people she is observing. Benjamin’s “lived Berlin” presents the same kind of combination of spatial imagination with temporality. Along with the digging archeologist, the Benjamin in the act of recollecting appears like a *flâneur* strolling down a memory lane that is by no means straightforward, filled with detours and shady corners which intercept and ambush, and sometimes even lead to labyrinths. However, in her protagonist of this urban story, Ng in fact introduces a figure of mobility different from Benjamin’s practice of *flânerie*. Surrounded by the crowds of Chinatown, Leila appears not so much a *flâneuse* in the tradition of Benjamin’s Baudelaire, who “demanded elbow room and was unwilling to forgo the life of a gentleman of leisure” (Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 172), because her working-class family background sets her apart from the typical bourgeois *flâneur*.

Yet *Bone* is truly an urban novel refracted through the consciousness of a protagonist who is always on the move. Besides taking various hurried walking trips around Chinatown, Leila often views the landscape from the vantage of a moving car. The narrative obsession with different motor vehicles—Trans Am, BMW, Jaguar—not only corresponds to Leila’s boyfriend, and later her husband, Mason’s trade as a car mechanic, but also highlights an important aspect of urban mobility. The details of bus lines and street names on different routes reflect the protagonist’s and the author’s desire to give spatial order to the city and reconstruct urban memory through spatial

¹⁵ According to Ng, this retrospective narrative form has a specific origin in ethnic memory: the oldtimers’ longing to go “back” to their homes in China and the typical racist slurs flung at Chinese Americans telling them to go “back” to China (Shan, *Ming ke yu zai xian* [*Inscriptions and Representations*] 205).

imagination. Through this deployment of the female consciousness exploring the cityscape, Ng also records the potential danger for a *flâneuse* who needs to brave the assault of the male gaze, even the potential danger of sexual harassment. Leila is reluctant to go to Portsmouth Square, for instance, because she is often the only girl there and she wishes to avoid the “pathetic” scene of lonely old men trying to pick her up; she also resents being appraised by their casual but sexualized stares. The “minatorial geography” in this case, instead of being the ghetto of crime lords, is about the gendered threat lurking in a masculine territory against a single *flâneuse*.¹⁶

On a metaphorical level, another minatory potential for the *flâneur* and *flâneuse* lies in the possibility of encountering the unspeakable past in their psychological geographies. Gilloch identifies three “ghosts” that haunt Benjamin’s Berlin: his close friend Fritz Heinle, who committed suicide with his fiancée in 1914 to protest against the First World War; the disillusioned and exiled adult Benjamin, who constantly thinks about taking his own life; “and the looming spectre of National Socialism and its attendant atrocities” (57). I will add the lost diagram to the list as another haunting reminder of irrecoverable losses. *Bone* also centers on death and an “inconsolable” loss that nevertheless will bring us “astonishing insights” (Benjamin, *Reflections*, 31). In *Bone* the first-person narrator Leila acts like a distracted detective trying to identify the causes of a traumatic loss: Ona’s suicide. Is Ona a Juliet-like victim of family feuds and forbidden love? Is she, as a middle child, tired of being stuck in the middle of everything? Or was her death, as the police would like to believe, a drug-induced accident? In the process of Leila’s soul searching, the novel gradually transforms from a narrative of *why* into a narrative of *what*—from a search for the reasons for the death of a young Chinese American woman to an interrogation of Chinese American identity, especially that of the first and second generations. In this respect, the narrative strategy of *Bone* comes close to Wayne Wang’s seminal Chinese American film *Chan Is Missing* (1982), which shifts from a “whodunit” to a “whoisit.”¹⁷ As in Wang’s film, the final answer is forever elusive. Both Wang and Ng offer their work as mimetic witness, and present the audi-

¹⁶ Chris Jenks describes London’s East End with the concept of “minatorial geography” (158-59). Earlier in his discussion on the history of the *flâneur*, with examples from late Victorian literature Jenks claims the invisibility of the *flâneuse* and her tales since as a masculine province the modern city does not provide women a chance to look but to be looked at (150). However, in postmodern geographies, I would argue, we encounter more and more *flâneuses* with their own stories to tell.

¹⁷ The story of *Chan Is Missing* is about two Chinese American taxi drivers who search through Chinatown for their missing business partner Chan Hung. Norman K. Denzin rightly observes about the film that “[o]n the surface, this is a ‘Whodunit,’ but more deeply, it is a ‘Whoisit.’ Its topic is epistemological. ‘How do we know the self and its meanings’ and are these meanings ever certain?” (75). Ng’s epistemological question is even more race- and gender-specific than that in Wang’s film.

ence/reader with various facets of Chinese American life which in turn open multifarious entrances into San Francisco Chinatown. The responsibility of putting together a comprehensive and comprehensible map that can illuminate the nature of this labyrinth of urban space ultimately falls on the audience/reader.

Unlike the deliberately (black) comic tone in *Chan Is Missing*, however, an oppressive sense of haunting colors *Bone*. “Ona still shaded everything we did” (19), Leila confesses. “Everything went back to Ona. And beyond Ona there was the bad luck that Leon kept talking about” (50). Ona, who jumps off the thirteenth floor of Nam Ping Yuan just days before the Chinese New Year, robs her family of any chance of *ping/peace*. The dead Ona has a “seething presence” that transforms Leila’s vision into something “charged with the occluded and forgotten past.”¹⁸ Just like Kingston’s nameless aunt who plunges into the drinking well with her newly born baby, Ona’s haunting presence demands recognition and paper offerings.¹⁹ In a sense, Leila’s narrative becomes itself a paper offering by the daughter of a paper son. Leila’s first-person narrative in the novel is therefore rendered as an extended act of mourning which establishes a connection between the dead and the living, the immigrant generation and their American-born children.

What this haunting experience eventually brings us is a kind of “profane illumination,” an important aspect of Benjamin’s materialist hermeneutics. Avery F. Gordon contends that the sociological imagination of haunting brings us “profane illumination” that allows us to see “the flashing half-signals ordinarily overlooked until one day when they become animated by the *immense forces of atmosphere concealed in them*” (204 original emphasis). Ona’s death brings the characters and readers an uncanny “shock experience” that preludes a renewed vision of history.²⁰ It also provides a second look at daily life with a defamiliarized vision. The revolutionary potential that Benjamin sees in the surrealist’s “profane illumination” (*Reflec-*

¹⁸ I am quoting from Gordon’s summary remark about how Luisa Valenzuela, Toni Morrison, and Sabina Spielrein possess the visionary power “that cannot only regard the seemingly not there, but can also see that the not there is a seething presence” (195). Juliana Chang has a similar interpretation of Ona’s presence in the novel. In her “symptomatic and palimpsestic reading of domesticity in *Bone*, observing how the intergenerational transmission of encrypted secrets structures family formation” (113), Chang regards Ona as “the Goddess of Counting” who is performing an “epistemological ritual”: “As an agent of demetamorphORIZATION (literal counting, literal breaking, literal death) Ona exposes the discounted, broken-down, socially dead subjects of Chinatown as the remains of nationally encrypted secret of racialized labor exploitation” (128).

¹⁹ Donald C. Goellnicht observes that Kingston’s representation of suicide has become a trope that has been adapted and revised by many later writers such as Ng and SKY Lee (“Of Bones and Suicide” 301).

²⁰ Benjamin reads the shocks of modern life as the main source of Baudelaire’s poetry. See “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” in *Illuminations*, especially 163.

tions 181), I argue, in turn provides a kind of counter-memory built upon what Michel de Certeau terms the practice of everyday life and inspired by “the local, the immediate, the personal” as in opposition to the grand narrative of official history.²¹ “The trope of spectrality,” as Daniel Martin points out, “frequently manifests itself in literary responses to ‘official’ narratives of national histories” (90). Combining the extremely shocking experience of violent death with commonplace and mundane details, Ng’s materialist writing of Chinatown illuminates the psychic space of Chinatown and what it means to be Chinese American.

In fact, Ng’s narrative counter-memory of a lived Chinatown follows a double line of emplotment. On the one hand, she portrays Chinatown as an ethnic space within which she chronicles the life stories of the oldtimers—as represented in Leila’s survey of the spatial configurations of Chinatown and the stories of Leon—to make up for the missing part in official American history, an enterprise similar to Kingston’s project in *China Men*. On the other hand, not unlike Kingston’s agenda in *The Woman Warrior*, Ng explores Chinatown as a gendered space, in which different generations of Chinese American women struggle to survive in a once bachelor society. In the following two sections I examine the paternal space and women’s spatial mobility in *Bone*. While I draw an arbitrary gender line, because Chinese American men and women do entertain different spatial formations, I posit that their lives and memories are intricately connected as they interact in the novel’s textual space.

Re-Membering the Paternal Space

It is important to note that in *Bone* Fae Myenne Ng insists on the positive power of memory, no matter how traumatic or haunting it is. “Remembering the past gives power to the present,” as Ng elegantly puts it (*Bone* 88-89). The past in the novel, however, is always overshadowed by a sense of loss, as exemplified by Ona’s untimely death and the way that Grandpa Leong’s

²¹ Here I have George Lipsitz’s definition of counter-memory in mind. Adding on to the Foucauldian concept of counter-memory with a stress on personal specificity, Lipsitz contends, “[c]ounter-memory is a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, the personal. Unlike historical narratives that begin with the totality of human existence and then locate specific actions and events within that totality, counter-memory starts with the particular and the specific and then builds outward toward a total story. Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden stories excluded from dominant narratives. But unlike myths that seek to detach events and actions from the fabric of any larger history, counter-memory forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past. Counter-memory embodies aspects of myth and aspects of history, but it retains an enduring suspicion of both categories. Counter-memory focuses on localized experiences of oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experiences” (213).

bones are lost within the common family grave outside of Chinatown. The episode of Leon and Leila's search for Grandpa Leong's missing bones highlights the fact that traces of the first-generation immigrants are rapidly disappearing. This loss has its historical origin in discriminatory laws and a sojourner mentality that prevented many oldtimers from securing permanent burial spots for themselves, and often resulted in bones being removed to common graves after temporary grave site leases were terminated. As such, this displacement even after death powerfully symbolizes the disembodiment of first-generation Chinese Americans, especially those who helped build America, in the national discourse. One of Ng's primary objectives in writing *Bone* is therefore to re-member Chinatown into a lived space that houses the spirits of the forefathers, to preserve this elusive memory.

As Pierre Nora points out, *lieux de mémoire* surface when memory is threatened by possible erasure.²² Furthermore, sites of memory appear "by virtue of the deritualization of our world" (Nora 12). Rituals constitute an important aspect in the novel. For example, the man in the Benevolent Association advises Leila to pay her respects to the common grave because only "the right gesture" will help her find the lost grandfather (78). As the American-born generation, Ng and her protagonist need to create new rituals since the old ones no longer work well in the "New World." In contrast to the exultant festivity in *Donald Duk's* communal rituals, rituals in *Bone* tend to be personal and of a hybrid and ambivalent nature, from the sewing women's rituals to comfort Leila's grieving mother, to Leon's personal rituals to appease both the living and the dead. Significantly, Leon stands out as the inventor of new rituals, the inventor who also fails to finish almost all of his projects. He offers a sack of Golden Coins oranges and a pack of Lucky Strikes to the common grave of the Leong family and makes an altar for Ona's ashes in Mah's apartment. These rituals are performed in two different chapters, but they share the same significance as acts of constructing *lieux de mémoire*. Further, the spatial arrangements of the rituals clearly juxtapose the sadness of loss with the happiness of luck and fortune—"Side by side, the sad with the happy" (102)—just as Leon planned.

On a symbolic level, Ng performs a narrative ritual in a textual site of memory. Writing the stories of the Chinatown oldtimers allows her to construct a memorial, an act that intends "to turn the site of reading into memorial space" (James Young 7).²³ Similarly, this practice of re-membering

²² The full quote goes, "[t]he moment of *lieux de mémoire* occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history" (11-12).

²³ James E. Young in his monograph on the cultural meanings of Holocaust memorials points out, "the first 'memorials' to the Holocaust period came not in stone, glass, or steel—but in narrative. The *Yizkor Bikher*—memorial books—remembered both the lives and destruction of European Jewish communities according to the most ancient of Jewish memorial media:

through writing is in keeping with the Chinese traditional belief in the monumental value of literature. Ng's "memorial" writing, however, aims not to reify the past but empower the present and, perhaps more importantly, the future. By putting the loss of Grandpa Leong's bones into narrative form, Ng manifests a desire to counteract the trauma of "the missing grave syndrome" (Young 7). If the oldtimers do not even have their bones to show for their lives on the Gold Mountain, the "words on paper" that constitute *Bone* will ritualistically serve as their symbolic burial markers and the novel's textual space will act as the site of their memory. "Memories do add up," Leila asserts, "Our memories can't bring Grandpa Leong or Ona back, but they count to keep them from becoming strangers" (89). Ng's intention of constructing narrative memorial appears not only communal, but also personal since she dedicates the novel to Ah Sam, her great grandfather who came to the United States at the end of the gold rush (Shan, *Ming ke yu zai xian* 206).

This "siting" of Chinese American memory is of crucial importance to the production of ethnic counter-memory through spatial imagination in the novel. Memory in Ng's lived Chinatown is connected with specific material sites. Lisa Lowe offers a convincing reading of the trope of space in the novel, and as she contends, "[h]istory in *Bone* is the history of place, an archaeology of the richly sedimented, dialectical space of urban Chinatown community" (120). Chinatown, more specifically, is a Foucauldian heterotopia that "marks the disunity and discontinuity of the racialized urban space within the national space. It is a space not spoken by or in the language of the nation" (122). However, Chinatown does exist as part of the American national language, but almost always in a negative way. In other words, the socio-linguistic connotation of the term "Chinatown" is based on a negative logic and alludes to somewhere or something that is *not* native (exotic), *not* comprehensible (inscrutable), and *not* the same as mainstream society (unassimilated).²⁴ I would further argue that as a socially and culturally inscribed space, Chinatown is heterotopic in that it mirrors the legendary Gold Mountain that has lured so many Chinese immigrants to weather the black waters of the Pacific. These pioneers risked their lives for a mythical city, ultimately finding little gold but plenty of broken dreams. Like the house of the ghost mate in Kingston's *China Men*, the Gold Mountain is a false utopian space that interpellates Chinese immigrants to forfeit their past and submit themselves to American capitalist ideology. These immigrants pass through a

words on paper. For a murdered people without graves, without even corpses to inter, these memorial books often came to serve as symbolic tombstones" (7).

²⁴ In his sociological study of New York's Chinatown, Jan Lin has a similar observation: "In the semiotic realm...Chinatown as a negative symbolic representation signifies and legitimizes broader interpenetrating social projects of law and order, modernization, and cultural assimilation. In this discourse, Chinatown and Chinese Americans appear timeless, insular, and resistant to change" (x).

painful “mirror stage” only to find themselves excluded from membership within the mainstream symbolic order.

The most direct allusion to the reflective nature of spatial representations in the novel is perhaps the old-man hotel, the San Fran. At one level the name of the hotel is an ironic comment on the capitalist metropolis that has absorbed the labor of the immigrants but given them little or no recognition in return; the house is created as a memorial of this absence of acknowledgement. As a residential space for the oldtimers this practice of naming also bespeaks their determination to stake their claim on *Dai Fu* (the Big City): if they cannot have the Gold Mountain/San Francisco, at least they have the San Fran inside Chinatown. Moreover, the San Fran becomes a site of origin when Leila describes it as “our family’s oldest place, our beginning place, our new China” (4). Ng manifests her intention to pay homage to this place for the oldtimers by opening the novel with Leila’s survey of the interior space of the San Fran. It takes the ingenuity of the immigrant generation to name their house after the city; it takes the discernment of the American-born generation to recognize the elders’ contributions to the creation of a new ethnic group, the Chinese Americans.

At a symbolic level, the San Fran, as the “oldest place” and “beginning place” of Chinese America, *is* San Francisco, where the first Chinese immigrants came to America and left their bones behind.²⁵ Nevertheless, Ng is not blinded to the sad connotations of the San Fran. As much as the San Fran is the home place, it is also a place of loss. In a brief but highly charged scene at the beginning of the novel, the San Fran is shown to be the place where a lost old man who has no memory of his other home strays. Leon lives there whenever he is estranged from Mah, and there young Ona has to go to bring her father home when he finds out about Mah’s affair with her boss Tommy Hom. A “steady rhythm of loss,” as Lisa Lowe points out, characterizes the lives of the Leongs (123). This rhythm of loss in fact prevails in the lives of all the Chinatown oldtimers, epitomized by the hotel. It is also one of the reasons why Ng composes the novel in the first place: “I witnessed how hard they worked, how alone they were at the end of their lives without the comfort of family. I thought someone should tell their story” (Jones 7).

While the oldtimers attempt to incorporate the city within Chinatown, Chinatown itself is constantly under the surveillance of the outside world. Apart from the persistent official intrusion of the city government and the police force, the voyeuristic gaze of the tourists has long penetrated China-

²⁵ There are, of course, other faces of San Francisco. Rob Wilson, for instance, calls it a “spectral city” with “the ‘spectral’ forces...back from the past and out from the future” to inspire creative energies “that bespeak the mongrel communitas of San Francisco as Pacific Rim nexus and site of global/local beatitudes” (593).

town's external layout. A classic "ethnoscapes,"²⁶ Chinatown cannot escape from the influx of tourists and new immigrants. Tourism in Chinatown becomes such a fixture that the inhabitants have little or no reaction to it, except in commercial terms. Ng comments on this insensitivity of both the gazer and the gazed. In a scene right after she is informed of Ona's death, Leila looks at Chinatown from the perspective of a tourist:

From the low seats of the Camaro, I looked out at the streets and saw the spidery writing on the store signs, the dressed-up street lamps with their pagoda tops, the oddly matched colors: red with green, green with aqua blue, yellow with pink.

Looking out, I thought, So this is what Chinatown looks like from inside those dark Greyhound buses; this slow view, these strange color combinations, these narrow streets, this is what tourists come to see. I felt a small lightening up inside, because I knew, no matter what people saw, no matter how close they looked, our inside story is something entirely different. (145)

In this frequently quoted scene, Ng carefully draws a line between the tourist and the insider by placing her narrator at a psychological borderland. A sense of "spatial duality"—inside/outside—is invoked to add a racial perspective to Leila's psychic perception of Chinatown.²⁷ Leila, in an oddly mental estrangement from the everyday space around her brought on by the shocking news, is at a point of suturing two distinct consciousnesses and at once in two subject positions, which allows her to identify with the tourist gaze and immediately displace it with an insider's view. This relay of different psychological states provides a twist of the Duboisian "double consciousness." In a tragic sense it takes a horrendous shock such as Ona's death to shake Leila out of her complacency and become truly critical of the tourism around her.

A deeper sense of irony at the expense of the gazing tourists comes from the fact that many of the "ethnic" architectural trappings, the strangeness that tourists come to appraise, are in fact figments of Orientalist imagi-

²⁶ Arjun Appadurai argues that there are five dimensions of global cultural flows which move in non-isomorphic paths: ethnoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes. Ethnoscapes are flows created by tourists, immigrants, migrant workers and so on. Ng's Chinatown is clearly an ethnoscape in this sense.

²⁷ Liam Kennedy points out the intricate relations between urban space and subjectivity: "Categories of spatial duality—of inside and outside, of self and other—are commonly used in representation to portray the city as a psychic space, resonant with drives and impulses which trigger memory, stimulate desire, or cause fear. In this psychic environment race is often figured as uncanny, an eruptive force in the symbolic order of the city; the subject of acts or repression, displacement and dislocation" (10).

nation of an American-born Chinese businessman and white architects after the 1906 earthquake destroyed the old Chinatown. Hence the reconstructed Chinatown feeds tourists with the “theatrical chinoiserie” and “the stage-set China that does not exist” for which they have traveled a great distance.²⁸ One way to look at this constructed Orientalization is as a conscious act of *masking*. As Sau-ling Wong argues, some Chinatown inhabitants “are actively engaged in ‘fooling the Demon’” by “fabricating Orientalia, in an operation comparable to African American shucking or jiving” (“Ethnic Subject” 253). At another level, the “new” Chinatown is constructed as a commodified spectacle to satisfy the consumer/tourist’s scopophilic pleasures upon which lies the residents’ livelihood.²⁹ Jenks indicates that there is a resistance to interpretation in the spectacle: “It is a reactionary force in that it resists interpretation. It is a prior appropriation of the visual into the form of the acceptably viewable, and this ‘acceptability’ befits the going order. The spectacle indicates rules of what to see and how to see it, it is the ‘seen-ness’, the (re)presentational aspect of phenomena that are promoted, not the politics or aesthetics of their ‘see-worthy’” (155). By sending Leila on a journey of simultaneous introspection and inspection around Chinatown, Ng counteracts the reactionary force of the spectacle that has unarmed people of their power of interpretation and to interrogate this externalized “see-ness.”

Ng’s “counter-hegemonic espionage” (Jenks 156) is therefore achieved from an insider’s perspective. Being a second generation Chinese American who grew up in Chinatown, Leila knows by heart many stories beyond the sightseeing scope of the tourists. As a community relations specialist at her school, the home visits she pays allows her to learn about the lives of recent immigrants who, like their predecessors of past centuries, struggle to survive in the urban landscape. Nevertheless, her inside stories are by no means positive white-wash: drift-about, spitters, sitters, and flea men populate her Chinatown landscape. What Ng unveils in her novel is a place beyond the ethnocentric scope of the tourists and urban planners; she presents the inside

²⁸ Elaine Joe gives a brief history of the reconstruction of San Francisco Chinatown after the earthquake: “The city father had no intention of allowing Chinatown to be rebuilt in its own neighborhood, on valuable land next to the Financial District. While they were deciding where to relocate the Chinese, a wealthy businessman named Look Tin Eli developed a plan to rebuild Chinatown to its original location. He obtained a loan from Hong Kong and designed the new Chinatown to be more emphatically ‘Oriental’ to draw tourists. The old Italian buildings were replaced by Edwardian architecture embellished with theatrical chinoiserie. Chinatown, like phoenix, rose from the ashes with a new façade, dreamed up by an American-born Chinese man, built by white architects, looking like a stage-set China that does not exist.”

²⁹ Sau-ling Wong points out that under genocidal immigrant policies Chinese Americans “are placed in the situation of permanent guests who must earn their keep by adding the spice of variety to American life—by selectively maintaining aspects of traditional Chinese culture and language fascinating to whites” (“Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?” 265).

story of this Chinatown that is not a replica of the “old China” but a hybrid construct that blends imagined representations of “Chineseness” and the real lives of its inhabitants.

A major aspect of Ng’s project in *Bone*, therefore, obliges her to restore a Chinese American “geography” of a Chinatown crowded out by the tourist imagination and economic discourse, a geography in Said’s sense “as a socially constructed and maintained sense of place” subject to manipulation and invention (“Invention, Memory, and Place” 180). Chinatown can easily be vacated of historical and personal memories if it is abandoned to the imaginary geography of the dominant society. The urgency of Ng’s project lies in the fact that Chinatown, overshadowed by the Transamerica Pyramid, is an ethnoscape under siege by the global business flow of the Financial District, the high-class commercial glamour of the Union Square shopping district, and the yuppyish aura of North Beach. This particular location contributes to the ambiguous status of Chinatown today: it has become porous, even though the glass ceilings of race and class still remain intact, and it is always in danger of diminishing as the city government looks for ways to appropriate its valuable urban space.³⁰ Ng needs to invent a counter-memory for Chinatown to make it a place of memory instead of just a forgettable urban enclave surrounded by the mainstream economic powers of metropolitan San Francisco.³¹ As Stuart Hall observes, in the world of the global post-modern, the “subject of the local, of the margin, can only come into representation by, as it were, recovering their own hidden histories” (“The Local and the Global” 34-35).

Other than the street scenes and architectural layout, ethnicized spaces emerge in some very unlikely places. In one scene Leila is looking for Leon’s immigration document, as she needs his official birth date to apply for social security. Exasperated by Leon’s multiple birthdays and different aliases, Leila resorts to searching through Leon’s suitcase. The findings in Leon’s suitcase bring back a buried past:

³⁰ The city fathers’ intention of relocating Chinatown after the earthquake is but an early example of the danger. In his discussion of the spatial re-imaginings in *Bone*, Frederick Luis Aldama consults urban sociologist Richard Edward DeLeon’s finding about the more than triple increase of San Francisco’s supply of downtown space from 1965 to 1985, during which time the city’s progrowth coalition displaced the poor under the euphuism of “slum clearance” and “blight removal” (89). As Aldama observes, Ng’s Chinatown is “dotted with and criss-crossed by an infrastructure of the mainstream” and constantly faced with “impingement and restraint from an outside socio-spatial force, which threatens to imprison her ‘third-world,’ service-proletariat character’s lives” (88-89).

³¹ My conception of *place* as a special space of memory is close to Kennedy’s: “Place, understood as a space of provisional self-definition or communal definition, remains powerfully affective in urban culture. Places are charged with emotional and mythical meanings; the localised stories, images and memories associated with place provide meaningful cultural and historical bearings for urban individuals and communities” (Kennedy 7).

I lifted the suitcase up on the kitchen table and opened it. The past came up: a moldy, water-damaged paper smell and a parchment texture. The letters were stacked by year and rubberbanded into decades. I only had to open the first few to know the story: “We Don’t Want You.”

A rejection from the army: unfit.

A job rejection: unskilled.

An apartment: unavailable.

...Leon had made up stories for us; so that we could laugh, so that we could understand the rejections....

Now, seeing the written reasons in a formal letter, the stories came back, without the humor, without hope. On paper Leon was not the hero. (57-58)

Here the suitcase that has been with Leon ever since his transpacific voyage, a legacy of his Chinese past, becomes a space of ethnic memory. Just like Chinatown is an accumulation of collective memory for generations of Chinese Americans, Leon’s papers constitute “a material archive” of his life and “the residue, the trace of the ‘conversion’ of Chinese into ‘Americans’” (Lowe 125). This suitcase of material archives at once records the conversion and the impossible completion of such a conversion. It contains traces of the difficult task of passing over socially and legally imposed barriers that separate Chinese from Americans.

It is also the place in which Leila “bumps into a rememory” that belongs to Leon.³² Like Ona’s untimely death, this rememory haunts the textual space of the novel, one that has become part of Leon, although he has been attempting to transform the various rejections into jokes with plausible explanations. But the discriminating messages of rejection, along with the moldy smell and physical presence of the letters, remain a haunting presence in Leon’s American life and in Chinese American social memory. Papers have special meaning for Leon, a paper son who exchanged his birth identity for fake American citizenship.³³ “In this country, paper is more precious than blood,” Leon asserts (9). Within the context of Chinese American history, papers that easily overwrite biological bloodlines cannot change racial

³² In her reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Gordon explicates Sethe’s spatial description of rememory: “The picture of the place *is* its very sociality, all the doings, happenings, and knowing that make the social world alive in and around us as we make it ours. It *is still out there* because social relations as such are not ours for the owning....The possibility of a collectively animated worldly memory is articulated here in that extraordinary moment in which you—*who never was there* in that real place—can *bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else*” (166 original emphasis).

³³ Goellnicht regards Leon’s trading identity as a “paper son” a form of symbolic suicide (“Of Bones and Suicide” 304). Ng’s second novel *Steer Toward Rock* (2008) deals especially with the dire consequences of the paper son system.

ideology. In contrast to the engine room inside a ship and the basement of his laundry as spaces of work in which he can show his mastery over machinery, the suitcase, like the San Fran and Portsmouth Square, is a place of defeat for Leon. He is like the ragpicker for Leila's *flâneuse*, and Good Will is his happy hunting ground of parts for recycling. In an unsentimental but highly suggestive way, Ng shows how the act of revamping different used materials is Leon's only means of self-assertion. Haunted by a lifelong accumulation of rejection and defeat, however, he is incapable of finishing his projects and falls into the habit of "leaving the easiest part till last and then walking away" (54). Paradoxically, through his failure Leon becomes a figure of historiography; the debris of his life re-sources the memory of the next generation.

It takes the daughter-narrator to recognize this narrative of defeat and to transform it into a story to pass on. Leila's search through Leon's suitcase locates Chinese American memory in the novel, making it a basis of inquiring into the past and a source of inventing the future. As Leila states, "Family exists only because somebody has a story, and knowing the story connects us to a history" (36). While I agree with David Leiwei Li that Ng seems ambivalent toward history in *Bone*, this ambivalence does not prevent the author and the narrator from digging deeper and deeper into the past. Instead, they bravely face up to this encounter with history. Thus, toward the end of the suitcase episode, Leila's impatience and disgust transform into acceptance and a eulogy for her step-father: "Leon was right to save things. For a paper son, paper is blood.... I'm the stepdaughter of a paper son and I've inherited this whole suitcase of lies. All of it is mine. All I have are those memories, and I want to remember them all" (61). Hence Leila's archaeological effort does not only bring back memory as homage to the first generation but also constructs effective counter-memory as a resource for later generations.

Changing the Face of Chinatown

As mentioned, Ng writes of a post-Exclusion era Chinatown, a place where immigrant women and American-born generations gradually changed the face of the old bachelor society. While investigating Chinatown as a paternal space, therefore, at the same time Ng also carefully provides a complementary version of women's spatial configurations of the Gold Mountain, which mostly involve gender and generational differences in terms of mobility.

The immigrant mother's narrative is thoroughly permeated with a sense of entrapment in *Bone*. Mah's move from the Chinese village to Hong Kong and then to Chinatown is induced by Leila's father. When she is abandoned, she is literally trapped inside Chinatown with her sewing machine and later

the baby shop. Mah's second marriage to Leon, a convenient green card marriage, fares no better since, as a sailor, Leon is always shipping out. Ironically, she chose to marry Leon because she believed his frequent long voyages would protect her from too much emotional commitment. Still, she feels oppressed and lonely, as evinced by the scene in which she flies into Tommy Hom's arms while preparing for Grandpa Leong's funeral. Her affair with Tommy is the only time in her life that she seeks an exit out of the routine ordered by Leon's comings and goings. But this also fails, and eventually becomes her lifelong albatross; when Ona dies, Mah believes it is because of her deviation from duty as a faithful wife.

Spatial imaginations in *Bone* are noticeably gendered. Leon points out the different spaces he and Mah occupy in America: "You don't know. You're inside Chinatown; it's safe. You don't know. Outside, it's different" (181). Mah's ignorance of the dangerous "outside" world and her cloistered safety are emphasized by the repetition of "You don't know." Yet Leon's statement based on an ideology of separate gender spheres is deconstructed by the very fact that Chinatown women are also part of the work force, wherever they are situated. Moreover, these women's "overemployment" erodes the imagined boundary between private and public spheres, as the home becomes another site of labor.³⁴ Ng presents a woman's version of the Gold Mountain story when she describes Mah's hardship: "Twenty-five years in the land of gold and good fortune, and then she returned to tell her story: the years spent in sweatshops, the prince of the Gold Mountain turned into a toad, and three daughters" (24). The ironic list that includes three daughters as part of Mah's failure presents a comment on traditional Chinese sexual ideology. Failing to present her Hong Kong relatives with a male heir is as much a personal defeat as being abandoned by her first husband. Nevertheless, the three daughters are useful workers at sweatshops, the family grocery and laundry. Ng also carefully illustrates that it is not safe for women inside this ethnic enclave. There are temptations when a life consisting of nothing but physical toils becomes unbearable; one either turns gossipmonger or starts an affair.

Most poignant of all, Ng reveals that "inside"—the place of supposedly cloistered safety—is in fact a site of global economic exploitation. In this version of Chinatown we see garment sweatshops with an exclusively female workforce, at times including their children, although the owners are

³⁴ Lowe contrasts Mah's "overemployment" with Leon's difficulty in maintaining a steady job. She further argues that "the family relations in *Bone* allegorizes the conditions of immigrant life within the contradictions of the liberal nation-state as capitalism extends globally: the immigrant's lack of the civil rights promised to citizens of the nation permits the 'private' space of the immigrant home to become a workplace that prioritizes the relations of production over Chinese family relations" (169).

almost always men.³⁵ In *Bone* the time of the sewing ladies is punctuated by outfits of different patterns, culottes or linen shifts; each pattern provides an index to a different fashion in vogue in the outside world. Thus, inside Chinatown the sewing ladies work to provide the women of the mainstream society with their fashion statements. Yet Ng always maintains a sense of ambivalence in the portrayal of the sweatshops and the sewing women. In fact, at one time we are encouraged to see the sweatshops from a working-class perspective rather than that of the oppressed, as seen in Leila's description of Tommy's sweatshop:

Walking into the factory felt like walking into the cable-car barn. Every machine was running at high speed: the Singers zoomed, the button machines clicked. The shop vibrated like a big engine. Everything blended: oil and metal and the eye-stinging heat of the presses. The ladies pushed their endurance, long hours and then longer nights, as they strained to slip one more seam under the stamping needle. (176-77)

The way Ng compares the sweatshop to the cable-car barn undermines the invisible line that divides the women from the "outside" world. Just like the cable cars that have been the mainstay of the city's transportation, the sewing ladies' machines contribute to economic well-being, both inside and outside their households. Without diminishing the material hardships endured by these women, such as the incidents in which a broken sewing needle almost blinds Mah and another punches through Leila's finger, Ng nonetheless praises their contributions. She further provides these sewing ladies a certain space for taking control of their work. When an easy pattern is in season that makes sewing "easier than eating rice," they work extra hours. But when a difficult pattern is at hand and it is like "sewing two dresses for the price of one," they listen to opera singing, take long tea breaks and crack melon seeds (177). In another scene, Mah's only means of expressing her anger and frustration with married life is to run the Singer without any fabric (70). By making this deliberately non-productive use of the machine, she protests against the heavy toll of her life inside Chinatown and seeks some relief from her sense of inner emptiness.

Significantly, these sewing women also perform a border-crossing act by imitating the outside fashion that they help to create. Mah, adept at copy-

³⁵ Lowe points out that this description of the female work force in the novel is a testimony of "the changes in Chinatown immigrant community, gender, and work, as sweatshops first made use of Chinese male labor during the garment industry's growth from the 1920s through the 1940s and then turned increasingly to female labor after the 1946 modification of the Magnuson Act permitted Chinese wives and children to enter as non-quota immigrants and the Immigration Act of 1965 abolished Asian national origin quotas" (169).

ing from the current patterns, sews outfits for herself and her daughters. This act of mimicry invites several levels of interpretation. At one level, Mah's act of imitation indicates a colonized state of mentality as she desires to share the wardrobes of women from mainstream society. These fashionable outfits signify the extent of their assimilation into mainstream values, much like the way they "feast" upon the sit-com *I Love Lucy* to show their acceptance of the dominant public culture and their desire to learn from it. At another level, it allows her to practice a technology of self-construction. Fashion, as Jennifer Craik argues against a common belief, is not merely a kind of masquerading. "Codes of dress are technical devices which articulate the relationship between a particular body and its lived milieu, the space occupied by bodies and constituted by bodily actions. In other words, clothes construct a personal *habitus*," Craik contends (4).³⁶ Living in confinement, these sewing women unsettle the invisible force field that separates Chinatown from the outside world for themselves and their daughters through dressmaking, the very thing for which they are exploited. Women's clothing creates a woman's space and in this case a fashion statement becomes an identity statement. Mah's home-sewing further reveals a daughter's homage to the maternal ingenuity that transforms cheap fabric from discount stores into fashionable outfits and somehow implodes the consumer culture. The fact that Mah pencils her patterns on "pig-pink butcher paper" (137) further manifests a kind of recycling economy out of necessity, much like the episode in which Mah stays in the kitchen and sucks on the pigeons' bones, leaving the best parts for the daughters' "nutritious treat" (30).³⁷

"Nina, Ona, and I, we're the lucky generation. Mah and Leon forced themselves to live through the humiliation in this country so that we could have it better," Leila points out (35-36). Leila's image of "the lucky generation" is thoroughly examined in the novel. Besides recording the hardships

³⁶ Craik further explains, "the *habitus* occupies by the body imposes expectations, conventions and skills as being essential for operating in specific technically organized environments. Thus bodies are 'made up' in both senses of the term—constructed through the acquisition of body techniques, and known through the ways in which they are made presentable in habituses or living environments. Techniques of fashioning the body are a visible and primary denotative form of *acculturation*, that is to say, we use the way we wear our bodies to present ourselves to our social environment, mapping out our codes of conduct through our fashion behaviour. Our *habitus* of clothing creates a 'face' which positively constructs an identity rather than disguising a 'natural' body or 'real' identity" (4-5).

³⁷ Sau-ling Wong structures her study of the literary motifs in Asian American literature around the modes of Necessity and Extravagance, derived from passages in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. She defines the two terms as such: "The terms *Necessity* and *Extravagance* signify two contrasting modes of existence and operation, one contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded, the other attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness, and autotelism" (*Reading Asian American Literature* 13). Wong points out that the mother in *Bone* is "a determined practitioner of thrift and an eater of uninviting food" (25).

of the immigrant mothers, Ng also traces the epistemological and ontological struggles of the second generations as they explore a new sense of mobility that was denied their mothers. The three sisters are deployed to represent different modes of reaction to these struggles for meaning.³⁸

Nina, the youngest, chooses to literally fly away: first as a flight attendant, then as a tour guide to China, where she trades on her Chinese ancestry, something about which she could not care less. However, Ng makes it clear that this moving away is hard on Nina and her choice actually results from the memory of hardship. She instinctively rejects Leila's choice of a Chinatown restaurant for their reunion in New York because she wants to avoid the feeling of "eat guilt": "I always feel like I should rush through a rice plate and then rush home to sew culottes or assemble radio parts or something" (26). A home in Chinatown implies the collapse of the private sphere and the work place, and it also means one literally leads a hand to mouth existence. However, the sisters fare little better in the Latino restaurant of their choice because they are still "eating guilt" as the memories of their parents' lifelong toils accentuate the whole meal. Interestingly, Nina's space is closely connected with the culinary discourse in her chapter of the novel.³⁹ Eating-places become Nina's involuntary *lieux de mémoire*, where the past is sutured with the present. It suggests that Nina can fly away, but she can never be completely deracinated.

As the middle daughter, Ona is trapped: "Ona was the middle girl and she felt stuck in the middle of all the trouble" (139). Her faithful observance of ancestral rituals reveals the part of her that is tradition-bound. Her jump from the housing project can be even seen as a symbolic experiment with flight. Ona, however, cannot be airborne like Nina. Her space is perhaps the girl's bathroom where Leila finds her crying, "her socks around her ankles, her dress a mess" (136). This violent image appears as a *déjà vu* of the sadistic bathroom scene of *The Woman Warrior* in which a silent girl is tortured by Maxine the narrator. Ona could be that silent girl, incapable of talking about the violence she has encountered. The reason for Ona's hurt is never explained but the image is vivid enough. At that time Leila gives her no sympathy but blames her for ruining the dress that Mah has stayed up all night making, with perhaps a hidden motif of sibling jealousy. Later Leila

³⁸ In her analysis of "A Red Sweater," an early version of the second chapter of *Bone*, Sau-ling Wong contends that the three sisters "represent three possible responses to the demands of Necessity: immobility, fall, and flight" (*Reading Asian American Literature* 157). My reading of Leila is slightly different from Wong's idea of her as an immobile character.

³⁹ Food is an important metaphor in the novel. Nicole Waller observes that a way of "polarizations" runs through the culinary discourse in *Bone*: "Food is historiography in Ng's food rituals that enable the living to 'swallow' past deaths and deprivations. Food becomes an arena for the American-born generation's dilemma of having to choose between hunger and a Chinatown history or abundance and a mainstream eat-be-eaten capitalistic ethos" (486).

also hides in the same bathroom when she learns of Ona's death and is shocked into recognizing the hurt that Ona must have experienced. This is one of the uncanny moments in the novel when the ghost of the past comes home and demands recognition. Even at the narrative level Ona is treated in a much less substantially than the other characters, her presence almost always evoked through memory. Yet death gives Ona omnipresence. As Leila confesses, Ona makes death real to people around her (118). Ona, locked in with her unspeakable hurt, is the ultimately "missed" one whose ghostly (dis)appearance creates the necessary shock experience that brings profane illumination. As the original peacemaker who tries to abridge the estrangement of Mah and Leon, Ona haunts her family and the novel and leaves them no *on* [安]/peace.⁴⁰

With Leila, our first-person *flâneuse*, spatial configurations and mobility are complicated and contingent upon familial relationships. The novel begins on the note of a "failed family" (3). Our understanding of Chinatown is refracted through Leila's inspection of familial relationships, particularly the disintegration of her nuclear family in the process of their "conversion" into Americanness. Ng portrays this disintegration through spatial dispersal, including placing Leila's biological father in Australia, frequent shipping outs and disappearances of Leon, Ona's death, and Nina's move to New York. Mah is the only constant in Leila's life. And yet we can clearly sense Leila's feeling of deprivation as the original mother-daughter symbiosis is replaced by a new familial construct; the mother is missed as well. Leila, as the daughter of a previous marriage, experiences a sense of lack in terms of patrilineage and, for all her closeness to Leon, is always haunted by the lack of the biological father whom she has never seen. This obliquity of familial relationship has a telling influence on Leila and throughout the novel we see her oscillating between Mah's Chinatown apartment and Mason's place at the Latino Mission, undecided about where her home is. In fact, it takes the whole length of the novel for Leila to finally take leave of #2-4-6 UPDAIRE, Salmon Alley, only to be brought back again by Ona's death.⁴¹

Because of their different conceptions of home, the sisters also have different geographies. While visiting Nina in New York, in one of the two chapters in which Leila moves beyond the ambiance of Chinatown, Leila

⁴⁰ 安 is a Chinese ideogram for peace. Goellnicht argues that Ona's broken body represents "a failure to be incorporated into the national body" ("Of Bones and Suicide" 317). This failure is in fact common among minority experiences. In Ona the reader is reminded of Toni Morrison's Beloved, who haunts 124 Bluestone, Cincinnati, and Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* whose lingering presence around the garbage dump disquiets the landscape of Lorain, Ohio.

⁴¹ As the narrative is in a cyclic form, the ending is actually set at some time before Ona's suicide. Leila moves back to Salmon Alley after Ona's death and for quite some time she is again trapped between Chinatown and the Mission.

marks the difference between them, “I thought about our different worlds now: Nina had a whole map of China in her head; I had Chinatown, the Mission, the Tenderloin” (28). The “original” expansive “old country” versus the American “imitation” and its working-class neighborhood in a cramped urban space—one senses the entrapment and envy in this transpacific comparison. It seems that, for all her mobility, Leila remains paradoxically trapped. As Louis B. Jones’s book review points out, Ng makes Leila’s “moving across town to a new neighborhood...as hard as crossing the Pacific Ocean.”

Ng nevertheless offers Leila another prospect beyond Chinatown when Leila and Mason drive to his cousin Dale’s in Redwood City. This excursion is presented as a typographical crossing of class frontier from the working-class Chinatown and the Mission to one of the professional cities of the Bay Area. The trajectory of moving from the central city to the suburbs corresponds to the “symbolic movement” of white ethnics, which is “part of a progressive narrative of American identity formation” (Kennedy 54). Within Chinese American context, this demarcates a moment in which Leila and the reader come face to face with an embodiment of the “model minority” myth. Dale’s professional and material success, as a computer expert with a suburban house—complete with a pool and “lollipop-colored lawn furniture” (44)—exemplifies this myth of assimilation and class ascension. This is the success that matches the great expectations of Leon’s Gold Mountain dream. Leon’s constant talk of opening his own business—the grocery and the laundry, for example—and his junkyard inventions bespeak not only the occupational discrimination he has suffered but, more importantly, a desire for social mobility that will enable his family to move from the working class, “whose life was work and death the dream” (181), to a propertied class.

Leon fails miserably; yet Ng shows that Dale also pays a great deal for his success. Imbibed with mainstream monetary values, Dale offers to pay Mason for the mechanic job on his BMW, failing to understand that Mason is fixing the car as “a family favor” (44). Leila witnesses Mason’s disgust and Dale’s bewilderment for this lack of “home education” (45). Here home is not connected with an essentialist identity, but signifies a space that goes beyond domestic confines and into a cultural network of kinship. Having been educated outside Chinatown in all-white schools, Ng implies, Dale is lost to this ethics of “home.” Dale’s alienation from “home” indirectly criticizes the model minority myth which is “founded upon the supposed persistence and rearticulation of ‘*traditional* Confucian values’ in Asian Americans, whose success lies in their ability to adapt Asia to America as well as to transform America through the application of a ‘Confucian’ ethos” (Palumbo-Liu 21). Dale’s success only highlights his distance from this ethos. This experience of spatial relocation reinforces Leila’s attachment to her “home”

with all its memory of loss and struggle with poverty. For all her external mobility, Leila wants to and will hold onto her home in the heart because “*The heart never travels*” (193).

At the end of *Bone*, we see that Leila too learns to perform a symbolic ritual. During Leon’s welcome home dinner Leila and her family sit under Genthe’s old Chinatown photos and order “enough food to invite the spirits of the oldtimers to join us” (191). This spiritual communion is an appropriate trope for the writing of the novel, which serves as a symbolic ritual of “worship” for the Chinese pioneers in America. While choosing the title, Ng admits she actually played on transnational homophones since “bone” sounds like “good” in her dialect and she would like to imagine the oldtimers nodding their approval of her work (Shan, *Ming ke yu zai xian* 207). Moreover, by writing in a language “foreign” to her immigrant forefathers, as Ng explains, she has symbolically created a home for the older generations in this language (*Ming ke yu zai xian* 207-08). This linguistic *at-homeness*, I submit, is of even greater significance for the American-born descendents whose native language *is* English. Fae Myenne Ng’s representation of Chinatown in *Bone*, then, is indeed a “good enough” textual *lieu de mémoire* that brings together generational memories of San Francisco Chinatown—the place where Chinese America began—into a real and lived place.

Chapter 2

Ghostly China: Narrative of Transnational Haunting in Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses*, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, and *Saving Fish from Drowning*

If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taken place. The ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.

—Avery F. Gordon
Ghostly Matters

Upon the publication of her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Chinese American author Amy Tan became an instant star in the publishing world. Her second novel, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), was also a triumph, as were her successive books. Tan's skillful renditions of mother-daughter relationships have moved many readers around the world. Moreover, *The Joy Luck Club*—which came more than a dozen years after Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*—helped create a “renaissance” of Chinese American writing. Despite that Tan refuses to be labeled a mother-daughter expert, both *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife* center on the love and antagonism between Chinese immigrant mothers and their American daughters. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, and *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Tan continues to concentrate on the conflicts and final reconciliation between mothers and daughters, and she repeatedly invokes Chinese history and landscape to contextualize her portrayal of Chinese American experiences. I argue that China, in these texts,

becomes a phantom space haunted by family secrets and ghostly past and serves to set off the protagonists' American present. This chapter will delve into Tan's deployment of what I call "narrative of transnational haunting" in the three novels in order to discuss her technologies of representing China and Chinese American ethnicity.

Technologies of Representing Ethnicity

Readers familiar with Amy Tan's novels know of the recurrent themes that run through her writing, such as mother-daughter relationships, the urgency of recuperating maternal memory and carrying on matrilineage, and the daughters' struggles with ethnic and professional identities. In *The Hundred Secret Senses*, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, and *Saving Fish from Drowning*, furthermore, Tan adds the plot of ghosts, ghost-writing, and ghost narration onto these familiar themes of searching for origin and selfhood. Present in canonical texts such as Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, ghosts are familiar to readers of American ethnic literatures. And Tan excels in recycling the subject matter. *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, for example, is a quasi-Gothic narrative in which a desire for at-homeness is embedded in grotesque stories of death and revenge. Ghost-writing has double meanings for the daughter protagonist Ruth Yang. On the one hand, it refers to her profession as an unrecognized ghostwriter of self-help manuals; on the other, Ruth had been forced in her youth into the role of spiritual medium to fake communication through sand-writing with her dead grandmother on behalf of her mother LuLing. In both cases, ghost-writing is mobilized as a trope for (trans)cultural negotiations, with Ruth serving as a translator. As well, ghost-writing in the novel is an ethnic marker and, along with the reference to the bones of Peking Man, underlines an anthropological interest in China and Chinese history. This interest has long been a standard feature in Tan's writings so that no critical reading of her works can avoid an interrogation of her technologies of representing ethnicity.

Tan's usual practice of representing and negotiating with Chinese American ethnicity is to work it through familial terms. Tan consistently writes about the emotional entanglements between Chinese American mothers and daughters in all of her five published novels. Furthermore, perhaps because of her own experience of a trip to China, Tan often uses China as a place to settle unresolved personal crises originating in the United States. Despite Tan's claim to be "a specifist as a writer" instead of "a generalist" (Gray 48), her renditions of Chinese American kinship and the spatial and historical configurations of China have often been faulted as inauthentic and stereotypical reproductions of the "Orient" for the benefit of mainstream readers. Asian American critic Sheng-mei Ma, for instance, argues that Tan promotes

“an ‘alternative’ Orientalism, a New Age ethnicity mongrelized with primitivism, that appeals to Westerners’ long-held Orientalist views of Asians and Asia under the guise of an embracing of ethnicity” (*The Deathly Embrace* xxii). Ma’s comment encapsulates the criticism against Tan’s heavy reliance on Chinese elements in her writing. And yet accusations of ethnic “fakeness” against authors like Tan can hardly be productive. As mentioned in the previous chapter, oftentimes ethnic writers are forced into the position as an involuntary representative. As critics we should realize that any attempt to fix a set of standards for value judgment is neither probable nor feasible while faced with the uncertainty and constructiveness of ethnicity. Rather we should try to tease out the literary and psychological nuances in each text and carefully examine the material conditions of its production. With this position in mind, I find Sau-ling Wong’s “‘Sugar Sisterhood’: Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon,” Rey Chow’s “Women in the Holocene: Ethnicity, Fantasy, and the Film *The Joy Luck Club*,” and Te-hsing Shan’s “Imaginary Homeland: The Image of China in Chinese American Literature” most useful when it comes to critical scrutiny of Tan’s techniques of representation.

In an elaborated discussion of what she terms “the Amy Tan phenomenon” (“Sugar Sisterhood” 174), referring to the crossover appeal and blockbuster success of Tan’s fiction, Sau-ling Wong analyzes how the complex interplay of self-Orientalizing and counter-Orientalist possibilities in Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God’s Wife* enables the author to acquire a large readership that straddles both the mass market and academia. Wong’s first and foremost concern lies in how Tan’s cultural “mistranslation” provides misinformation and palatable Orientalism to middle-class American readers of the 1980s (181). She further identifies “temporal distancing” and “authenticity marking” as Tan’s favorite devices in constructing a “quasi-ethnographic Orientalist discourse on China and the Chinese” (184). The misuse of the term “sugar sister” for “cousin” in *The Joy Luck Club* stands as one prominent example of such constructed misinformation. Still, towards the end of her essay Wong makes room for the possible “subversions of naive voyeurism” in Tan’s novels that “the reader attuned to questions of cultural production” would detect (191).

While Rey Chow’s reading focuses on the film adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club*, it exemplifies a nuanced exploration of the technologies of representation of multicultural ethnicity. Chow first questions the “repressive hypothesis” with regard to the discourse of ethnicity and identifies an inherent Foucauldian Panopticonism embedded in the question of authenticity (“Women in the Holocene” 103).¹ Under the “panoptacist multiculturalist

¹ Chow writes: “The discursive ferment and mechanisms that surround ‘ethnicity’ in our time share many similar features with the ‘repressive hypothesis’ that Foucault attributes to the discourse of sexuality. Chief of all is the belief in ‘ethnicity’ as a kind of repressed truth that

gaze” the confessional and autobiographical narratives produced by ethnic writers in turn become “the *National Geographics* of the soul—the observation platforms and laboratories in which the ‘perverse’ others—the ‘in-mates’—can be displayed in their ‘non-conforming’ and ‘abnormal’ behavior, in their strangely coded practices and rituals” (103-04). Yet while she is keen to the power relationship within such Orientalist visual practices, Chow also advocates a supplementary reading in which she juxtaposes *The Joy Luck Club* with *Jurassic Park* to analyze how melodrama “offers a privileged view of the basically mechanic or technologized nature of...sentimental emotions” (107). As such, *The Joy Luck Club* is “a legend of fantasy” that dramatizes the metaphoricity, textuality, and seriality of Chinese American “history” and is always “recuperated into a Western notion of otherness” (111). The mothers in *The Joy Luck Club*, in particular, are primarily melodramatic “metaphors and stereotypes” (107). As Chow insightfully notes, “[b]ehind each mother is thus always another mother. Mothers are, in other words, not a replacement of ‘fathers’ but their displacement; not simply another self-sufficient ‘origin’ but always already a mark-on-the-other, a signifier for another signifier, a metaphor. Most of all, ‘mothers’ are legends: as much as being popular ‘stories,’ they offer, in themselves, ways of reading” (107).

Wong and Chow hold different positions towards Tan and the filmic adaptation of her novel. Nevertheless both of them provide exemplary non-judgmental inquiries into the politics of representation and the issue of authenticity. The former is critical of the self-Orientalizing gestures in Tan but is also alert to the opposite impulse of counter-Orientalist subversion in Tan and their relationships to cultural production; the latter unravels the underpinnings of emancipatory assumptions and the construction of melodramatic fantasy in ethnic textuality and visuality. Their works remind us that there are alternatives to the binary paradigm of the real versus the fake when we consider the representation of ethnicity.

It is fair to say that Amy Tan constantly searches for ways to negotiate between the two worlds that are culturally different but integral parts of her lived experience as a Chinese American writer. Te-hsing Shan takes on this transnational and transcultural aspect of Asian American texts and argues for the existence of a “doubly imagined homeland” (*Ming ke yu zai xian [Inscriptions and Representations]* 182) in his reading of Asian American imaginations of China. He observes that the Asian American texts he has ex-

awaits liberation. In order to facilitate this liberation, it is not enough that we identify the hidden motifs and inscriptions of ethnicity in all cultural representations; it is believed that we also need to engage in processes of confession, biography, autobiography, storytelling, and so forth, that actively resuscitate, retrieve, and redeem that ‘ethnic’ part of us which has not been allowed to come to light” (“Women in the Holocene” 101).

amined appear to have “performative effects” (182) in that they offer textual counter-memory to make up for the absences in the official American history (209). This argument affirms the collective function of Asian American literature. What is most inspiring is his notion of a “doubly imagined homeland.” If, as Salmon Rushdie has stated, an immigrant writer “is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost” (11), the homeland the second generation has constructed out of these fragmentary images and then represented through the mediation of English is inevitably a “doubly,” even “multiply” imagined one. Tan’s representation of China draws from such a mediated transcultural and transnational imagination. In Tan’s writing, China, as a (maternal) homeland, is always one of the main narrative axes and a result of multiple negotiations. And the sense of narrative haunting also derives from this practice of transnational imagination.

Although she employs different narrative models and strategies, Tan always resorts to the basic plot of negotiating transnational and transcultural differences. Up to her latest novel, *Saving Fish from Drowning*, Amy Tan’s biggest burden—and asset—is her mother and her mother’s Chinese homeland. No matter how the daughter characters try to resist, the way to spiritual and physical healings lies on the other side of the Pacific. Nevertheless, the dual locations of identification always prove to be problematic for both the author and her characters. Perhaps because of an autobiographical instinct, Tan is at her strongest when she deals with the daughters’ uneasy relations with their everyday lives which, according to Wong, are always presented “with descriptions of high material specificity or information density” (“Sugar Sisterhood” 186). The antiphonal exchanges between mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* in which the daughters’ stories are cradled and framed by the two segments of maternal voices are truly emotionally evocative, for instance. Tan’s texts become most questionable when she inserts details about China and Chinese history which serve as “markers of authenticity” that will create “an ‘Oriental effect’” according to Wong (187)—and domesticate them for the purpose of exploring Chinese American familial relationships. “Sugar sisterhood” is one example; the failed pun on “Changmian” in *The Hundred Secret Senses* is another.²

² The Chinese protagonist Kwan Li in *The Hundred Secret Senses* explains the name of her village Changmian in her broken English as followed, “*Chang* mean ‘sing,’ *mian* mean ‘silk,’ something soft but go on forever like thread. Soft song, never ending. But some people pronounce ‘Changmian’ other way, rising tone change to falling, like this: *Chang*. This way *chang* mean ‘long,’ *mian* mean ‘sleep.’ Long sleep” (275). When it comes to fabric, however, in Chinese “mian” actually means cotton, not silk. Whereas Tan intends to play on the village name to display knowledge of China and to use it as a marker of authenticity, she only shows her poor understanding of Mandarin. It also demonstrates her mistaken trust in her Pinyin-English dictionary since Tan admits that she relied on the Pinyin-English dictionary for

With all the suspicions against Tan's self-Orientalizing gestures, I still would like to look at Tan's positive contributions to the tradition of Asian American literature and argue that her most significant contribution lies in her hybrid use of ghosts and the transnational diasporic narrative to create a narrative of transnational haunting. While still writing in the realistic mode, Tan chooses to branch into the fantastic. Her narrative of haunting differs from Kingston's in that whereas Kingston's ghosts—such as the Mexican ghost, the garbage ghost—are deployed at the metaphoric level, Tan's are real and “alive,” such as the Yin people (ghosts) who coexist with the living in *The Hundred Secret Senses*. In this highly personal “hauntology,” Tan's ghosts are so closely linked with China that they can be regarded as products of her obsession with the maternal memory—since China is inevitably intertwined with matrilineage in her texts.

Hauntology is a critical term Derrida used in his analysis of Karl Marx and the spectrality of exchange-value in capitalist cultures. What I would like to draw from Derrida's hauntology is the inherent anachronism embedded in the term.³ The personalized “hauntology” in Tan's works also involves an anachronism in that the American present is always already linked with the Chinese past. Overshadowed by the maternal will and consciousness, Tan's Asian American daughters need to resolve all the narrative conflicts in China, a geographical space of the past that haunts their American present. Hence they need to physically or metaphorically “return” to China and this “journey back” becomes a problematic search for “roots.” It is problematic because Tan's mothers are usually either dead or in danger of losing their memory, which is another form of death. Embedded in Tan's novelistic discourse is a conflicting desire of matricide and obsession with the maternal body. In her novels, the (Chinese) mothers are figures of authority that the (American) daughters have to contend with. While they need to exorcise an overwhelming “anxiety of influence,” in Harold Bloom's term, the daughters are also fearful of facing the vacuum created by the absence of their mothers. This conflicting desire becomes the narrative drive in Tan's novels and pushes the plots onward; it is also the base of her representation of China.

the puns on Changmian in the essay “The Ghost of My Imagination” (*The Opposite of Fate* 261). Sheng-mei Ma observes that “[i]t may not simply be Tan's inadequate understanding of the Chinese language that results in this error. Tan is likely to be romanticizing the Orient in the stock images of silk, jade, porcelain, and so forth...” (*The Deathly Embrace* 123).

³ Derrida describes hauntology as a kind of scrambled temporalities: “Repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost. *What* is a ghost? *What* is the *effectivity* or the *presence* of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum? Is there *there*, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, an opposition that holds up? Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time* makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a *hauntology*” (10).

In her overrepresentation and constant allusions to the maternal China and Chinese history, Amy Tan of course can be accused of participating in the creation of an American version of “spectropoetics of multiculturalism,” as proposed by Daniel Martin (91).⁴ However, what is important to me in terms of Tan’s hauntology is the way in which the haunting presence of China in her texts creates an uncanny sense and “unhomely” effect. The daughters are drawn into a particular “structure of feeling” about China, as Avery F. Gordon observes in the epigraph. In order to feel “at home,” furthermore, they need to practice a “politics of accounting”—“to make contact with haunting, to engage the shadows and what is living there” and “develop a sense of historical accounting” (Gordon 18). This practice of “historical accounting” draws Amy Tan’s daughter protagonists out of their complacent American reality to face up to the maternal history that constitutes an important and integral part of the historiography of Chinese America.

Reading Narrative of Transnational Haunting

Despite the fact that Tan’s novels are always haunted by the maternal presence and absence, not until *The Hundred Secret Senses* were ghosts officially deployed. Whereas in her previous texts these “Chinese superstitions” appeared to be objects of suspicion and embarrassment for the American daughters,⁵ in *The Hundred Secret Senses* she boldly juxtaposes the World of Yin with the present-day San Francisco. Why on earth does Amy Tan want to play with ghosts, we might ask? As Gordon observes, “[t]o write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects. To impute a kind of objectivity to ghosts implies that, from certain standpoints, the dialectics of visibility and invisibility involve a constant negotiation between what can be seen and what is in the shadows” (17). Our senses become enlarged and sharpened because of this constant negotiation

⁴ In his analysis of SKY Lee’s Chinese Canadian novel *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990), Martin coins the term *à la* Derrida to describe the phenomenon that permeated the Canadian literary marketplace in the last few decades of the twentieth century and to criticize the controversial policy of multiculturalism in Canada. “A spectropoetics of multiculturalism,” according to Martin, “infuses ethnic experiences, identities, and histories with an exchange, and within a system of exchanges. Multiculturalism celebrates ethnic diversity through a capitalist agenda that transforms ‘ethnicity’ into a marketable commodity, and one that, in the process of being exchanged, validates an ideologically constructed image of Canada’s supposed heritage of tolerance. Yet ethnic identity, because it comes into being through exchange, cannot exist as anything other than spectral” (91).

⁵ For example, for one of the daughter protagonists Jing-mei (June) the Chinese mothers’ mah-jongg playing Joy Luck Club seems to be “a shameful Chinese custom, like the secret gathering of the Ku Klux Klan or the tom-tom dances of TV Indians preparing for wars” (16). This association of the mother’s invention with racist practices and stereotyping indicates June’s misunderstanding and mistrust of her Chinese heritage.

and enable us to go beyond the limits of the visible and the invisible—the precise definition of the “secret senses” in the novel. The protagonist’s Chinese sister, Kwan, describes secret senses in these terms with her broken English: “Secret sense not really secret. We just call secret because everyone has, only forgotten. Same kind of sense like ant feet, elephant trunk, dog nose, cat whisker, whale ear, bat wing, clam shell, snake tongue, little hair on flower” (102)—which Olivia translates into “instinct.” And in the novel Kwan is the one character who has not forgotten her “secret senses” or “instinct.” Her “mission” requires her to guide Olivia to face the tragedy of her previous life in China and to reconcile what has been left unresolved. This gesture of looking backward, of remembering, and engaging in a mythical trip of return, is the base of the transnational narrative. Ghosts in this novel, therefore, not only serve as reminders of one’s spiritual power but also push the narrative forward.⁶

In fact, the novel opens with the connection between Kwan and ghosts—“My sister Kwan believes that she has yin eyes,” Tan’s biracial protagonist Olivia states. “She sees those who have died and now dwell in the World of Yin, ghosts who leave the mists just to visit her kitchen on Balboa Street in San Francisco” (3). In this opening paragraph we encounter Tan’s customary hybrid of Chinese and American landscapes. The presence of America, down to the detail of the street name, is juxtaposed with the more generic Chinese underworld. The contrast between the common American cityscape and the ghostly World of Yin creates an effect of defamiliarization. After the defamiliarized opening, besides inserting a series of encounters with the ghosts, Tan focuses on the conflicts and final reconciliation between Olivia and Kwan as she delves into Chinese history, specifically the nineteenth-century Taiping Rebellion, to contextualize her portrayal of Chinese American experiences. In terms of the geography of living people, Tan’s story counterpoints contemporary San Francisco with a village in rural southeastern China and juxtaposes the war-torn, or Communist-ruled, Chinese village with the postmodern metropolis of San Francisco. Furthermore, in an attempt at new emplotment, Tan creates an American biracial protagonist, Olivia, and gives her a Chinese half sister, Kwan, to embody Chinese culture and values. At thirty-six Olivia and her estranged husband, Simon, are accompanied by Kwan on a trip to China. This venture is intended to save their marriage but, serendipitously, it settles business from another life. Here Tan gestures toward “Chinese superstitions” by incorporating the concept of reincarnation. However, the seemingly implausible plot of ghosts and reincarnation has been thoroughly naturalized in *The Hundred Secret Senses*.

⁶ Ken-fang Lee reads *The Hundred Secret Senses* from the immigrant perspective and argues that the haunting past and the ghosts in Kwan’s narrative “symbolize cultural memory that a migrant cannot forget or eradicate” (117).

For all her supernatural power to connect with the Yin people, Kwan is not unlike the Chinese mothers in Tan's previous texts. Kwan, who conveniently takes over the maternal role because of Olivia's irresponsible Caucasian mother, comes from a younger generation of Chinese women than the Joy Luck mothers and Winnie Louie, the mother in *The Kitchen God's Wife*; yet she appears little different from the older women. Kwan is in fact Olivia's surrogate mother. Thus Tan's treatment of Kwan also repeats the emphasis on the blood tie between mothers and daughters in her previous texts. Olivia, in her first-person narrative voice, talks about how her half-sister ignores their obvious cultural and physical differences and clings to their sameness based on Chinese ancestry: "As she sees it, we're connected by a cosmic Chinese umbilical cord that's given us the same inborn traits, personal motives, fate, and luck" (21). This reference to a metaphoric "umbilical cord" echoes the famous statement by one of the Joy Luck aunties that "Your mother is in your bones!" (31). Hence descent is always the deciding factor and the force that ties the two superpowers across the Pacific together; in a sense biological determinism overrides any possible individual dissent.⁷

And this "Chinese umbilical cord" has called Olivia back to China. Interestingly, Tan packages this trip to China with commercialism and professional specificity. In an attempt to save their failing marriage, Olivia and Simon have "conjured up a proposal...to write and photograph a story on village cuisine in China" (130) and then gained financial support by a potential publisher. On the one hand, Olivia's profession as a commercial photographer neatly falls into what Rey Chow calls the "*National Geographic*" mode, in which "the First world" can leisurely access "the Third world" through the mediation of the camera lens. This project also comes close to what Frank Chin has termed as "food pornography" in Asian American literature.⁸ On the other hand, we may well read this trip, though necessary for the novel's structure, as one of Tan's gestures at anti-Orientalization, through which she metafictionally and more or less self-consciously reflects upon her own writing practice. Both Olivia's article on Chinese village cooking and Tan's novels about the mothers' past in China might reasonably be considered tourist voyeurism in which "the Third World" is consumed visually and thematically. The environmental disaster at the end of the novel after the archeological wonder near the village has been discovered bears witness to the

⁷ This tendency of resorting to biological determinism in Tan's texts has its autobiographical origin. It is now a commonly known story that in 1987, when Tan and her husband accompanied her mother Daisy on a visit to China, she experienced a magical moment of "homecoming" and she emerged from the trip better equipped than before to cope with her double heritage and hybrid identity.

⁸ "Food pornography" refers to the selling of exotic ethnic foodstuffs and eating customs to please the imagination and palates of the mainstream customers. See Sau-ling Wong's discussion of this theme in her *Reading Asian American Literature* (53-55).

catastrophic results of this kind of consumptive tourism.

Whether Tan is self-conscious about the commercialized consumption of China in her own writing or not, it is clear that the isolated mountain village Changmian represents China. For all its isolation, Changmian, which miraculously “has avoided the detritus of modernization” (204), has been “invaded” at least twice by foreign forces: the first time by American missionaries and foreign armed forces in the nineteenth century and the second time by the American couple Olivia and Simon, who unintentionally stumble upon the archeological discovery and bring global attention as well as ecological disaster to the village.

Interestingly, Tan introduces Changmian through a specific visual code. We first “see” this village through Olivia’s camera viewfinder. Olivia states:

As I look through the viewfinder, I feel as though we’ve stumbled on a fabled misty land, half memory, half illusion. Are we in Chinese Nirvana? Changmian looks like the carefully cropped photos found in travel brochures advertising “a charmed world of distant past, where visitors can step back in time.” It conveys all the sentimental quaintness that tourists crave but never actually see. There must be something wrong. I keep warning myself. Around the corner we’ll stumble on reality: the fast-food market, the tire junkyard, the sign indicating this village is really a Chinese fantasyland for tourists. Buy your tickets here! See the China of your dreams! Unspoiled by progress, mired in the past! (205)

Hence Olivia’s first impression of Changmian is characterized by *visuality* and *disbelief*. The juxtaposition of clichéd tourist language with the fantastic aura of the village further satirizes the hackneyed imagination of the international tourist. Olivia is singularly uneasy when faced with the “genuine article” and insists on creating an imagined and hidden postindustrial junkyard, which exposes the paradigmatic limitation of the First World tourist. As mentioned, she is behind the “discovery” of Changmian and it is quite likely that her projection about the village—as junkyard and amusement park—will become “reality.” An implied comment on the invasion of the neocolonial, modernizing power of the United States into a preindustrial space is suggested here. The reference to mist and Nirvana also cleverly links Changmian with the misty World of Yin and signals the narrative logic of haunting, demanding “a willing suspension of disbelief” in order to enter the fantastic and “carefully cropped” world of Changmian.

In an extended narrative relay, Kwan’s first-person narrative of the nineteenth-century China during the Taping Rebellion is interwoven with Olivia’s narration of the novelistic present in San Francisco. Tan’s choice of this specific time in Chinese history is a refreshing turn away from the back-

ground of the Sino-Japanese War in her previous texts, even though some historical and ethnic details may need correction. In order to link these two widely separated temporalities, however, Tan has to mobilize ghosts and the belief in reincarnation as the external framework. For Sheng-mei Ma this transnational linkage reveals Tan's appropriation of "New Age chic" (*The Deathly Embrace* 117). Yet ghostly haunting in the narrative importantly evokes and recalls Olivia's repressed memory of her Chinese ancestry and forces her to face the reality of her Chinese heritage. At the end of the novel Kwan disappears mysteriously when she tries to rescue Simon; nine months later Olivia gives birth to Samantha and both mother and daughter take up Kwan's family name, Li.⁹ This ending again simultaneously displays a matrilineal desire and a wish to carry on the matrilineal line. Olivia's choice of family name clearly shows that she chooses to connect with the sister she had rejected since they first met. Olivia finally states her belief about inter-generational linkage through the shared family name: "What's a family name if not a claim to being connected in the future to someone from the past?" (357). This belated acknowledgement of Kwan and Kwan's family name swings this narrative about interactions between the living and the ghosts back into Tan's familiar orbit of Chinese matrilineage and creates a fantastic and uncanny trinity of ghost/China/mother.

This "unholy trinity" resurfaces in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, set once again during the Second World War. Inspired by and written about the post-mortem maternal body and memory, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* is predicated with a gothic domesticity, in which mothers and daughters are locked in a contest of mutual hurting and can only be saved by a ritual of seeking the voice and lost name of the maternal grandmother. Tan's allusion to Peking Man again domesticates the archaeological and anthropological project into a family affair.¹⁰ Most important are the ways in which Tan interweaves this piece of Chinese history into her fictitious family story. For one thing, the novel seems to imply that Peking Man is the biological ancestor of the Bonesetter's clan. And the search for the bones of Peking Man leads to the first break between LuLing and her nanny Precious Auntie since the latter refuses

⁹ Getting the right family name is important in the novel. Olivia has been trying to find a proper name after her divorce with Simon. In fact, even before her marriage she was troubled by the issue of family names since her mother had remarried many times. As Olivia confesses, "As I think more about my name, I realize I've never had any sort of identity that suited me, not since I was five at least, when my mother changed our last name to Laguni" (156). Adopting her stepfather's last name turns out to be an ironic twist when Olivia's mother finds that Laguni is not actually a proper surname but "a made-up name nuns gave to orphans. Laguni—like 'lagoon,' isolated from the rest of the world" (157). Kwan's revelation that Yee is not their father's real family name but a borrowed one also shocks Olivia. Hence one of Olivia's "missions" is to find a true name, and by extension a proper identity, for herself.

¹⁰ Tan also makes LuLing's first husband a scientist on the archaeological team.

to disclose the whereabouts of the secret family cave in which the bones of Peking Man are allegedly buried. Precious Auntie, who turns out to be LuLing's biological mother, worries about a family curse if the bones cannot be properly restored to the cave. The scientific exploration thus is connected with the indigenous belief system. This hybrid approach once again utilizes the narrative of haunting.

Furthermore, ghost-writing, also connected with folk belief, effectively brings out the theme of transcultural negotiations in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. Instead of being a superstitious practice, ghost-writing self-reflexively thematizes the difficulties of crossover communications. *The Bonesetter's Daughter* is by far the darkest of Tan's works—possibly because it was thoroughly rewritten after the death of her mother Daisy Tan, who had been a constant source and inspiration for her daughter's novels and who suffered from Alzheimer's like LuLing in the novel. In the curiously fatherless textual space, the act of ghost-writing thus links three generations of women together; for the guilt-ridden LuLing especially, this ritual of reaching toward the other world is an important process of exorcism. At the end of the novel, the granddaughter Ruth starts to write her own book with the spiritual inspiration of the grandmother. As Nancy Willard observes in her review of the novel, "the dead returns, not to bear ancestral curses but to act as the writer's muse." Ghost-writing, in this instance, is a potent metaphor for both the act of cultural negotiation and translation as well as a metafictional reflection on the act of writing itself. Interestingly, this invocation of ghosts and cultural translation, two major themes in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, again pays homage to a mother figure. Thus in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* what starts out as a child's game of alternative medium of communication turns out to be the major avenue for intergenerational, and by extension, cultural negotiations. Through the device of ghost-writing Tan highlights the fact that any act of writing and reading is subject to interpretation and therefore uncertain reception. In this sense, ghost-writing can also be a metaphor for the creative effort of an ethnic writer whose practice of representing ethnicity is always subject to interrogation and reinterpretation but who should always be encouraged to find his/her own voice.

Ghost-writing becomes ghost narration in Tan's latest novel *Saving Fish from Drowning* since the whole novel is narrated by the ghost of Bibi Chen. Bibi died a violent and mysterious death before the novel opens, leaving behind a well-planned and paid-for art expedition to China and Myanmar. Bibi's spirit travels along with her friends to Asia and witnesses how they desecrate the local temple in Lijiang, leave China in disgrace and are kidnapped by the Karen tribe in Myanmar, the tribal people who have suffered genocide under the military government and mistake one of the American tourists as the reincarnation of their savior "the Younger White Brother."

Combining the gothic tradition, journalist writing, political satire, and travel literature, the novel is a hybrid in the form of black humor. It may be read as Tan's attempt at transforming her own writing after Daisy's death. Having lost her mother and muse, Tan takes her characters and readers on a wild ride to the mother's homeland and beyond and forays into the new territory of global journalism and politics. The spirit of the mother, however, still lingers to haunt the novel, "embodied" in the voice of Bibi the ghost.

To make this thoroughly implausible plotline believable, Tan plays on the gothic tradition by inserting "a note to the reader," in which she describes how she chanced upon and was inspired to write her novel by a manuscript of automatic writing recorded by a medium, supposedly dictated by the deceased San Francisco socialite Bibi Chen. The creation of a "ghostly" narrative frame for her novel aims to give the story credibility, as does the newspaper clipping attached after the note, reporting the mysterious disappearance of eleven American tourists. Together, the ghostly frame and the news clip create verisimilitude for this ghost story. In the manner of Samuel Coleridge, Tan appeals to her readers to properly perform their duty as fiction readers: "Whether one believes in communication with the dead or not, readers are willing to suspend disbelief when immersed in fiction. We want to believe that the world we have entered through the portals of another's imagination indeed exists, that the narrator is or has been among us" (xiv). This statement, which also comes from the gothic conventions, becomes a self-deconstructive gesture which underlines our suspicion about the plot's credibility. Hence Tan's attempt to "authenticate" the ghost story by mobilizing the gothic tradition and contemporary journalism paradoxically serves to highlight the fact that the so-called "reality" is only fabricated simulacrum. These "pretexts" to the novel proper thus remind us not to indulge in credulous reading and to strengthen the sense of black humor which runs through the novel.

In fact, black humor is always a latent feature in Tan's writing. In *Saving Fish from Drowning* Tan magnifies it and brings it into the surface to create what she herself calls "a comic novel" in earnest. Nevertheless, mothers and China are still prominent in the narrative. The ghost narrator, Bibi, who was born in Shanghai and immigrated with her family to San Francisco at the time of the 1949 Communist takeover, serves as nodal point to connect and to embody the two features. Bibi is obviously the missing mother in the story, who looks after her tourist "children" even after her death. She is also the abandoned daughter who has been seriously traumatized by her own mother's absence. Bibi's mother had died of diabetes right after Bibi was born and the child was raised by her father's first wife Sweet Ma, who tormented Bibi with abusive language against her mother and by teasing her with the only heirloom left by the mother—"a hairpin with a hundred tiny

leaves carved out of bright imperial-greed jade” (25). This piece of jewelry was the gift from Bibi’s father to celebrate the birth of the daughter and the origin of Bibi’s name *Bifang*, “precious jade...glorious spring” (25).

The traumatic memory of the lost mother is an important hidden text in the novel and later becomes the key to the mystery of Bibi’s own death. Although Bibi appears to be an omniscient narrator in the novel, she cannot recall the cause of her own death. The mystery is not solved until the very end and the mother’s hairpin turns out to be the murder weapon. Bibi stole the hairpin from Sweet Ma but in turn it was stolen by an unfaithful servant. Bibi’s Chinese cousin finally located the object and sent it to Bibi. This maternal heirloom, however, became a lethal weapon because Bibi fell from a stool and the jade piece cut into her neck. Bibi’s grotesque death can hardly be credulous and yet it is believable in the context of maternal discourse. She is literarily killed by maternal memory and love.

When she finally receives the long-lost jewel, the first thing she notices is that it is a haircomb instead of a hairpin (as she had remembered), which provides a subtle comment on the illusive nature of memory. Then Tan spends the last page of the novel describing Bibi and the haircomb—“the two things remaining that had belonged to” the dead mother:

I rubbed my mother’s haircomb against my cheek and pressed it near my heart. I rocked it as one might a baby. For the first time I felt the emptiness of her loss replaced with the fullness of her love. I was about to burst with joy. And then my knees grew weak. They wobbled and grew rubbery. I felt a softening wave and I tried to push it away. But then I realized what it was, my holding back my feelings so I wouldn’t fall. Why should I not feel it? Why have I denied myself the beauty of love? And so I did not stop myself. I let joy and love and sorrow wash over me. And with the haircomb close to my heart, I plummeted off the stool.
(472)

The description of the way in which Bibi “mothers” the haircomb discloses the depth of her sense of loss. Having never experienced a mother’s love or caress, Bibi transfers her daughterly emotion onto the object representing the mother’s body and transforms it into a maternal embrace. Through this practice of transference and transformation, Bibi reengages with the irrecoverable loss so that she can finally overcome it. The maternal heirloom from China is thus a loaded symbol of Chinese heritage that the Chinese American daughter needs to contend with. The haircomb reminds Bibi of how she has been holding back her feelings throughout her adulthood, condemning her to a loveless life. Finally this epiphany of love kills her but also paradoxically liberates her. And the destructive yet necessary desire for the mother is Tan’s

ultimate commentary on maternal love, which is behind each and every one of her narratives of transnational haunting.

Amy Tan's consistent deployment of the narrative of transnational haunting signifies an obsession with the death and absence of the maternal figure, virtually a trademark of her novels. In the following chapter we shall see a different approach to the Chinese American mother-daughter plot. After her mother's death, Amy Tan makes a conscious attempt to move from her recurrent narrative frame. Thus we see how in *Saving Fish from Drowning* Tan tries to go beyond the Chinese landscape, or the imaginary maternal homeland, to incorporate other parts of Asia and related political issues. It remains to be seen whether she can succeed in self-transformation as a writer. Clearly, though, her affective representation of haunting and transnational cultural negotiation contributes to the tradition of Chinese American matrilineal discourse, bringing about "a transformative recognition" of ghosts and other things beyond the real.

Chapter 3

Representing the New Hybrid Generation: Reinventing the Mother-Daughter Plot and Constructing Narratives of Relationality in *Mona in the Promised Land*

Chinese Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?

—Maxine Hong Kingston
The Woman Warrior

Helen goes on with a delicate bang on her cup. “You are daughter. *Daughter*. Do you remember what is a daughter?”

“I remember.”

“Who are you?”

“I am your daughter.”

It’s like being in church, right down to the moment of silence—which Mona takes to be a chance for Helen to turn misty-eyed again, that Mona might feel what a Disappointment she is. Helen swishes around some tea in her mouth, a good sign. Mona makes gorilla face, and out of habit, her mother almost makes a face back. But in the midst of furrowing her brow, she suddenly starts talking.

“We agree, except what kind of daughter lies to her mother?”

“No kind.”

“I have no daughter.”

—Gish Jen
Mona in the Promised Land

In 2009, when Elaine Showalter nominated eight key figures among outstanding contemporary American women novelists, Gish Jen was the only Asian American—indeed, the only ethnic woman—on her list.¹ In the same year, Jen became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

¹ The eight women authors were Joyce Carol Oates, Jane Smiley, Annie Proulx, Marilynne Robinson, Anne Tyler, Jayne Anne Phillips, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Gish Jen. Toni Morrison is not on the list because, according to Showalter, she is “so well known she does not need to be included.” See Showalter’s article “The Female Frontier” in *The Guardian*.

A decade ago, John Updike chose to include Jen's "Birthmates" in *The Best American Short Stories of the Century*.² Gish Jen is undoubtedly one of the most talented and distinguished writers on the contemporary American literary scene, and one of the reasons that Jen is so highly regarded is her inventiveness. She continually experiments with unusual and even "dangerous" subjects. As she declares in an interview, "as a writer you have to get up the nerve to write about the things that are dangerous" (Satz 140).³ Sex, racism, power, and the "switch" of ethnic identity are some of the "bad" topics that may easily put her in a "minefield" (Satz 140). Jen is also significant in the development of contemporary Asian American writing because she constantly pushes boundaries in terms of subject matter while drawing inspiration from existing themes and traditions. In Jen's first novel, *Typical American* (1991), she writes about the immigrant generation of the 1950s and maps out the issues of assimilation and the formation of ethnic identity through the perspective of the patriarch of the family, Ralph Chang. As a sequel to *Typical American*, *Mona in the Promised Land* focuses on the growth and development of the second generation of the Chang family in the 1960s and 1970s, especially of the second daughter Mona, while mobilizing the mother-daughter plot to create an intergenerational emphasis. Moreover, one of the central plotlines touches upon a taboo topic regarding racial and ethnic affiliation; the impish protagonist Mona, who grows up in a Jewish suburb of New York, decides to "switch" and become Jewish. Thematically, both novels attempt to claim America for Chinese immigrants and their descendants while remembering the illusionary motherland China. In *The Love Wife*, Jen makes an ambitious move to explore the theme of diasporic affiliations by incorporating a survivor of the Chinese Cultural Revolution into a Chinese American family of mixed marriage with adopted Asian children.⁴ Jen's constant engagement with new and challenging topics and themes makes her one of the innovators of the Chinese American women's literary tradition. It is small wonder that Showalter has credited her as the representative of the "new hybrid generation" of ethnic American women writers of

² "Birthmates" is one of the eight short stories collected in Jen's *Who Is Irish?* (1999).

³ In the interview, Jen responds to Martha Satz's question regarding her preference for being "wicked" (139) by observing that being wicked "means writing about the things we're not supposed to write about" (140).

⁴ Jeffrey Partridge notes that there has been a debate between "claiming America" and "claiming diaspora" in Asian American scholarship since the late twentieth century. Claiming America presents an ethnic nationalist position, which attempts to establish the Asian American presence in the national imagination of the United States. "For Asian American critics such as Lisa Lowe and Shirley Geok-lin Lim," Partridge observes, "'diaspora' rather than 'claiming America' more accurately represents the demographic exigencies of Asian Americans in the new millennium" (101). Apparently, Jen's novels are transitioning from "claiming America" in the Chang family saga to "claiming diaspora" in *Love Wife*, if we follow Partridge's observation.

the 1990s.⁵

This chapter places Gish Jen within the context of the Chinese American women's literary tradition and examines the ways in which Jen experiments with "dangerous" topics, such as ethnic switches, and playfully reinvents a Chinese American woman's tradition in *Mona in the Promised Land*. With the inclusion of a mother-daughter plot in the novel, which is one of the most important themes in Chinese American women's writing, Jen dutifully constructs a vertical/generational relationship and yet reshapes it with a different maternal figure and the insertion of the sibling plot. At the same time, Jen also creates different horizontal communities for her inquisitive protagonist Mona. Camp Gugelstein exemplifies one such community that aims to deconstruct various boundaries and respond to the call for a racial coalition in and after the civil rights movement. The dissolution of this utopian community directly questions the possibility of solidarity in the face of the challenges of racial, class, and gender differences. Moreover, through the multiple "switches" of identity of her characters, Jen unsettles an essentialist fixation on racial authenticity as well as the politics of insiderism. Finally, through the reconciliation between Mona and her mother Helen and the birth of Mona's Chinese-Jewish American daughter Io, Jen is consciously creating a comic tradition for Chinese American women's writing that acknowledges the importance of matrilineage and a politics of relationality which goes beyond familial, class, and racial confines.

Reinventing the Chinese American Mother-Daughter Plot

Beginning with the Eaton sisters of the early twentieth century, Chinese American women's writing has gradually gained attention in the American literary arena. As Shirley Lim notes, "[i]t was only in the 1970s that the notion of a body of Asian American literature as a separate canon became common" ("Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories" 573). Furthermore, the popularity of Asian American women's writing since the 1970s is nothing short of phenomenal. According to Amy Ling, in the early 1990s, there was an Asian American literary and artistic "renaissance" in which women were playing a prominent, if not dominant, part ("Emerging Canons" 191). As mentioned in the Introduction, Chinese American women authors, with their culturally and historically specific insights into gender, race, and class issues, are inventing various literary traditions of their own, which is a feat in itself, considering the many difficulties these women are faced with. "When Chinese American writings emerged in the late 1960s and the early 1970s," Da-

⁵ This quote comes from the Kindle version of Showalter's latest monograph on American literary history, *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx* (2009).

vid Liwei Li notes, Chinese American writers suffered “the dual burden of at once subverting an American Orientalist discourse based on their cultural oppression and reconstructing a Chinese American tradition that would mark their cultural liberation” (“The Production of Chinese American Tradition” 323). Additionally, Chinese American women authors had to contend with the extra burden of the formidable patriarchal ideology of their ethnic community.⁶ Moreover, Chinese American women writers are also under different influences in their variegated racial lineages, geographical origins and linguistic usages.⁷ Amy Ling identifies three prominent thematic categories in Chinese American women’s writing before Kingston’s arrival: “delight in storytelling often mingled with nostalgia, protest against racial and sexual injustice, and experiment in language or structure” (“Chinese American Women Writers” 221). In fact, these thematic categories continue to shape writing by Chinese American women today.

In addition to the three categories above, the mother-daughter plot is one of the most important themes in Chinese American women’s writing. The mother-daughter plot or “the constructions of femininity in discourses of motherhood and daughterhood” (8), as Marianne Hirsch defines it, structures much women’s writing. Indeed, matrilineage is indispensable for the development of women’s writing. Thus, Virginia Woolf rightly underlines the importance of maternal figures in a literary tradition of women in *A Room of One’s Own*: “For we think back through our mothers if we are women” (76). In the context of Chinese American women’s writing, Maxine Hong Kingston’s critically acclaimed *The Woman Warrior* made popular the mother-daughter plot, or what Sau-ling Cynthia Wong calls “Chinese American matrilineal discourse,” by presenting the ambivalence about her hyphenated identity from a daughter’s perspective.⁸ The mother and her stories contribute to both the growth and confusion of the daughter narrator, as evinced in the anguished questioning in the first epigraph of this chapter. The obsessive engagements with the maternal presence/absence in Amy Tan’s novels, as discussed in Chapter Two, won Tan popularity with mainstream readers as well and furthered the development of a maternal tradition in Chinese

⁶ For instance, Lim points out that Asian American literature “has been an active site of masculine views and feminist resistance” and the Asian American women’s texts studied in her essay “are symptomatic of the struggle to refigure the subject between the often oppositional demands of ethnic and gender identity” (“Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories” 572).

⁷ For Amy Ling, Chinese American women authors should include at least three groups: immigrants, American-born Chinese, Eurasians and Amerasians (“Chinese American Women Writers” 220).

⁸ Wong also points out that Chinese American matrilineal discourse was not an invention of Kingston’s. Su-ling Wong and Earl Cressy’s 1952 collaborative autobiography, *Daughter of Confucius*, is one of the pre-1965 texts that write about the female-centered household (“Sugar Sisterhood” 177).

American women's fiction.

The significance of the mother-daughter plot in Chinese American women's writing also has a historically and socially specific context. One of the major achievements of second-wave American feminism involved espousing the importance of matrilineage to the extent that it is almost regarded as a prerequisite for women's consciousness-raising. Hence, scripting the mother-daughter plot became significant in women's writing. Discussing the phenomenal popularity of Amy Tan, Sau-ling Wong observes that the favored status of the Chinese American matrilineal discourse results from "a convergence of ethnic group-specific literary tradition and ideological needs by the white-dominated readership—including feminist readership—for the Other's presence as both mirror and differentiator" ("Sugar Sisterhood" 177). To a certain extent, therefore, Chinese American women writers have built a literary tradition and gained their footing in the literary market and academia through the constant deployment of the mother-daughter plot. A risk in this type of success is that the (white/mainstream) reader can easily overlook and even erase Chinese American cultural and historical specificities as they consume this apparently formulaic text. Thus, one of the major challenges for the Chinese American woman author who wants to revamp the mother-daughter plot involves devising a way to avoid the trap of self-Orientalization and ethnographic self-Othering. In writing *Mona in the Promised Land*, Gish Jen has taken up the gauntlet and succeeded in the task.

Both *Typical American* and *Mona in the Promised Land* center upon the intersection of diasporic experiences and ethnic identity formation. As the novels tell the two parts of the Chang family saga, they explore the issue of ethnic identity from different gender perspectives. Ralph Yifeng Chang, whose transnational journey opens the narrative of immigration in *Typical American*, reflects on the immigrant's struggle with the notion of becoming American. He occupies the main speaking position in the novel. The female characters, particularly Ralph's wife Helen and his sister Teresa, have to deliberately erase their individuality and selfhood to maintain the self-respect of the man in the family, who has a tendency to metaphorically or literally sleep through difficulties.⁹ Jen purposely highlights the fact that the Chang women have to sacrifice themselves both physically and psychologically to keep Ralph on his feet, a strategy that allows her to uncover the gender imbalance and androcentric ideology in the patriarchal family. In *Mona in the Promised Land*, Jen chooses Mona to be the center of narrative consciousness, allowing the daughter to replace the father. Indeed, Ralph is

⁹ For instance, Ralph goes into symbolic or real hibernation when he realizes that he can never return to China after the Communist takeover, when he fails to get tenured at the university, or when his fried chicken enterprise folds.

“re-placed” in the second novel in multiple ways: he no longer dominates the narrative or his family. In her adaptation of the mother-daughter plot, Jen also demonstrates how the mother, Helen, has been Americanized. This subverts the clichéd binary opposition and cultural conflicts between the immigrant mother and the American-born daughter. In reformulating the mother figure, Jen also deconstructs the essentialist equation of the immigrant mother with China and thereby forecloses any possibility of the daughter serving “as a convenient, unobtrusive stand-in for the mainstream reading public.”¹⁰ Moreover, Jen inserts a sibling subplot into the mother-daughter narrative. The Harvard-educated Callie is completely different in temperament and character from her sister Mona and has the full potential to become an example of the Asian model minority with her Ivy League background and a promising medical career. Instead, Jen allows Callie to embrace her “Chinese roots” and become a Sinophile.

The textual representation of the mother-daughter relationship in *Mona in the Promised Land*, as exemplified in the dialogue of the epigraph, is fraught with tension. Helen has just found out that her favorite daughter Mona has secretly converted to Judaism and is now “a more or less Catholic Chinese Jew” (44). The questions and answers between Helen and Mona are formulated in a catechist fashion, through which the maternal authority and the familial hierarchy are confirmed. However, Jen deliberately eases the tense, church-like aura by switching to a totally different register in Mona’s reading of the mother-daughter exchange. Mona regards Helen’s attempt to reinforce the sanctity and permanence of kinship as simply a part of a familiar script; the daughter is so emboldened by her own semiotic reading that she tries to predict and even manipulate the mother’s reaction. The routine of making face demonstrates the intimacy between the mother and the teenage daughter. The first sign of the rupture of the close bond takes place when Helen substitutes the usual response in body language to Mona’s “gorilla face” with disciplinary talk about the sin of lying daughters (45). Then Mona “drops a bomb” by announcing that, perhaps, she is “not Chinese” (46), signifying Helen’s failure to reproduce a dutiful daughter in Mona. From this point, the mother-daughter relationship spirals downward, and the breach is not healed until Mona’s wedding at the end of the novel. Clearly, in *Mona in the Promised Land*, Jen is responding to the tradition of the mother-daughter plot but with a distinctly comic twist.

Although Helen instantly resorts to Chinese familial ethics to discipline Mona, she is by no means the traditional mother that we would find in most of Amy Tan’s novels, who can be easily identified with a China of the past. Helen’s character in *Mona in the Promised Land* is significantly different

¹⁰ This is adopted from Sau-ling Wong’s comment on *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (“Sugar Sisterhood” 197).

from the delicate and subservient Hailan, or Sea Blue, of *Typical American*, whose “life ambition was to stay home forever” before she left China (62). Her transformation actually begins in *Typical American*, in which Helen has a brief affair with the seductive entrepreneur Grover Ding. She is nevertheless immediately punished by Ralph’s disciplinary hand, that pushes her out of the second-floor bedroom window. In *Mona*, Helen is no longer a victim of family violence and a practitioner of self-effacement. In fact, she initiates the entire practice of switching by changing places with Ralph in the family in Jen’s second novel. Jen depicts Helen’s ambivalence about her “switched” position:

For Helen was so mad when she realized Ralph couldn’t take care of her—wasn’t that what a husband was for?—that she had what amounted to a personality transformation. She’d gotten used to the idea of helping, of working hard, even of going out of the house to work. But she’d never adjusted to the idea of becoming a main pillar of the family, standing there all by herself like the kind of ruin people went to Greece to see. In a way, she was proud of what she’d learned to do. But in another way this so wasn’t what she’d counted on, growing up in China.... (46)

The dry humor in Helen’s imaginative yet far-fetched allusion to the Greek ruins signifies a connection with ancient traditionalism and her mixed self-perception. With her Chinese background, Helen thinks of herself as a kind of spectacle due to her empowered status in the familial hierarchy, and yet, she is also proud of what she has achieved. Though from time to time the American Helen misses the way in which the Chinese Hailan sailed through her pampered life in the past, she is now busy maintaining a bourgeois lifestyle and accumulating capital as a “typical American,” in other words, assimilating into mainstream American society. Unlike most of the mothers in the Chinese American matrilineal discourse, the mother of the “Chang-kees” takes the lead in switching and changing identificatory affiliation.¹¹

Jen also undermines the fixation on an unchanging and essentialist “Chineseness” at the linguistic level by highlighting the different Chinese dialects spoken in Chinese America, which is markedly different from the undifferentiated deployment of Mandarin Chinese as the *lingua franca* of the Chinese American community in novels such as Amy Tan’s. For instance, Callie makes a belated discovery that “English isn’t the only language the parents speak with an accent” when she tries her “Harvard Chinese” on

¹¹ Ralph invents the new family name “Chang-kees” by mixing his surname with the Yankees in *Typical American* (127) to show how the Changs have integrated into the mainstream. This new surname, of course, also signifies the hybridization of their identity.

Ralph and Helen (128). As a child of the civil rights era, Callie is keen on affirming her own ethnicity and regards learning Mandarin as a way to “be in touch with her ancestry” (129), only to discover that Harvard Chinese or Peking Chinese is different from the Shanghai dialect spoken by her parents when she returns to the Chang household at Scarshill. Callie’s linguistic discovery is but one example of how, through satirical humor, Jen illustrates her understanding of and sensitivity to the cultural and linguistic differences of China as an “imaginary homeland.”

Callie’s enthusiasm for recovering her Chinese roots also serves as a contrast to Mona’s decision to convert to Judaism. Instead of praising the Chinese-identified Callie as the ideal/good daughter, Jen questions her essentialist conception of ethnic identity. As R. Radhakrishnan aptly points out, “the rhetoric of authenticity tends to degenerate into essentialism” (229). Under the sway of the civil rights movement, Callie learns to practice *tai qi*, has *shee-veh* (the Shanghai dialect word for congee) for breakfast, and is becoming more Chinese than her parents, who “now prefer raisin bran” (168). Later, she wears padded jackets and cloth shoes and calls herself by her Chinese name, Kailan, to signal her embrace of her Asian American identity. In fact, she is “so Chinese that Ralph and Helen think there is something wrong with her” (301). Callie’s nativist practice of Asian American cultural nationalism is obviously beyond the imagination of the parents who appear to assimilate themselves into a mainstream lifestyle.¹² While Jeffrey Partridge is correct in pointing out that becoming ultra-Chinese is Callie’s way of “becoming American” (181), Jen’s portrayal of Callie’s “Chinese turn,” or nativist position, is saturated with a satirical overtone. In fact, Callie, who “used to be sick of being Chinese” (167), is initiated into her Chinese ethnic identity at Harvard by her African American roommate Naomi, who speaks better Mandarin than Callie does. Although not without sympathy and humor, Jen satirizes any illusion of ethnic essentialism and authenticity through Callie. In a way, the nativist Callie serves as a foil to Mona, who has made a different choice in terms of ethnic affiliation.

Here, I must pause to briefly review the critical reception of the Chinese American mother-daughter plot. Wendy Ho’s *In Her Mother’s House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing* (1999) argues for the significance of the mother-daughter narrative by drawing examples from the works of Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan and Fae Myenne Ng. Ho

¹² I am borrowing the term “nativist” from Lisa Lowe’s argument in *Immigrant Acts*. Lowe explains the trope of opposing nativism or cultural nationalism and assimilation in Asian American discourse as “cultural nationalism’s affirmation of the separate purity of its culture opposes assimilation of the standards of dominant society” (75). She then uses Louis Chu’s *Eat a Bowl Tea* as a textual example of the allegorization of the conflict between nativism and assimilation (77).

contends that their stories offer “opportunities to analyze the ways Chinese American mothers and daughters construct and reconstruct their understandings of the conflicted self in relation to multiple homeplaces and borderlands. These experiences of women may suggest different and potential oppositional practices and standpoints to those constructed within the hegemonic social, cultural, historical, and political understandings of the U.S. nation-state” (35-36). In Ho’s feminist reading, the Chinese American matrilineal narrative becomes a highly politicized site for critics and readers alike to explore the construction of female selfhood and different positionalities. Conversely, there are critical voices opposing such a celebratory rhetoric and criticizing the familial model of generational conflicts as either *passé* or essentialist.¹³

Lisa Lowe articulates some of the crucial points of the generational theme. Lowe points out that many Asian American novels choose to utilize “a family narrative” to represent “the question of the loss or transmission of the ‘original’ culture” (62). Using Louis Chu, Kingston and Amy Tan as examples, Lowe forcefully criticizes what she regards as “homogenizing Asian Americans as exclusively hierarchal and generational”:

I argue that interpreting Asian American culture exclusively in terms of the master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians. The reduction of the cultural politics of racialized ethnic groups, like Asian Americans, to first-generation/second-generation struggles displaces social differences into a privatized familial opposition. Such reductions contribute to the aestheticizing commodification of Asian American *cultural* differences, while denying the immigrant histories of material exclusion and differentiation.... (63)

Using a short story by Diana Chang as an example, Lowe then goes on to suggest that it is important to contextualize the vertical relationship of the generational model with the horizontal relationship among communities (63-64).

While Lowe has rightly identified the excess of family narrative in Asian American literary production, I would also like to argue that we must take individual practices into consideration. Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey*, for instance, includes many different racial and social communities to define the existence of Wittman Ah Sing. In Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*, the family

¹³ Caroline Chung Simpson, for instance, somewhat condescendingly remarks in her review of Ho’s monograph that “the current of Asian American literary studies now rushes away from the focus on generational struggle that was often the Gibraltar of past studies” (191).

narrative of the Leongs is metonymic for the history of San Francisco's Chinatown. Ng's second novel, *Steer Toward Rock*, even puts the scenario of falsified family lineage on center stage and explores the disruption and distortion of kinship and love relationships resulting from the paper son system, while commenting on the nation-state's disciplinary mechanisms against Chinese immigrants. Both authors deploy the generational theme to uncover larger and layered historical contexts of Chinese America. To a large extent, the generational theme predominates in ethnic literary representations due to the history of immigration, but it does not necessarily lead to essentialist practices. In fact, the entire issue depends on the author's aesthetic execution, or what Sau-ling Wong terms "modality of presentation" ("Sugar Sisterhood" 195).¹⁴

In the case of *Mona in the Promised Land*, representations of the Americanized mother and the nativist sister significantly complicate the traditional Chinese American mother-daughter plot. Although the mother and her daughters all start with the same class background, they eventually have different ideas about what and where "the promised land" is, and what exactly it consists of. The assimilationist mother, who has conformed to the bourgeois ideology of mainstream American society, no longer represents Chinese authority. In contrast to the mother's desire for homogenization, the two daughters veer towards heterogeneity and make different choices about their identities: Callie opts for the nativist model of Asian American nationalism; and Mona decides to become a Chinese-Jewish American, as embodied by her adoption of the surname "Changowitz" for herself and her new family (303).¹⁵ The insertion of a subplot about sibling differences also adds a horizontal dimension to the master narrative of the inter-generation plot. With a revised version of the maternal figure and multiple possibilities in terms of ethnic and identificatory affiliations, the novel moves beyond the confines of traditional matrilineal discourse. Importantly, in her attempt to innovate the mother-daughter plot, Jen nevertheless maintains the conventional employment of the female *Bildungsroman* by paralleling Mona's *Bildung* with her gradual alienation from the mother, though ending with their final reconciliation. Instead of being cliché, I would argue that this deployment of the usual plotline creates a sense of stability in a novel of constant "switches" and transformations. It also suggests a sense of respectfulness for the maternal figure that is culturally specific to the Asian American women's tradition. To a certain extent, the desired "promised land" to which Mona

¹⁴ Wong contrasts what Elliott Butler-Evans identifies as a self-deconstructive "interrogative modality" in *The Woman Warrior* with the epistemologically unproblematic "declarative modality" in *The Joy Luck Club* (195).

¹⁵ Andy Kaplan of the Jewish temple gives the teenage Mona the nickname Changowitz to tease her.

eventually returns is the family fold. By carefully preserving “a continuity with the past” while engaging in innovating the Chinese American matrilineal discourse, Jen is indeed engaged in the “invention of tradition,” as defined by Eric Hobsbawn.¹⁶

Constructing Horizontal Communities in the Promised Land

In a sense, *Mona in the Promised Land* seems to respond directly to Lisa Lowe’s argument about the importance of creating a horizontal community. In addition to the sibling subplot, Mona has numerous horizontal communities to interact with as she experiments with multiple possibilities of ethnic identity: her Japanese boyfriend Sherman Matsumoto, who wants her to become Japanese; the *ménage à trois* of Mona, her best friend Barbara Gugelstein, and her Jewish boyfriend Seth Mandel; the “Expressers” in the resort on Rhode Island; and Camp Gugelstein at Barbara’s house.¹⁷ Camp Gugelstein, composed of peoples of different racial, class and gender backgrounds, stands out among these variegated groups in the novel as the most radical and idealist horizontal community. In fact, with its members of many colors, Camp Gugelstein presents a utopian version of racial integration and cultural hybridity, a miniature Rainbow Coalition no less.¹⁸

Jen makes it clear that instead of deliberately building an interracial community, the coming together of Camp Gugelstein is accidental, a result of spontaneity and intuitiveness. Alfred, the African American second cook of the Changs’ pancake house, gets kicked out by his wife and Barbara makes him a guest in the Gugelstein residence when her parents are on vacation. After a period of hide-and-seek, Mona, Barbara and Seth are shocked to discover that Alfred is truly making himself at home by having parties with his friends and sleeping with Barbara’s cousin, Evie. The three young people decide to join in the revelry and enjoy their summer vacation in this group of many colors. In addition to “yellow” (Asian), black and white, there are even different shades of blackness. For instance, Ray the vet is “papaya-colored,”

¹⁶ Hobsbawn defines “invented traditions” as such: “‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (1).

¹⁷ The “Expressers,” who fight against “the oppressors,” include Mona, Callie, Naomi, and the half-Jewish Eloise Ingle (184).

¹⁸ In his 1984 Democratic National Convention address for the presidential campaign, Rev. Jesse Jackson advocated the formation of a Rainbow Coalition to unite peoples of all colors and classes. He later established the National Rainbow Coalition. The reference to the Rainbow Coalition here is to mainly illustrate the racial hybridity of the camp instead of Jackson’s political ideology. For details of the speech, see < <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jessejackson1984dnc.htm> >.

and Luther the Race Man is “creamed-colored” (198). The multicultural group activities—including “Soul Train and the funky chicken” (199), playing mah-jongg, checkers, chess, billiards, Ping-Pong, many outdoor activities, discussion sessions about racial politics, and “even a little yoga” (200)—make Camp Gugelstein almost like an ideal commune of the hippie subculture. As one of the African American members, Professor Estimator, points out, the “redemptive love” advocated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is “alive here, at Camp Gugelstein...elsewhere it is on the wane” (201).

In its most idealistic form, the camp is a potential Foucauldian heterotopia, a space of alterity “that call[s] into question the hierarchical organization of all other social space” (Lowe 122).¹⁹ With its members from different class and racial backgrounds—college-bound high school students, a pancake cook, Vietnam veterans, a construction worker, a law student, and a professional protester against racial discrimination—the camp exhibits a composition of high heterogeneity. At the same time, this hybrid composition is also a reminder of the layered history of the formation of nation in the United States. The members of the camp are descendants of slaves, who were forcefully transplanted to boost the economy of “the New World,” Holocaust survivors who fled the Old World to keep the family line alive, and Asian immigrants who fled civil wars and sought the tantalizing American Dream. The existence of Camp Gugelstein directly challenges the practices of racial and class segregations of the white mainstream culture; it is an exact embodiment of the integrationist vision of the civil rights movement. Thus, the central spatial imagination of Camp Gugelstein, as dreamt by Seth, is “a house with no walls between the rooms” (208).

However, such a house is a mere vision of Seth’s after the disintegration of the camp. Just when Mona is having fun and regards the camp members, especially the African Americans, as “the most interesting people [she] has ever known” (203), Barbara’s suspicion that one of the black members has walked out with a Gugelstein silver flask turns the camp upside down. Seth is “devastated” when the camp falls apart with mutual accusations of racism (207). He has invested so much of his youthful enthusiasm in this idealist community that he even buys a dashiki to be “his camp shirt” (200). When his dream turns out to be a nightmare, like many American dreams, Seth has to face his own naivety and bitterly confesses, “They considered me a racist bastard, and I considered them my friends” (207).

To a certain extent, Camp Gugelstein exemplifies a Bakhtinian performance of the carnivalesque, which has a potentially disruptive power to undermine the domination of mainstream discourse. Jen’s text, however, shows that extremes meet. “Camp Gugelstein” is the tenth chapter of the

¹⁹ Here, Lowe is using the Foucauldian term to explicate the spatial alterity of Chinatown in *Bone*.

novel and the end of Part II. The next chapter, “The Fall Begins” tropes on the double meaning of fall and delineates how Mona’s luck goes downhill when the summer pleasures end. The flask incident illustrates that the promised land of racial harmony has very little defense against materialism and mutual distrust.

In fact, the case of the missing flask is only the tip of the iceberg. If we review the Camp Gugelstein episode carefully, we can easily detect signs of racism and classism between the lines all along. Barbara, for example, takes up Alfred as a “cause.” The fact that the kitchen staff of the pancake house “calls her Miss B—not for Miss Barbara, but for Miss Blanco” (132) highlights the conspicuousness of Barbara’s whiteness among the colored workers around her. Early in the novel, the unspeakable history of American slavery is invoked when Barbara claims that in the basement of the Gugelstein house “is a real-life entrance for the Underground Railroad” (60). We may even read the progress that Alfred makes in the novel as an allegory of the African American’s pursuit for civil rights: while he starts out with limited freedom as a subaltern hiding in the basement of the Gugelstein house, Alfred gradually gains his mobility and finally demands equality. Based on Mona’s slip of tongue, he even takes the Changs to court for racial discrimination. Jen, however, does not intend to demonize African Americans as intruders of white privileges. She balances the delineation of racial interaction by showing how Seth constantly wants to be in charge. Later, Luther criticizes Seth’s political liberalism and calls him a “typical paternalistic motherfucker who cannot stand blacks talking for themselves, much less acting in their own self-defense” (202).

The gender dynamics in the camp demands an allegorical reading as well. Men tend to dominate the discussion sessions, whereas women mostly stay in the background or are constructed as objects of desire. The relationship between Evie and Alfred exemplifies a clichéd model of interaction between white women and black men, a legacy from the time of slavery. This model assumes that black men take the “conquering” of white women as a way to reclaim the masculinity that was denied them in the institution of slavery. Conversely, white women are tempted by the myth of black hypersexuality. Instead of racial and gender stereotyping, however, what Jen tries to examine through the Camp Gugelstein episode is the dangerous imbalance in terms of race, class, and gender in the United States. The ideal of democratic equality proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence is constantly challenged by historical occurrences, such as the institution of slavery, the civil rights movement, and the feminist movement. Thus, the failure of Camp Gugelstein becomes a national allegory of the potential failure and disintegration of the nation-state, should it insist on treating these internal challenges with disregard. Moreover, the Gugelstein residency is in fact a

rental house. Once Barbara's father gets laid off, the Gugelsteins lose the house as well. The dislocation of the Gugelsteins in this case exposes the ruthless capitalist competitions that underwrite the American social and economic structure. More importantly, it also communicates a serious political message: the Gugelsteins can move back to their old house, but where is the "house" for the American people if the nation-state falls apart?

With the final disintegration of Camp Gugelstein, Jen calls into question practices of political utopianisms that fail to take historicity and difference into account. Revisiting the spatial image of a house without walls, Mona's statement rings true here: "If people lived in houses with no walls between the rooms, there would have to be a lot of rules. I don't think you would like it. You can't have no walls and also have everyone in touch with their feelings. People would have to have manners. They would have to have a public face and a private face" (208). The internal barriers remain even when the external walls are taken down. One may even have to resort to a kind of self-division to protect their precious privacy. Furthermore, one of the internal barriers in Camp Gugelstein is the lack of mutual trust resulting from a racialized historical legacy. For all of her acts of charity, Barbara is always suspicious of Alfred and his friends. The missing flask only serves to confirm her nagging and race-fueled suspicion. The shadow of racial tension would divide the "house," even if it were physically without walls.

This distrust also originates in the deliberate ignorance of differences, regardless of whether these differences are based on race, class, or gender. At its best, Camp Gugelstein appears to be a fanfare of cultural hybridization. As Robert Young observes, hybridity increasingly represents "the interrogative languages of minority cultures" (24). Importantly, the operation of hybridity "makes difference into sameness, and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the difference no longer simply different" (26).²⁰ The operation of Camp Gugelstein, with its emphasis on multicultural integration or, returning to the spatial imagination again, building a house without walls, is considerably weak on the analysis of difference. Lisa Lowe's critique of American multiculturalism is almost like a direct comment on the camp:

Multiculturalism levels the important differences and contradictions within and among racial and ethnic minority groups according to the discourse of pluralism, which asserts that American culture is a democratic terrain to which every variety of constituency has equal access and

²⁰ Young observes that there is a "double logic" involved in the practice of hybridity, consisting of "a binate operation, in which each impulse is qualified against the other, forcing momentary forms of dislocation and displacement into complex economies of agonistic reticulation" (26-27).

in which all are represented while simultaneously masking the existence of exclusions by recuperating dissent, conflict, and otherness through the promise of inclusion. (86)

Without honestly confronting and then changing the material reality of racialized practices and exclusionary ideology in the nation-state, any type of multiculturalist rhetoric or experiment, such as Camp Gugelstein, is only “playing house,” a game that has little or no political substantiality and sustainability.²¹

In contrast to the failed experiment of racial inclusiveness and integration of Camp Gugelstein, the real success in the novel is Jen’s experiment with inventing ethnicity by allowing her characters to play with multiple “switches.”²² At one time or another nearly every character in the novel changes or switches. For instance, while the African American Naomi chooses to become Chinese, Mona can be Jewish. Rabbi Horowitz presents Mona with puzzling advice: “*The more Jewish you become, the more Chinese you’ll be*” (190 original emphasis). The rabbi’s advice indicates the fluid nature of ethnic identity and the possibility of an interethnic coalition based on true understanding and actual practice. In a sense, the entire novel experiments with and tests the validity of this sophism.

In her *New York Times* book review of *Mona in the Promised Land*, Jacqueline Carey comments that in this novel, “ethnicity is bent” within the “explosion of transformations” (16). Ethnicity, as Werner Sollors explains in his introduction to *The Invention of Ethnicity*, implies “belonging and being perceived by others as belonging to an ethnic group” (xiii). While ethnic groups are typically “imagined as if they were natural, real, eternal, stable, and static units” (xiii-xiv), Sollors suggests that we should think of ethnicity as an invention. Indeed, Sollors reminds us that the “formulas of ‘originality’ and ‘authenticity’ in ethnic discourse” belong to “a palpable legacy of European romanticism” (xiv). Once we have demystified the colonial fixation upon originality and authenticity and see through the constructive nature of

²¹ Jeffrey F. L. Partridge reads the failure of Camp Gugelstein as an illustration of “the precariousness of panethnic efforts and the tenacity of racist attitudes” (186). However, Partridge notes the positive side of the camp in terms of cultural hybridity: “Camp Gugelstein’s panethnic interaction and its resultant cultural hybridity reflect a significant new emphasis in Chinese American literature. The cultural hybridity subverts the literary Chinatown by displacing notions of ethnic essence and cultural stasis” (187-88). For Partridge, the linkages that bind the divergent cultural groups of Camp Gugelstein together exemplify what Vijay Prashad calls polyculturalism. “As with hybridity theory,” Partridge contends, “polyculturalism questions our culture’s insistent belief in primordial, static, and pure cultures, but it furthermore seeks to actively engage oppressed peoples and white ‘allies’ in actively forging antiracist communities” (189).

²² Amy Ling calls this kind of boundary-crossing as cultural cross-dressing. See her essay “Cultural Cross-Dressing in *Mona in the Promised Land*.”

ethnic identity, it becomes possible to “bend” ethnicity or make switches. R. Radhakrishnan has usefully outlined three phases of narrative of ethnicity in the United States: in the first and assimilative phase, “the immigrants suppress ethnicity in the name of pragmatism and opportunism”; in the second, a “Du Boisian-period that refuses to subsume political, civil, and moral revolutions under mere strategies of economic betterment,” ethnic minorities “reassert ethnicity in all its autonomy”; and the third phase “seeks the hyphenated integration of ethnic identity with national identity under conditions that do not privilege the ‘national’ at the expense of the ‘ethnic’” (221). I would argue that the bending of ethnicity can be regarded as the fourth phase of the U.S. narrative of ethnicity.

Mona superlatively embodies the practice of ethnic “switches” in the novel. Jen admits in an interview that “...Mona is the person I would have liked to have been....But Mona’s together in a way that I was not.” (Matsukawa 117). Thus, Mona is a wishful version of the author herself. However, while Jen has carefully delineated Mona’s changes and transformations as important parts of her *Bildung*, she also treats Mona with satirical humor. When Mona begins contemplating the possibility of becoming Jewish, she bases her argument on a naïve belief in the American freedom of choice: “American means being whatever you want, and I happened to pick being Jewish” (49).²³ At one time, she even wants to give up being Jewish because the conversion process appears to take too long. There is also an insistence on difference of race and religion in her choice when she argues with Helen that she can turn Jewish because it is a religion but cannot become black because it is about race. Jen shows that Mona’s awareness of the possibility of turning black culturally because she knows some kids “call each other brother, and eat soul food instead of subs, and wear their hair in the baddest Afros they can manage” (49). Apparently, at this point, Mona’s insistence on becoming Jewish has more to do with the superficial desire to assimilate with her Jewish peers in school, much like white youth’s fetishization of black culture in the 1960s. Her thoughts on changing the family name to Changowitz in the Epilogue, however, demonstrate that the adult Mona has a better understanding of what switching identity really signifies.

In addition to Mona, Sherman Matsumoto, the visiting student from Japan, is another character who undergoes many transformations, shedding light on the practice of inventing ethnicity in the novel. At first, Mona takes Sherman to be Chinese. In return, Sherman puts the idea that Mona can “switch” into her mind by asking the then thirteen-year-old Mona to go to

²³ Amy Ling points out that Article I of the Amendments to American Constitution “guarantees five freedoms to all U.S. citizens: freedom of religion, speech, the press, peaceable assembly, and the right to petition” and Jen “adds a sixth to this list: freedom of cultural choice” (“Cultural Cross-Dressing” 227).

Japan and “*be Japanese*” (19). The presumed exchangeability of Chinese and Japanese identities is based upon the common Asian features of the two races, an assumption that ignores the history of antagonism between them. Jen quickly unsettles this presumption by showing Helen’s hysteria about having a flesh-and-blood Japanese in her house and a painted Japanese flag on her ice box. For Helen, it is impossible to forget the trauma and atrocity of the Sino-Japanese War even in “*the U.S. of A.*,” such as the Nanking Massacre, which Mona mistakenly pronounces as “Napkin Massacre” (15). This incident clearly indicates the different perceptions of racial identity and history between the two generations. Sherman’s request that Mona should turn Japanese for him also reveals a mindset of patriarchal possessiveness, in which a wife is regarded as subordinate to her husband. Helen and Sherman, the two people from Asia, stand as reminders of the complicating factors of historical and cultural experiences in identity formation.

Interestingly, in later phone conversations with Mona, Sherman speaks a totally different language and charms Mona with his comprehensive knowledge of world geography and an assumed mobility as a global trekker. Mona finally discovers that the seductive Sherman on the phone is actually performed by two Jewish American boys in her neighborhood, Andy Kaplan and Seth.²⁴ Sherman, in this case, is just the voice of a make-believe character, and the entire scam is made possible by modern electronic technology. Here Jen actually circles back to the beginning of the novel and comments further on Sherman’s mistaken racial identity due to his Asiatic features. Devoid of the visual factor, anyone can imagine and perform the character of a fictionalized Japanese. By presenting the multiple possibilities and transracial performance of the character Sherman, Jen highlights the imaginary and performative nature of ethnic identity. At the same time, by writing about Helen’s war memory and Sherman’s patriarchal thinking, Jen also acknowledges the important and deciding factors of identification, such as historical experience and cultural upbringing. “Ultimately,” as Susan Friedman observes about the practice of cultural hybridity in the novel, “Jen’s multidirectional irony affirms the historical production of both roots and routes, both the persistence of traditional group identities based in a belief in difference and the inevitability of change and cultural blending” (*Mappings* 176).

Mona in the Promised Land is not the first work of Chinese American fiction that contemplates the possibility of fluid identity. Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey*, for instance, uses the magic power of the monkey king, who is capable of performing seventy-two transformations, as a metaphor for ethnic fluidity. We can read Jen’s novel as a continuation of

²⁴ There are other cases in the novel in which people assume different identities during phone conversations. For instance, Mona pretends to be Callie when she runs away from home and gets a call from Helen in Callie’s dormitory.

Kingston's work in that *Mona in the Promised Land* carries on the tradition of transforming ethnic identity, albeit with a different mythological base, class ideology, and ethnic background. Both *Tripmaster Monkey* and *Mona in the Promised Land* are set in the 1960s and 1970s, with both protagonists, Wittman Ah Sing and Mona, trying to create their own ethnic identity. In fact, we can argue that *Mona in the Promised Land* adopts the narrative of fluid identity from *Tripmaster Monkey* and reframes it within the *Bildung* of a teenage girl in an immigrant family. Importantly, Jen utilizes the transformative power of the monkey trickster from the margins to challenge the status quo and expand/challenge the existing boundaries.²⁵ However, in *Mona in the Promised Land*, the mythological base has shifted to the Judeo-Christian tradition and alludes to the search for the Promised Land in the Old Testament. Within the American context, the search for a land of hope and freedom in the "New World" is also an important founding myth of the United States.²⁶ Moreover, Jen's novel is set in the Jewish neighborhood of Scarshill. The Changs move to this New York suburb for its good public school system. To the WASP real estate agent, Scarshill is merely a Jewish ghetto that is "Moneyed! Many delis!" (3). To the Changs, it is a significant step in their upward mobility: "For they are the New Jews, after all, a model minority and Great American Success. They know they belong in the promised land" (3). By moving the Changs out of Chinatown and calling them the "New Jews," Jen's novel not only reflects the lifestyle of a different group of Chinese immigrants in the United States than those who populate Kingston's texts, but it also explores the myth of the model minority and life in the suburban "promised land" for Chinese Americans.

Jen also uses Mona's exploration of fluid identity to criticize the demand of ethnic authenticity by mainstream society and easy compliance of the minority group. "In the diasporan context in the United States," R. Radhakrishnan notes, "ethnicity is often forced to take on the discourse of au-

²⁵ In her study of tricksters in ethnic American literatures, Jean Rosier Smith points out that in almost all cultures, tricksters "are both folk heroes and wanderers on the edge of community, at once marginal and central to the culture. Tricksters challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries. Whether foolishly, arrogantly, or bravely, tricksters face the monstrous, transforming the chaotic to create new worlds and new cultures" (2).

²⁶ The theme of "promised land" functions at various levels in the novel. The secular version of pursuing a promised land becomes an important source of hope for the different immigrant groups who come to the United States to search for a new life. Conversely, this search for an earthly paradise can be full of conflicts and contradictions for women and minority groups. For example, Mary Antin's autobiography, *The Promised Land* (1911), reveals the difficult position of Jewish American women. To a certain extent, Jen's novel rewrites Antin's classical text by presenting Mona's desire to turn Jewish. Moreover, the reference to the Underground Railroad in the novel alludes to the fact that the north was a promised land of freedom for the enslaved African Americans during slavery.

thenticity just to protect and maintain its space and history” (228).²⁷ Nothing is spared in Jen’s satirical portrayals. For instance, when Mona first transfers to her new school, she constantly flaunts her very limited Shanghainese vocabulary, such as “*Byeh fa-foon*” (stop acting crazy) and “*Shee-veh, Ji-nu* [soy sauce],” (5) to show off her “authentic Chineseness.” Indeed, this act of self-authentication works: “Her friends’ mothers invite her to taste-test their Chinese cooking,” which Mona diplomatically pronounces “[v]ery authentic” (6). Jen then reveals that the Chang girls are actually more interested in turkey pot pie than their mother’s Chinese cooking (6). Mona also talks about how “somewhere in China somebody eats or has eaten or once ate living monkey brains” (8). The linguistic and culinary details that Mona has mobilized to build up her “value” as an authentic Chinese are what Sau-ling Wong terms “markers of authenticity” (“Sugar Sister” 187). Nevertheless, the satirical way in which Jen displays these markers deconstructs the Orientalizing fantasy and imagination; both mainstream and ethnic subjects are satirized and questioned in the novel.

The novel also illustrates another danger of fixation upon the discourse of authenticity: mainstream society can actually assume the position of an expert and insider of a particular Third World culture and then turn around to question the authenticity of the ethnic minority. The Ingles, whom Mona dines with on Rhode Island, exemplify the tendency to appropriation. Mrs. Ingle ignores the fact that Mona is as much a New Yorker as she is and inquires about Mona’s country of origin. She also reveals her expertise on Chinese art:

They also discuss Chinese art, about which Mona knows nothing and Mrs. Ingle everything, as the latter inadvertently demonstrates by making Mona do the talking. Communism is Mr. Ingle’s forte. He discusses the Korean War with Mona, assuming she knows what a parallel is. He discusses Hong Kong, and Formosa, which Mona at least knows is now called Taiwan.

“When did that happen?” Mr. Ingle wants to know. (182)

These are instances of internal colonization in which members of mainstream society forcefully essentialize, otherize and exoticize the ethnic minority while displaying their own insider knowledge of the Third-World culture. By demonstrating Mr. Ingle’s outdated knowledge of Taiwan and his

²⁷ Radhakrishnan goes on to question the coupling of ethnicity and authenticity: “It becomes difficult to determine if the drive toward authenticity comes from within the group as a spontaneous self-affirming act, or if authenticity is nothing but a paranoid reaction to the ‘naturalness’ of dominant groups....Is authenticity a home we build for ourselves or a ghetto we inhabit to satisfy the dominant world?” (228-29).

suspicion of the accuracy of Mona's information, Jen satirizes such appropriative insiderism. Moreover, she also undermines the "purity" of the WASP family line by exposing the fact that Eloise Ingle is half-Jewish and subtly alludes to the possibility of racial passing as a legacy of American racism.

The ethnic bending in the novel proves to be the greatest challenge to the discourse of authenticity. Callie confesses to Mona that "she didn't understand what it meant to be Chinese until she met Naomi" (168). Naomi also enlightens Mona about her own racial identity: "Mona has never thought of herself as colored before, though she knew herself not to be white. *Yellow*, says Naomi now. *You are yellow. A yellow person, a yellow girl!*" (170). Later, Mona discovers that even Naomi's Chinese cooking is more "authentic" than Helen's. In the summer resort on Rhode Island, for instance, Naomi teaches Mona how to cook "an authentic tea-smoked duck that involves burning tea leaves in a wok and smoking the duck in it for sixteen hours" (186). In return, Mona "shares Helen's most recent favorite duck dish recipe—namely, Peking duck. Westchester style. The whole secret is soaking the duck overnight in Pepsi-Cola" (186). The exchange of recipes here at once undermines the idea of "authentic" cuisine and signals the practice of hybridization at work in the novel. Thus, an African American can teach Chinese Americans how to be Chinese and cook Chinese food. In contrast, the novel shows that the hybrid way in which Helen makes her Peking duck is inventive and delicious as well. Naomi also advises Callie that she can forget about her parents and choose her own ancestors (129). Mona's decision to turn Jewish and change her name into Changowitz echoes Ralph's creation of Chang-kees in *Typical American*. Whereas the invention of Chang-kees is an attempt at assimilation, Changowitz signals the choice of alliance with another minority group. Together, Chang-kees and Changowitz represent the different ways that two generations of the Chang family attempt to create their individual version of ethnic identity; the variations here mark the different visions and interpretations of the American promised land. Moreover, by writing about the birth of the biracial Io, Jen highlights the importance of the new bloodline for a new America and extends the fixed racial boundary.²⁸

Radhakrishnan rightly points out that to avoid the essentialist tendency in talking about authenticity, it is better to "situate the problem of authenticity alongside the phenomenon of relationality and the politics of representa-

²⁸ Jen's use of a biracial character to end the novel is, to some extent, autobiographical because she herself is married to a Jewish American and has two children. Yet, it is more meaningful to read this as Jen's way of mapping a new bloodline for Asian Americans because of increasing numbers of interracial marriages that take place within the demographic. Vincent J. Cheng even goes so far as to argue that "both functionally (ideologically, politically, figuratively) and to a large degree also literally, 'Asian American' can and should be considered a 'mixed-race' identity designation" (148).

tion” (229). Here I would like to borrow Susan Stanford Friedman’s theory of relational narrative to discuss the concept of ethnic identity in Jen’s novel. Friedman argues that we must supplement binary narratives of race with what she calls “relational narrative” to fully “capture the liminality of contradictory subjects positions or the fluid, nomadic, and migratory subjectivities of...the ‘new geography of identity’” (“Beyond White and Other” 7). She identifies four predominant cultural narratives about race and ethnicity since the 1960s: the first three scripts, “narratives of denial, accusation, and confession,” operated with the logic of white/other binary; and the fourth, “the narrative of relational positionality,” began to emerge in the 1980s and gained visibility in the 1990s. Friedman contends that it is the fourth script that can elevate the feminist discourse above the binary opposition between blacks and whites. Scripts of relational positionality “regard identity as situationally constructed and defined and at the crossroads of different systems of alterity and stratification” and therefore can help “construct a multiplicity of fluid identities and acting situationally” (17). This type of relational narrative is significant for American national and ethnic discourses in that it looks beyond the racial struggles between blacks and whites and expands the scope of racial politics in the United States. As Gary Y. Okihiro eloquently suggests, Asian and other minorities in the United States not only challenge the basic tenet of American democracy but help “to redefine the meaning of the American identity, to expand it beyond the narrow idea of only white and black, and to move it beyond the confines of the American state and the prescribed behaviors of loyalty and patriotism” (155).

Friedman also points out that relational narratives can formulate “what R. Radhakrishnan calls a new kind of ‘coalition politics’ based upon ‘relationality as a field-in-process’” (“Beyond White and Other” 40). This kind of coalition politics is different for the utopian alliance of Camp Gugelstein in that it goes “beyond absolute categories of pure/impure and oppressor/oppressed to work instead with the location of shifting positions of privilege and exclusion in global perspective” (40). Despite the civil rights rhetoric of love and integration, Camp Gugelstein still follows the logic of a rescue narrative based on fixed categories, in which the privileged high school students play the saviors of the disadvantaged African Americans. The disintegration of the camp proves that that the construction of Camp Gugelstein never went beyond a fixation on “absolute categories,” and the novel in fact advocates a complex way of looking at racial politics. While Asian Americans such as the Changs suffer from bigotry, Ralph reproduces this kind of racial ideology in his distrust of other races. The novel also demonstrates the differences between categories of whiteness. The real estate agent’s snobbish allusion to Scarshill as a Jewish ghetto is one example; the fact that Barbara’s father becomes scapegoated and gets laid off when his

company made a bad investment illustrates another example. In the final analysis, what Jen promotes in *Mona in the Promised Land* is the construction of a kind of relationality that goes beyond binary oppositions and the analysis of the distributions of power within one's family, society and nation-state due to the intricate interrelations of race, class, and gender.

Reaching Out and Holding On

While advocating the relational model to analyze race and ethnicity, Jen also introduced a comic vision for Chinese American women's writing, which has a significant influence on later works, such as Marilyn Chin's *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen*.²⁹ In her interview with Yuko Matsukawa, Jen admits that the tone of her novel is sometimes comic or "tragic-comic" (119).³⁰ Most importantly, as she confesses in her conversation with Rachel Lee, Jen uses humor to "organize anger" and transcend rage so that she can tell "a coherent story" (225). Hence, Jen's comedic writing is defined by the way in which she creatively and artistically confronts racism with anger. We also find a spiritual level to her comic writing: there is always a glimpse of hope for her characters, even in their darkest moments. Harsh reality and the idealism of the promised land may clash, but it is always possible to find an earthly Eden as long as one can reach beyond the existing social boundary. One such instance is Mona's encounter with a homeless lady at New York's Grand Central. Mona runs away from home after Helen slaps her for telling Alfred about her parents' racist attitude, which gets them sued for racial discrimination. Jen talks about how Mona would usually have felt lost and small in the church-like train station, but that day, she has an Edenic vision:

But today, before she sees herself in perspective, she feels, quite unexpectedly, as though she stands in the Garden of Eden. Just for a moment. The wind of apprehension, as always, will blow. But between gusts, she feels it—not even that she is standing in, but as though she is herself the Garden of Eden. A place that will remain a place of sun even after the poor forked whatever have been banished. She feels as though she stands at the pointy start of time. Behind her, no history. Before her—everything. How arrogant! *As if you have no mother! As if you*

²⁹ In the documentary *Maxine Hong Kingston: Talking Story*, Kingston also talks about how her writing displays "a quirky sense of humor." Chin's fantastic story in *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* takes the use of wacky humor to another level for Chinese American women's fiction.

³⁰ Jen talks about the mixed nature of such tone: "...I have always considered this complexity of tone one of my strengths. I think it has to do with the fact that I come from a culture where things can have opposite attributes at the same time, like in food, sweet and sour. The world is at once yin and yang." (Matsukawa 119).

come out of thin air! She can hear Helen's voice. Still Mona feels it—something opening within herself, big as the train station, streaming with sappy light. And feeling this, she is almost not surprised to find next to her—she is sitting, it seems, on a bench—a lady. (255)

Mona is like an Eve in exile but full of hope for the future. After the initial moment of distrust, she even feels a connection with the homeless woman who lays one foot in Mona's lap in her sleep. She then "reaches for the lady's other foot" so that the sleeping woman will not fall from the bench. The episode ends as Mona closes her eyes and "clasps her hands on the lady's slim ankles, and holds on" (256). Then Mona lets down her guard and falls asleep as well. Here Jen suggests that reaching out of set categories and holding on to the affective bonding of trust and intimacy are indeed the right gestures in this earthly paradise. The maternal interruption and harsh comment in Mona's vision indicates that her promised land is in fact postlapsarian. For all its imperfections, however, the empathy between this run-away Chinese American girl and the homeless white woman transcends racial and class boundaries and promises redemption. Clearly, Jen's comic vision is built upon this precious moment of human relationality and connectedness.

I would argue that this type of comic vision of empathy and relatedness is Gish Jen's greatest contribution to Chinese American writing. Jen's artistic talent is demonstrated in the way in which she skillfully adapts traditional themes, such as the mother-daughter plot, to express an individual vision and perspective on the issues of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. The wedding in the Epilogue specifically demonstrates her reinvention of the generational theme by focusing on the interrelations of Helen, Mona, and Io. Jen subtly shifts the mother-daughter tie to a kind of marital bond in describing the three generations of women in the family. Mona is crying hard when Helen shows up for her belated wedding with Seth: "For the way she's crying, anyone would think that Helen is the person Mona's taking in sickness or in health....*until death do us part*, she thinks, and rushes forward, just as Io falls down" and instead of crying, Io stands up and "like a fine witness, claps" (304). Here the toddler granddaughter virtually acts as the witness for the bonding between the grandmother and the mother. Thus, the promised land that Mona searches for and Jen offers in the novel is a maternal space of multiethnic identifications and multiracial compositions, where mother-daughter symbiosis is possible despite all of the conflicts and interruptions. By writing about the dynamics of mother-daughter, sibling, and interracial interactions, Gish Jen combines the emblematic theme of intergenerational conflicts and class differences with a revised vision of ethnic bending and horizontal coalition to create a special kind of comic vision and, in so doing, reinvents a new tradition for Chinese American women's writing.

Chapter 4

The Spaces in between: Chinese American Biracial Women and Writings from the Borderlands

[S]exual interest, which is still one of the most powerful motives in human contact, operates independently and often counters to the interests represented by the organization of society. Romantic love, which is proverbially interested in the exotic and the unfamiliar, not infrequently crosses racial barriers, and is never completely inhibited by class and caste taboos.

—Robert E. Park
Race and Culture

The sex at the origins of miscegenation led to the sexualization of racial taboos against mixture—an obsession with sex and women's bodies as the site of potential racial transgressions—which explains how race, nation, sex, and sexuality are so intertwined in representations of mixed-race subjects.

—Suzanne Bost
Mulattas and Mestizas

That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the mestiza stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balance of opposing powers. In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—a mestiza consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm.

—Gloria Anzaladúa
Borderlands/La Frontera

“I give my right hand to the Occidentals and my left to the Orientals, hoping that between them they will not utterly destroy the insignificant ‘connecting link.’ And that’s all.” Thus Edith Eaton (Sui Sin Far) ends her autobio-

graphical essay “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” (230).¹ Generally credited as the first North American woman writer of Chinese ancestry, Edith Eaton also was outspoken about the predicaments suffered by Eurasians. Instead of passing herself as white or even Japanese (like her sister did), Eaton chose to speak on behalf of her mother’s people, the denigrated Chinese, and adopted a Chinese pen name.² With alternating by-lines between her English and Chinese names, Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far—the “connecting link” between two races—becomes a trope for Eurasian identity and a pioneer in Chinese American literature: she embodies the borderlands, the spaces in between, the interstices that engender hybrid identities.³ Such a hybrid identity, however, is fraught with ontological and epistemological anxiety, as exemplified in the painful query of one of the Chinese American biracial children she met in “Leaves”—“Why did papa and mama born us?” (223). It takes great courage for biracial women like Eaton to speak about their lives on the border. This chapter is dedicated to explore the body of work by biracial women writers of Chinese ancestry and analyze textual representations of these survivors on the borderlands, with special emphasis on Amiee Liu’s *Face* and Sigrid Nunez’s *A Feather on the Breath of God*.

Voices from the Interstices

What concerns the first generation of biracial women most is their Eurasian identity. As a special racial category we first need to look into the definition of the term “Eurasian.” Citing V. R. Gaikwad, Shirley Geok-lin Lim concisely historicizes the term:

The coining of the term “Eurasian” is usually ascribed to the Marquis of Hastings in the seventeenth century, referring to the children of British men and Indian women at the moment of British colonization of the subcontinent. The notion and fear of miscegenation (of mixing “blood” and of consequent generational degeneracy through interracial marriages) did not appear to have been motivating forces during the period of the first contact. (“Introduction” xi)

¹ In this chapter I use the version of “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” (1909) collected in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*, edited by Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks.

² Edith Eaton’s younger sister Winnifred launched a successful writing career under a Japanese-like pseudonym and ethnicity, Onoto Watanna. See Amy Ling’s chapter “Pioneers and Paradigms: The Eaton Sisters” in *Between Worlds*. The Eurasian girl who has tried to pass as Mexican or Spanish in “Leaves,” as Annette White-Parks suggests, is very likely to be Edith Eaton’s other sister, May (156).

³ White-Parks has a similarly observation, “The term *Eurasian* itself suggests a stance on the border where both races meet” (155).

While in the late seventeenth century British traders and soldiers were encouraged to sire “mixed-blood” children to facilitate the penetration of the East Indian Company into India, by the late eighteenth century the term “Eurasian” carried such negative connotations that “Anglo-Indian” was used instead by the offspring of the interracial marriage (Lim, “Introduction” xi). The engendering of a Eurasian was, therefore, inevitably entangled with colonial expansion and capitalist exploitation. Once stigmatized, it takes her great effort to embattle the shadow of miscegenation and the suspicion of impurity.

Most significantly, this unwelcome colonial “legacy” was constructed out of specific temporal and spatial conjunctures intricately connected with colonial history and geopolitical locations. The new configurations of this ethnic category always embody the materiality of a colonial economy. What is negative about interracial breeding always spells out an imbalance of power between races.⁴ As seen from the evolution of the term, the emergence of Eurasians results from a “nativist” strategy of the European imperialists. Robert J. C. Young further points out that the breeding of mixed-race Eurasians is “a proposal for a more efficient form of colonialism” since this racial admixture is supposed to help the continuation of the European species and “enlighten” the Asians (143). In fact, the failure of the European colonists to acclimate themselves in the tropical areas such as India and the Caribbean had been one of the rationales behind the argument for racial mixture (142-43). In terms of racial politics, the Eurasians are also supposed to be “insiders” to both races, and can thereby be instrumental in colonial expansion. The irony is that they are in fact “outsiders” to both since both groups, intent on racial purity, reject them. Hence we have the literary trope of the “tragic Eurasian,” as presented in Edith Eaton’s writing.

In the American context, racial mixture also resulted from colonial expansion. Starting in the colonial period, the encounter between the white colonist and Native American tribal peoples created the “half-blood,” or the half-Indian and half-white, who became an important cultural symbol in nineteenth-century imagination because of the western expansion. William J. Scheick’s study of nineteenth-century American literary representations of the half-blood clearly shows that the contemporary attitude toward the mixed-blood Indian reflected a national ambivalence toward the western frontier. “Three discernible facts clearly emerge,” Scheick infers, “that in general the half-blood found lasting comfort in neither racial group, that his social commitments remained nebulous, and that, understandably, he tended toward his own kin and toward self-advantage” (7). Besides this “*twilight*

⁴ Robert Young states that the question of hybridity had first been broached when different varieties of human beings, like animals, had been classed according to the hierarchical scale of the Great Chain of Being (6).

race” (Scheick 17), other Americans of hybrid races also suffered from unjust laws and public distrust. At some point, the legitimacy of the offspring of certain interracial marriages was not even legally recognized. In 1880, for example, the state of California denied the legality of Chinese-white marriages. Such anti-miscegenation statutes were not declared unconstitutional until 1948 and the complete removal of all such statutes in the United States did not happen until 1967 (Chan 59-61). These anti-miscegenation laws mark non-Caucasian immigrants, such as Asian Americans, as both socially and physically aliens. As Susan Koshy aptly puts it, “immigration and miscegenation laws converged in a ‘biopolitics of the population’ by providing critical regulatory mechanisms to the U.S. state to discipline the individual and aggregate social body of Asian Americans” (2). Peoples of mixed races, as historian Paul R. Spickard observes in his monograph on the subject, have been constantly discriminated against despite the founding myth of the melting pot and the fact that America is in one sense founded “upon a vision of intermarriage” (*Mixed Blood* 4). As Teresa Kay Williams, among many Asian American theorists of racial hybridity, observes, “races have been socially constructed in such a way that they have remained separate, monoracially-boundaried, exclusive, and unequal” (63).⁵

Women, in particular, suffer most in cases of racial mixture since their bodies are regarded as “the site of potential racial transgressions,” as Suzanne Bost observes in the epigraph (9). Such harsh reality makes biracial women who speak out most courageous and theorizing the border spaces from which they survive and speak of great importance. Speaking from her lived experience, Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa describes the life in the borderlands as that of an “alien”: “Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits” (20). From “*los intersticios*, the interstices that she writes about, she calls for “a new *mestiza* consciousness”—“a consciousness of the Borderlands”—to cope with hybrid identity (77). Anzaldúa further employs cultural and gender specificities to define this *mestiza* consciousness: “In a constant state of mental nepantlism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, *la mestiza* is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values one group to another” (78). Swamped by colliding cultural codes, “[t]he

⁵ Huping Ling summarizes several theories of interracial marriage, such as Milton Gordon’s assimilation theory, regarding “interracial marriage as a sign of the growing acceptance of a minority group by the major group”; and the theory of hypergamy, assuming that both partners in an interracial marriage are mutually benefited “as minority male of higher socioeconomic status but lower racial status might upgrade his racial position by marrying a female with the opposite characteristics” (173). Ling herself holds that love and romance should be the deciding factors in this kind of relationship (174). However, as Robert E. Park reminds us in the epigraph, interracial romantic love is often a result of the pursuit for the exotic and the unfamiliar.

new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” (79). Finally, Anzaldúa presents a vision of fluidity and “a new mythos” based on her own mixed-race background: “The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her how duality is transcended” (80).

Taking *Borderlands* as an example of intercultural hybridity, Susan Stanford Friedman observes that, “Anzaldúa’s point is that everyday life—in all its physical, linguistic, psychological, and spiritual dimensions—insists upon the realities of hybridity, a *mestiza* condition that is both forced upon her as a mark of her oppression and embraced by her as a site of possible freedom” (*Mappings* 100).⁶ Friedman stresses the possibility of turning hybrid conditions into freeing spaces that are neither utopic nor dystopic but locational.⁷ This freeing act requires linguistic and artistic expression. These voices from the interstices are important not just because “the personal is the political” but also because they enable transfiguration of racial and cultural landscapes.⁸ These voices can recall the past, refigure the present, and reimagine the future. From this perspective, I turn to reading three generations of biracial women’s works.

As the pioneer of Eurasian/Chinese American literature, Edith Eaton wrote at a time when a “Chinaman” was regarded as “more repulsive than a nigger” (224).⁹ Her genealogy and writing reflect the historical and geopolitical contexts of nineteenth-century China-West encounters. Her parents met and got married in Shanghai, the center of international trading and the meeting point of various colonial interests, in the 1860s when competitions for financial gains and territorial control among the invading foreign powers and the Chinese anti-imperialist resistance were most intense. Her father, Edward Eaton, was a British silk merchant whose very appearance in China signified the success of the “open door” policy enforced by the colonizers’ militarism. China had been forced into a global economy in which at best she played the role of a silent partner and at worst of a provider of raw material. Educated in England to be a missionary, Grace A. Trefusis Eaton,

⁶ In view of the impasse of “difference-talk” and “hybridity-talk” in feminism, Friedman advocates “a migratory feminism in the borderlands, one that doesn’t obliterate difference, but moves through and beyond it to the spaces of encounter and the processes of syncretism and intercultural hybridity” (*Mappings* 102).

⁷ These three terms come from Friedman’s analysis of the power relations involved in the politics of hybridity. The oppression model assumes that agency is always with the dominant power; the transgression model believes in the agency of the hybridic dissident; the locational model stresses multidirectional power flows that allow negotiation (*Mappings* 89-91).

⁸ “Multiracial Asian Americans,” as Maria P. Root contends, “challenge current definitions and assumptions about culture and ethnicity in relation to race” (30).

⁹ This quote is from the famous dinner table scene from “Leaves” in which the narrator renounces the safety of her ability to pass and speaks up as one of the denigrated Chinese.

Edith's Chinese mother, represents another kind of colonial invasion.¹⁰ Edith Eaton mentioned in a newspaper article that her mother "was training for a missionary."¹¹ As White-Parks notes, "[t]he mission school's function was primarily assimilative—to convert Chinese populations to the Christian religion, to teach Chinese the English language and culture, and to use Chinese, once converted, to carry the gospel to their own people in China's interior" (10-11). Before she married Edward, Grace was most likely intended to be trained to become one of the insiders whose mission was to help convert their "heathen" compatriots. Although her position has never been completely the colonized, Grace's race makes her marriage with Edward Eaton a disruption of the colonial/racial hierarchy and demarcation. Their offspring embody this transgression and hence suffer for it.

As can be seen from her writing, Edith Eaton greatly suffers from the colonial "legacy" in her developmental years. In Edith's early childhood, the Eatons emigrated from England to Canada. This transcontinental immigration resulted in a steady downward spiral of the family's financial situation. As a child, the silence between Edith Eaton and her parents on the subject of her racial identity perhaps traumatizes her most. She recalls this painful past in "Leaves": "I do not confide in my father and mother. They would not understand. How could they? He is English, she is Chinese. I am different to both of them—a stranger, tho their own child" (222). This sense of estrangement intensified as she matured. Driven by poverty, poor health and literary ambition, Eaton became a witness to different historical incidents as she travelled. Her experiences in England, Canada, Jamaica and the United States were nevertheless fraught with a sense of alienation from both the Chinese and Caucasian communities. From "Leaves" we witness how she is constantly faced with racial prejudices and violence, and mortified at being regarded as an Oriental curio or sexual object.¹² Yet she remained loyal to her identification as a Chinese. According to Williams, "In a racially ordered, racially invested society, the social phenomenon of passing has often been one of the few strategies available to, and utilized by, multiracial individuals to escape detrimental impact of race" (61). Edith Eaton's refusal to pass thus signals a courageous challenge to such a reified conceptualization of race.

Eaton's *Bildung* as a Eurasian was not easy; yet she devoted all her creative energy into making herself a "connecting link" between races. As

¹⁰ According to Annette White-Parks, Grace "is referred familiarly as Lotus Blossom" (10). Amy Ling points out that Grace was abducted from home at around three; later she was adopted by an English missionary couple and got an English education. Grace married Edward when she was sixteen (*Between Worlds* 26).

¹¹ This is quoted in White-Parks's biography of Edith Eaton (10). Eaton wrote a piece entitled "Sui Sin Far, the Half Chinese Writer, Tells of Her Career" for *Boston Globe* on 5 May, 1912.

¹² One of the reasons why Eaton finds herself highly sexualized is because popular culture stereotypes Eurasians "as sexual enthusiasts," as Spickard points out ("What I Must Be?" 47).

Nicole Tonkovich argues, "...Sui Sin Far's individual portraits constitute a photomontage of a new transnational face" and her effort demonstrates "that endurance, character, and courage should take precedence over ideological notions of eugenics, properly gendered behavior, and racial/national entitlement in determining citizenship in a transnational republic of letters" (253). Through her courage and her articulation of the Eurasian experience, Edith Eaton is clearly an early practitioner of "locational feminism."¹³

Several novels of 1950s depicting Eurasians in China present other historical and geopolitical configurations. Rey Chow observes that although throughout the nineteenth century China was invaded and was forced to grant many concessions to colonial forces, "[u]nlike India or countries in Africa and America, most parts of China were, in the course of European imperialism, never territorially under the sovereignty of any foreign power" (*Writing Diaspora* 8). In the middle of the twentieth century, however, China was on a collision course with drastic political and ideological changes. By the 1940s, most of China was occupied by Japanese invaders. At the same time, a civil war between the ruling Kuomintang (the Nationalist Party) and the Communist Party was tearing China apart. The Chinese who had outlived the Japanese invasion were faced with the Communist takeover and more wars. The writings by biracial women at this juncture mostly trope on the theme of identity politics vis-à-vis love and war and provide different perspectives to this hybrid identity than that of Edith Eaton's generation.

Set in 1949 and 1950, when communist revolutionaries were taking over China and the Korean war was on the outbreak, the first-person narrator Suyin in Han Suyin's autobiographical novel *A Many-Splendored Thing* (1952) rejects the category of "White Chinese" because she desires "to be all Chinese, not a counterfeit semi-European" (59).¹⁴ Her struggle with her racial identity plays out in the colonial territory of Hong Kong, described by

¹³ In *Mappings*, Friedman calls for a "locational feminism" that "travels globally in its thinking, avoiding the imposition of one set of cultural conditions on another, assuming the production of local agencies and conceptualization, and remaining attentive to the way these differences are continually in the process of modification through interactions within a global system of diverse, multidirectional exchanges" (7).

¹⁴ Whether *A Many-Splendored Thing* forms part of the canon of Chinese American literature *per se* is open to debate since the author appears more as a cosmopolitan European writer. However, as Elaine Kim points out, the text entered into the arena of American cultural imagination through its film adaptation. The Oscar-winning *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing*, starring William Holden and Jennifer Jones, was released in 1955. The male protagonist in this popular Hollywood version is cast as an American, rather than British, as in the book. The novel actually continues Han's first autobiographical novel *Destination Chungking* (1942), where she writes about her marriage with a Kuomintang officer during the years of the Second World War. She also has an autobiography series in four volumes—*The Crippled Tree* (1965), *A Mortal Flower* (1966), *Birdless Summer* (1968), and *My House Has Two Doors* (1980). For discussion of *Destination Chungking* and *The Crippled Tree*, see Amy Ling's *Between Worlds*, especially 65-69 and 112-15.

the narrator as a “Shanghaiand” (42) where people enjoy their life without a thought of tomorrow. Underneath the appearance of great flexibility, Hong Kong also rigidly resists transgressing racial categories according to Suyin: “The melting pot of the Orient, they called Hong Kong. Indeed no. The place where everyone met and many stayed apart, divided by hedges of prejudice and hearsay. However much one shook the mixture, it stratified into immiscible layers again” (65).

To avoid deracination, Suyin struggles to resist the racial mixture that she embodies and instead envisions an unambiguous racial affiliation for herself and her daughter. With a medical degree from London University, Suyin, the daughter of a Chinese father and a Belgian mother, clings to traditional Chinese ideology and nationalist sentiment for her identity. Playing a submissive mistress to her British lover, she nevertheless rejects his proposal on the grounds that marrying a biracial woman will ruin his journalist career. Suyin also wants to serve China regardless of the political situation, a position consistent with her attachment to her Chinese roots.¹⁵ But when she bitterly describes her double heritage as “schizophrenia” (80), this desire to cling to one’s roots also seems like a defense mechanism. Through the first-person narrative we see the self-contradiction in the character of Suyin. On the one hand, she is a self-sufficient single mother who supports her daughter with her medical practice, has a lover, and moves between Hong Kong and China with great mobility. On the other hand, Suyin’s internalized acceptance of Confucian doctrines reveals her traditionally bound mindset. Moreover, the foreword to the novel by Malcolm MacDonald, the then British Commissioner-General in South-East Asia, in which he elides any honest reflections on colonialism by praising the “benefits” of “Western Imperialism” and nominally admits that one of its “evil consequences” was “the creation of a superiority complex amongst the whites and an inferiority complex amongst the colored peoples” (viii), serves to accentuate the self-Orientalist tone of the text. Han Suyin’s vision in *A Many-Splendored Thing*, though considerably dated in terms of racial and sexual politics as we read it today, allows us to see one biracial woman’s struggle with her hybrid identity in a specific juncture of time and place.

Set against the backdrop of the last few months of the Sino-Japanese War, Diana Chang’s *Frontiers of Love* (1956) analyzes the existential conditions of Eurasians in Japanese-occupied Shanghai. Again, historical context

¹⁵ Han Suyin shows a strong sense of her rootedness in China. In contrast to her more Europeanized sister who is eager to immigrate to America, Suyin asserts her tie to China as she exclaims, “I belonged. My roots were here. If I chose personal salvation, freedom of the individual spirit away from here, fleeing to a safer, gentler world, I would slowly wither and die, for I was rooted. No matter how far away I strayed, I would come back. I would always be coming back. I could not help it” (*A Many-Splendored Thing* 109).

and geopolitical location set off the physical and psychic drama of the protagonists. The very title, *Frontiers of Love*, suggests psychological urgency in terms of spatial imagination intersecting with a specific temporality. The imminent defeat of the Japanese invaders and the rise of the Communist Party appear to promise a brand-new future for war-ridden China, a promise that was nevertheless repeatedly broken during the next half of the century. With the French Concession, the International Settlement and its Chinese areas, the city of Shanghai was divided into several internal colonies, making it an ideal locale to foreground the fragmented mentality of the biracial characters. The Japanese occupation also served to underscore the shattering of territorial integrity in Shanghai and, for that matter, China, which made a clear Chinese identity problematic. The particular class structure of Shanghai also influences the biracial characters' identifications. "Identity, for Chang, who is decidedly American in her thinking," Amy Ling contends, "is a purely individual choice, and for the Amerasian the choice is broader than for most" (*Between Worlds* 115). Also, we must remember the class-bound nature of this freedom of choice, as the biracial characters in *Frontiers of Love* are financially and socially privileged. The French Concession in which the protagonists live, for instance, is "inhabited mostly by Chinese—Chinese who were either wealthy, Westernized or prayed to a Christian God" (*Frontiers of Love* 21). With its complex racial mixture and class distribution, Shanghai, as Shirley Geok-lin Lim rightly comments, "literalizes the identity 'Eurasian'" ("Introduction" viii).

Diana Chang deploys three such privileged "White Chinese" characters to represent the choices of identification available to Eurasians in the wartime Shanghai.¹⁶ On one extreme, the young and light-hearted Mimi Lambert overtly identifies with her Australian father and is repulsed by the very term Eurasian. She must, however, countenance her biraciality when her Swiss lover abandons her because of her race. Having "been injured into nonexistence" (238), Mimi "would seek promiscuity as a mortification" and becomes "a willing victim" of sexual exploitation (232). On the other extreme, the radical and discontented Feng Huang, similar to Han Suyin, invests in a single vision of Chinese identity. While attempting to escape neurotic pressure from his British mother and come to grips with his own uncertainty, Feng attaches his hope to the promise of a new China, embraces communism and becomes an accomplice to the murder of an innocent Chinese youth. Ironically, to justify his Chineseness he takes cover from a Eura-

¹⁶ In an interview Chang also comments on the tripartite emplotment in her novel: "I started the novel as a linear sort of thing—the identity problem of a young woman who happened to be Eurasian rather than, say, an American from Wyoming. However, I didn't want it to be the story of a single Eurasian woman. So I explored the Eurasian problem in and through three main characters in order to get a variety of Eurasian identities and responses" (Hamalian 32).

sian stereotype: “As a Eurasian, he could pass as anything, including a playboy. Eurasians and playboys in Shanghai were suspected to be everything, and because of that they were suspected of nothing. He was needed, and he felt secure in that” (32). To validate his playboy act and spy for his revolutionary work, Feng betrays the love and trust of the biracial Sylvia Chen. As an alto ego to the author and the main focus of this novel, Sylvia also tries to balance the heritage inherited from her Chinese father and American mother. In contrast to her “sister” Mimi, afflicted by self-imposed invisibility and a self-destructive impulse after her disappointment in love, Sylvia seeks knowledge in order to “understand life and identity itself” (239). At the beginning of the novel we see how she squirms in her Chinese dress. Knowing that “foreign clothes didn’t suit her entirely either,” Sylvia decides to design her own modified Chinese dress after the war (4). This sartorial metaphor prefigures Sylvia’s choice of identification. It is foreseeable that Sylvia, like Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far before her, will serve as the contact zone where transcultural interaction may exist.

Reconfiguring Chinese American Family Narratives

The first two generations of biracial women show a strong attachment to their Chinese identity although their position is never secure in the Chinese community. The period of the 1960s, according to Paul Spickard, marked the watershed when attitudes towards mixed-race Asian Americans went through positive yet still limited changes: “Substantial numbers of Asian Americans began to marry non-Asians in the 1960s. By the 1970s, the numbers of Chinese and Japanese who married outside their respective groups and then had children were so large that Asian American communities were forced to begin to come to terms and accept the existence of mixed people” (“What Must I Be?” 49). Before the 1960s, biracial Asian Americans were often rejected by both the dominant (white) and the minority groups. The civil rights movement in the 1960s certainly influenced these changes. And yet nothing dramatic happened overnight and the increase in interracial marriage led to an even wider spectrum of racial mixture than before. Thus the third-generation of Chinese American biracial women writers are in a more privileged yet more complicated position than any of their predecessors. Moreover, these women writing in the 1990s and after are mostly daughters of Suyin and Sylvia’s generation, who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. They have to face, in their individual processes of identity formation, sedimented layers of Chinese history combined with their mixed-race origins and Chinese American ethnicity. Many of them seek answers to their hybrid identity through family history. Hence we have works such as Lisa See’s nonfiction *On Gold Mountain* (1995), where she traces the life stories of four genera-

tions of her Chinese American family, beginning with her Chinese great-grandfather and Caucasian great-grandmother.

Family history in the Asian American context is an important theme that has nevertheless become problematic in critical discourse. As discussed in Chapter Three, Lisa Lowe argues against homogenizing Asian Americans through family narratives. Lowe stresses that “Asian American identity” is not a given but always engages in a process that works out as much “‘horizontally’ among communities as it is transmitted ‘vertically’ in unchanging forms from one generation to the next” (64). Lowe’s suggestion for expanding the Asian American family narrative is certainly valid and insightful. Nevertheless, in her very call for hybridity she appears to overlook the issue of biraciality. Most of the textual examples to which Lowe alludes—*Eat a Bowl of Tea* and *A Great Wall*—are without mix-race complications. Diana Chang’s short story “The Oriental Contingent” which Lowe cites as a case against a fixed racial definition is the only work by a biracial author discussed in her critical review. But we find no allusion to racial hybridity here either. While interrogating how generational narratives might essentialize Asian American identity, we should also search for more Asian American differences and look into different familial constructs that could well reconfigure Asian American family narratives. Two fictional narratives published in the 1990s by biracial writers, Amiee Liu’s *Face* and Sigrid Nunez’s *A Feather on the Breath of God*, offer interesting variations on this theme.

Family history figures prominently in the two novels. The protagonists of both novels are daughters of biracial fathers and Caucasian mothers. Although both parents are instrumental in the protagonists’ *Bildung*, I find the unfolding of the paternal plot in both texts most pertinent to our discussion since it is their biracial fathers whose silences are the most poignant and confusing.¹⁷ Besides, the father-daughter relationship in Chinese American literature has been so overwhelmingly subsumed by the trope of the mother-daughter plot that the former demands more creative and critical explorations.¹⁸ Writing out of their border location, furthermore, both Liu and Nunez choose to delineate the process of articulation for biracial women in the form of *Kunsterroman*, a genre that records how an artist claims her voice. Maibelle Chung in *Face* is a photographer struggling with her artist career and nightmares; the first-person narrator in *A Feather on the Breath of God*

¹⁷ Petra Fachinger, on the other hand, focuses on the mother-daughter plot in *A Feather on the Breath of God* and discusses the German mother’s conflict with the American daughter. Fachinger argues that the childhood of the narrator “is overshadowed by her mother’s experience of World War II, homesickness, feelings of cultural superiority and of having married beneath herself, and (sub)conscious anti-Semitism and racism” (262).

¹⁸ Kingston’s *China Men* is an early example of Chinese American father-daughter relationship. The trauma of incest in Patricia Chao’s *Monkey King*, on the other hand, touches upon a taboo subject in terms of Chinese American father-daughter plot.

is the autobiographical persona for the author whose youthful dream of becoming a ballerina is replaced by that of a writer. My reading concentrates mostly on the ways in which the daughters' struggles with paternal silences provide insights of biracial family narratives, and then to a lesser extent on their efforts of gaining personal voices.

Whereas in "Leaves" the daughter Edith Eaton cannot communicate her sense of racial anxiety with her parents, Liu and Nunez write about the daughters' frustration with their fathers' silences. In *Face*, Maibelle Chung charges against her father's reticence—"Why don't you ever tell us about China?" (78)—much like the daughter's painful query in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*. What Maibelle has discovered through her probing into the father's past in China is nothing but obliquity of racial and familial relationships because of his mixed-race background. The daughter first discovers how the father has been slurred by his English classmate Halliday as "a Chink bastard" (89) and his Caucasian mother labeled a "White Witch" (88) and "a Chinaman's whore" (267). What pains her father most is the loss of his "real name" as he recalls the moment when he was brutally attacked by his racist schoolmates, "[a]ll I could think about was my name. Joseph is not my name. It's Chou. Joe is the anglicized version. My mother enrolled me at school as Joseph. I couldn't even correct Halliday, insist that he call me by my real name, because Mama had made that impossible" (90). For all his financial and class privileges he could not stop himself from being misnamed. Unlike Sylvia, Feng or even Mimi, the other biracial inhabitants in Shanghai, Joe does not have the luxury to choose his own identification. The mother's insistence on a western lifestyle—she even ordered underwear from Sears, Roebuck—deprives Joe of any chance to get in touch with the other part of his double heritage. Without his proper name he finds himself powerless in front of Halliday, the school bully and the symbol of white colonizers in the text. He is destined to be misnamed for the rest of his life: as Joe Chung the prominent *Life* photojournalist or Joe Chung the small-time inventor of gadgets.

Face highlights the recurrence of paternal silences in the Chung family. Joe also suffered his father's silences. The question of why Joe gave up his career as a photographer lies at the center of the novel, and obsesses his daughter. The only clue that Maibelle has is her father's cryptic remark: "Photographs are like mirrors. They can always be manipulated and distorted, no two people use them the same way. In the end, I might as well have been pulling the trigger" (135). Not until the end of the novel does he reveal another part of his unsightly past. Joe went back to Peiping (Beijing) in 1948 to search for his lost father when his photographs of his father leading the student protesters against Kuomintang in front of the Gate of Heavenly Peace

(Tiananmen) were used to hunt down and murder dissidents.¹⁹ This allusion to Chinese history is what Homi Bhabha calls an “unhomely moment” in which the past collides into the present to claim recognition.²⁰ The state-instigated mass murder of the dissidents in the text was repeated in reality four decades later by the Chinese government of another party who had promised otherwise. According to Rey Chow, the Tiananmen massacre of 1989 brought modern Chinese history to a “standstill of catastrophe” (*Writing Diaspora* 74).²¹ This uncanny repetition of national tragedy is interestingly played out against the domestic drama of the Chung family. And the trauma resides permanently in the biracial characters.

In a vicarious way, the misused photographs facilitate Joe’s revenge against his father’s abandonment. Never certain about his own identity, Joe’s quest for his father leads to his discovery of the father’s betrayal and the fact that the interracial romance of his parents is actually a twisted power contest between races. As Joe states after he finds out about his father’s other family, “[h]e had proved he could tame the White Witch. Now he could keep his conquest and take a real Chinese wife” (305). Joe Chung’s memory of Peiping—another Chinese metropolis—is again of exclusion. Joe’s oedipal tragedy combined with the national one become his own shame, sabotaging his belief in art and drying up his creativity. And his family suffers along with him. Joe’s wife Diana schemes to bring back the artist in Joe; his two elder children, Anna and Henry, have themselves sterilized; Maibelle struggles to keep a grip on her art and overcome her rape trauma.

While the father is bowed down by memories of exclusion in the two Chinese cities, the daughter is haunted by her own nightmares from the Chinatown of the metropolitan New York. Born in Chinatown, Maibelle is nonetheless an outsider because of her mixed origin. Liu shows that Chinese xenophobia makes the Chinatown residents particularly suspicious and unaccommodating to multiracial people. Maibelle’s redheaded presence stands out “like a vivid flaw in a bolt of jet-black silk” (1), highlighting her status as a racialized other. As a child Maibelle used to envy “the Yellow Butterflies” and their Asian features. “Yellow Butterflies” are of course racially

¹⁹ This episode originates in Amiee Liu’s reaction to contemporary Chinese history and her own family history. In her e-mail message to Amazon readers, Liu claims what motivated her to write *Face* was her “very visceral reaction to the Tien An Men [Tiananmen] massacre” and the knowledge that her grandfather “was one of the first pro-democratic activists in China.”

²⁰ See the section “Unhomely Lives: The Literature of Recognition” (9-18) in the introduction to Bhabha’s *Location of Culture*.

²¹ Chow gauges the impact of this catastrophe on Chinese history: “If Chinese history in the past century and a half has been a series of catastrophes, the events of June 4, 1989, marked their summation in the form of a mindlessly internalized violence directed against civilians by a government which barely forty years ago had stood for hope and emancipation from the corruption of the Chinese tradition” (*Writing Diaspora* 74).

and ideologically charged markers related to various levels of Orientalist imagination, such terms like “the Yellow Peril” and *Madame Butterfly* immediately come to mind. Yet to Maibelle, these words imply belonging and inclusion. In contrast, the San Francisco Chinatown in Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* seems to be such an intimate lived space despite being at once homey and claustrophobic.²²

Moreover, Maibelle’s Chinatown, like Joe’s Shanghai and Peiping, is a site of imminent violence. Many scenes of violence, mostly involving interracial conflicts, take place there. The most violent of all is the one in which fourteenth-year-old Maibelle was raped by a Chinatown youth gang. This repressed memory leads to her nightmares. Her will to forget enters in conflict with her need to remember. Without lifting the veil of repression, Maibelle’s identity is forever a “maybe,” as suggested by her nickname Maibee. But first she has to learn how to deal with her own shame. While contemplating the different ways her parents treat memories of shame, the protagonist comes to an epiphany of her biracial identity that combines the Western, the Chinese “and something else entirely. A third possibility” (342). Originated from the spaces in between races and cultures, this third possibility gestures toward Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness and allows Maibelle to heal racially and mentally.

In the end photography helps her overcome violent memories and cures her of the nightmares. For Maibelle, photography is not only a family legacy but also a way of articulation. Interestingly, Liu allows her protagonist to explore different aspects of photography: as commercial products; as aesthetic self-expression; and as social art. At the beginning of the novel Maibelle takes over the apartment of a deceased female photographer and, along with the space, she inherits her predecessor’s job shooting photos for mail-order catalogs. Maibelle’s engagement with commercial photography thus becomes not only a self-imposed apprenticeship but also an ironic intensification of her mother’s profession as a vender of art at a chic gallery. Photography was always Maibelle’s avenue for self-exploration, a way to find her own “face,” so to speak. Her senior project as a photography student is entitled “*Oriental I*,” “a wall-sized mosaic of one hundred forty-four separate photographs of disconnected body parts” with her self-portrait as the centerpiece (179). The racially and psychologically charged title and the composition of fragmented female body parts embody her distorted self-image rooted in racial and sexual traumas. The final stage of Maibelle’s apprenticeship that promises to take her out of racial limbo starts when she begins to photograph people in Chinatown. This visual recording of China-

²² Besides racial factors, another reason for the sense of narrative alienation in *Face* is perhaps the author’s different background. Liu admits in her e-mail that she grew up in the suburb instead of Chinatown.

town stories helps her to re-root with a place that was never really hers. Art, for Maibelle, thus becomes a social and ethical responsibility. As she reflects, “Yet it was my father who, by giving me his camera and urging me to use it, had set me up for the moment and the sense of responsibility that swept over me now” (151). The daughter takes up where the father left off, becoming an artist in her own right and compensating for her father’s “failed memories.” Importantly, at the very end, Maibelle comes across a biracial girl, as she shoots pictures of the place where she was raped. The presence of the blue-eyed child—the daughter of a Vietnamese mother and an American father—in the traumatic site signifies yet another interracial encounter, another colonial history, and another biracial story to be told and thus leaves the narrative open-ended.

Sigrid Nunez’s *A Feather on the Breath of God* is also open-ended. What leaves the novelistic discourse seemingly unfinished is the daughter’s endless sorrow about not knowing her father, which gives this powerful narrative of growing up in a mixed-race family during the 1950s and 1960s a sense of immanent haunting. In this autobiographical novel, Nunez’s portrayal of the father also tropes on his silence.²³ Nunez devotes the first part of the text to the father who is virtually unknown to the daughter. In contrast to the voluble German mother, who picks up English right after her immigration to the United States, the father has only limited English in spite of the fact that he came to America in his early teens. Bombarded by the daughter’s questions about Chinese exotic customs, for example, the father can only refrain in pidgin, “Chinese just like evvybody [sic] else” (6), which ironically confirms the daughter’s feeling that he *is not* like “everybody” else.

The text, filled with the daughter’s sense of confusion and loss about the silent father, is framed by two scenes specifically about him. It opens with the family’s chance encounter with the father’s Chinatown friends. For the first time, the narrator hears her father speaking in Chinese, confirming the Chinese identity she had doubted. At the end of the novel the narrator again recalls a childhood outing to her Chinese schoolmate’s home. The father who has never played with his own biracial daughters spends the whole time playing with two Chinese children. “A revelation and a shock,” the narrator describes her feeling about the scene, “that brief glimpses of a happy, active father” (180). Josephine Lee suggests that these two images of the father “signal the possibility of another side of her father that the narrator can only glimpse momentarily” (111). In contrast to his customary lack of

²³ Rocío Davis reads *A Feather on the Breath of God* as a short-story cycle. Davis argues that such a hybrid genre becomes a vehicle for Nunez to articulate the trauma of ethnic isolation and family division. See her *Transcultural Reinventions: Asian American and Asian Canadian Short-Story Cycles*.

linguistic fluency and emotional expression, the father who can talk and play is beyond the daughter's comprehension. This sense of deprivation prompts the narrator's enigmatic remark: "Some things it would be death to forgive" (180). What she cannot forgive is perhaps that she never has the chance to know the real father and that she has been denied this chance because she is not Chinese enough.

During his life of circulatory migration, the father also loses his Chinese family name. The silent father is a product of colonial history and neo-colonial racism. Born in Panama and raised in Shanghai until the age of ten, his name at his entrance into the United States was Charles Cipriano Chang. Later he called himself by his Spanish first name, Carlos. When he became an American citizen by serving in the army, he dropped his Chinese last name and used his mother's Spanish one. The narrator puzzles: "Why a man who thought of himself as Chinese, who had always lived among Chinese, who spoke little Spanish, and who had barely known his mother would have made such a decision in the middle of his life is one of many mysteries surrounding my father" (8). Her mother's justification that a Spanish name was meant to make him fare better in America and the family anecdote about the mishandling by the citizenship official cannot really satisfy the daughter. She is forever left with a sense of loss and always wonders in what way her life might have been different "had he kept the name Chang" (9). This sense of deprivation comes from the fact that she has been denied her Chinese heritage even before her birth. With a Nordic first name given by her mother and a Spanish last name, the narrator's name, although never mentioned in the text, signifies her alienation from an important part of her identity. In fact, she has very little chance to cultivate a *mestiza* consciousness as a biracial woman. Her only access to the Chinese and her father is by proxies: through Orientalist stereotypes—"Chinese inscrutability, Chinese sufferance, Chinese reserve" (16)—and Orientalist literature about China written by Caucasian authors such as Pearl Buck. The way that the father's chapter ends with a collage of recollections again indicates the daughter's lasting sense of confusion and inadequacy to speak about him.

The daughter also attempts to break through the father's silence through another proxy, Vadim, a Russian immigrant who also marries out of his race and has a daughter. The entire part four of the novel, "Immigrant Love," examines the narrator's unexplainable infatuation and her affair with this violent but vocal "cabbie." Some of her friends think of it as a class "backsliding"—"You can take the girl out of the projects, but..." (179). The ellipsis suggests an un/easy slippage from the hard-earned status of the middle class back to the underclass of the housing projects. Yet class is not really the issue here. What fascinates the narrator about Vadim is that they share a familial background of interracial marriages and immigrant parents. The

narrator confesses: “No. I am not in love with Vadim. He holds some key, it is true. But it is not the key to my heart. He holds some answers for me—I can say this even without being able to say what the questions are” (166-67). The unstated questions are in fact about immigrant and multiracial conditions; in an indirect way Vadim’s family seem to hold some answers for the narrator about her own family.

The narrator’s psychological projection is evinced in the ways in which she chooses to end the part with the story of her father playing with Chinese children and implicitly pairs Vadim with her father and Vadim’s daughter with herself. As the narrator and Vadim meet in an immigrant language class, English brings them together: “His accent, his broken speech, his slow acquiring of English—all this has certainly been important to me. It was language that brought us together, first of all, and it has always moved me to hear him speak” (164). The sense of satisfaction goes beyond a teacher’s concern with her pupil. It appears that the narrator enjoys a chance to teach English, a language that is forever foreign to her father, to an immigrant willing to learn and to assimilate. Vadim’s willingness to speak somewhat compensates for the father’s silence. Her sense of exclusion from the American national discourse because of her racial and class background is temporarily expelled when Vadim calls the narrator his “America” (147). What also fascinates the narrator is Vadim’s teenage daughter Svetlana as she often tries to imagine how the latter survives family violence and poverty with a desire to study her way out. It becomes clear that when the narrator fantasizes about Svetlana’s family life, she is in fact speaking out of her own memory: “But sometimes she feels that she is only driving the curses and the screams deeper and deeper into her skull. Deep, they will echo for the rest of her life. I could tell her” (168). Here the snickering comment that “[y]ou can take the girl out of the projects, but...” has another, sadder connotation.²⁴

To narratively recover the lost name, the daughter entitles the chapter on her father “Chang.” With the title in print, the narrator claims the name for her father and thereby reconnects herself to the other part of her biracial identity. But she is also keenly aware that her writing can hardly compensate for the lack of intergenerational communication. Thus she once voiced her frustration about writing: “Hard for me to accept the fact that he did not read books. Say I grew up to be a writer. He would not read what I wrote” (18). What the narrator desires is to have the father reciprocate to her writing. However, the father is not a reader and cannot respond to her in any literary way. With the father’s sudden collapse and death, moreover, any kind of response becomes impossible. Nevertheless, writing can still be an act of

²⁴ It is interesting to observe that there is a similar comment on the Chinese American protagonist in Wayne Wang’s *Dim Sum*: “You can take a girl out of Chinatown, but you can’t take Chinatown out of her.” In each statement identity is spatially defined and determined.

healing for the narrator's experience of being "ravished" (180). The way the text ends in her failed experience with psychotherapy hints at the therapeutic aspect of her act of writing. Thus she locates and retrieves the lost father in her creative work. By incorporating fragments of the father's life in her psychosexual and artistic development, the daughter narrator has at least partially succeeded in bridging the past with the present and her Chinese heritage with her American one.

The biracial women writers examined in this chapter write in the shadow of a post/colonial condition. Out of their border identity, nonetheless, they create a third possibility for their lives and their art. Again Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far provides the inspiration. She offers a vision of racial connectedness in "Leaves": "Only when the whole world becomes as one family will human beings be able to see clearly and hear distinctly. I believe that some day a great part of the world will be Eurasian. I cheer myself with the thought that I am but a pioneer. A pioneer should glorify in suffering" (223-24). With today's transnational globalization, Eaton's one-family vision seems prophetic instead of utopic.²⁵ The tradition of biracial women's writing that she has pioneered has accomplished much more than her modest claim—"planting a few Eurasian thoughts in Western literature" (288)²⁶—and significantly changes the literary and familial landscapes of Chinese America.

²⁵ Of course we must also be on watch for any possible racial backlash because the prominence of interracial mixture. Suzanne Bost, for instance, points out that the high profile of mixed-race identities in popular culture is deployed "as a sign of millennial shifts in American identity" (4). Yet she promptly alerts us to the potential racist reactions that may arise from this media attention since "it is important to keep in mind America's long history of representing racial mixture and to be on guard against segregationist reactions like those that culminated in anti-miscegenation laws and Jim Crow" (4).

²⁶ This quote is from the same article in *Boston Globe* by Eaton, "Sui Sin Far, the Half Chinese Writer, Tells of Her Career," which came out right before the publication of her collection of Chinese American stories, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912).

Chapter 5

National History and Transnational Narration: Feminist Body Politics in Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's *Joss and Gold*

Will you sell me, also, down the river
of nationalism, my sometimes brother,
who know your accent, can speak your poetry?
Your family and mine, croaking, drank from the same well.
Now you are grown rich....
Shall I sink silently to the stream's muddy bottom
while gold flecks rise to your hands like scum?
But you need me, my brother. How else
to find the thorn of martyrdom,
rose of the east, your history's self?

—Shirley Geok-lin Lim
“Song of an Old Malayan” in *Monsoon History*

Claiming English as my own was my first step out of the iron cage and
into a voice, and who is to say it is not my own language and not my
voice?

—Shirley Geok-lin Lim
Writing S.E./Asia in English

On the 13th of May, 1969, less than thirteen years after the official *Merdeka* (independence) of the Federation of Malaysia, violent race riots took place in the nation's capital, Kuala Lumpur. Political rallies after the federal elections of May 10, 1969, in which the Alliance government was deprived of the two-thirds majority it needed, eventually led to the four days of riots. Despite the fact that even today people are still debating about the “real cause” of these riots, they are generally regarded as the result of the long history of Sino-Malay friction. The more immediate background of the riots involved a series of educational, language and economic policies of the Malaysian government which sought to redistribute wealth among the ethnic communities. When these policies misfired, they led to “Malaysian resentment against the government for having created a system where the Chinese prospered while they continued to cope with severe poverty” and “a sense of discontent in the Chinese community that special privileges were accorded to the Malays and that their interests were not served” (Tay 291). The May 13 incident has been regarded as a watershed event in postcolonial Malaysian history. Asian

American scholar and writer Shirley Geok-lin Lim comments on the terrible consequences of the riots in her memoir *Among The White Moon Faces* (1996): “In the process of formation of a Malaysian elite, the May 13 riots provided the bloody revolution that changed Malaysia from the ideal of a multicultural egalitarian future—an ideal already tested by hostilities over power-sharing—to the Malay-dominant race-preferential practice in place today” (136). Apparently the racial riots constitute a traumatic memory to which Lim has to return in her writings in order to reconfigure her Malaysian identity.

The challenge for Shirley Lim, as for many other creative artists who engage traumatic experiences, is how to put these experiences into narrative form without an overabundance of aestheticization or sensationalization. In addition to her direct address of the race riots and their consequences in her memoir, Lim provides in her poem “Song of an Old Malayan” a poetic rendition on the pain of unjust division. The lament of the narrator in the poem, which seemingly describes the rupture of an old friendship because of class and money, takes on another level of meaning when phrases such as “the river/of nationalism” and “history’s self” are considered (30). With a native Malayan as her persona and from the perspective of Chinese Malaysians, Lim comments on the great divide within the Malaysia created by the Malay nationalist ideology. An implicit irony within these lines suggests that a sustained argument against the Chinese Malaysian community focuses on the Chinese economic dominance over the Malays. In her debut novel *Joss and Gold* (2001), Lim again turns to the May 13 riots, embedding it in a story of transnational encounters and female bodily experiences. Without sentimental lamentation, in *Joss and Gold* Lim uncovers a violent episode of national history and its aftermath in relation to its female characters, offering us an exemplary feminist narrative of history based on personal lived experience.

Joss and Gold is the *Bildungsroman* of Li An, who at the beginning of the novel is a senior at the University of Malaya and dreams about going to study in the United States. Instead of going abroad and fulfilling her American dream, she marries the rich and gentle Yeh Henry and becomes a lecturer of English literature at the university. The riots of May 13, 1969 completely change her life. She has a one-night affair with Chester, an American who works for the Peace Corps, and gives birth to a daughter Yeh Suyin after Chester returns to the States. Book II describes Chester’s unfulfilled life in New York. At 35, Chester is an anthropologist whose wife, Meryl, a career woman on the rise, talks him into having a vasectomy. In Book III Chester travels to Singapore where the divorced Li An is working and bringing up Suyin with the help of her mother-in-law, Grandma Yeh, and her friend Ellen. Henry shows up as a father figure when Suyin inherits the estate after Grandma Yeh’s death. Previously fatherless, Suyin now has to choose be-

tween her two fathers.

Although a summary can hardly do justice to the richness and complexity of the novel, it reveals the novel's ambitious take on the issues of ancestral heritage, national/racial identities and histories, imperialism and postcoloniality, as well as white and Third-World feminisms. This postcolonial rendition of the Orientalist stereotype also performs a kind of "body politics" that enables women to represent different positions in the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. The tripartite form of the narrative that spreads out in temporal and spatial terms—from Kuala Lumpur in 1968 to 1969, New York in 1980, to Singapore in 1981—can also be read as the metaphorical birth and growth of a new diasporic womanhood engendered at the moment of a national trauma and embodied by the biracial Suyin, the offspring of an interracial liaison. Lim thus presents a routing of Malaysian history through the interracial and transnational narrative. This chapter provides a reading of *Joss and Gold* as an example of narrating national history based on female bodily experiences. By tracing the development of this form of diasporic womanhood, this reading will embody the double national and transnational frameworks. In the first part, Lim's writing is placed within the historical and social framework of (post)colonial Malaysia in order to address the intersecting issues of language, nation and identity. The second part is a close reading of the novel which posits the protagonist Li An as the key to unraveling the entanglement of Chinese Malaysian identification vis-à-vis the national discourse in the novel. Also central to the novelistic discourse are the problematics of interracial relationships. Hence, I propose a reading of the formation of diasporic womanhood within the interracial discourse in the novel with specific focus on the biracial character Suyin.¹

The Southeast Asian Context

As a former colonial subject writing and teaching in the colonizer's language, Shirley Geok-lin Lim's works shed light on postcolonial and diasporic conditions. Her memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces*, published both in New York and Singapore, and winner of an American Book Award, is the poetic *Bildung* of a colonial child, an artist and an academic who has struggled with abandonment, injustice, and issues connected to sexuality. Questions of language, race, and gender especially stand out in this memoir and in her other writings. In her memoir, she refutes V. S. Naipaul's reading of postcolonial

¹ Lim voices her hope that instead of being read as an expatriate, her works will be read within "both Malaysian/national and U.S./transnational frames, the Third-World intersecting with a late-capitalist First-World, frame" ("First-World 'Expats' and Expatriate Writing in a Third-World Frame"18). My strategy of reading *Joss and Gold* in this essay attends to the double frameworks suggested by Lim.

people as those who “mimic” the colonizer’s culture and declares her independence from traditional cultural and gender positions. Thus she talks about appropriating British colonial culture “to escape that other familial/gender/native culture that violently hammered out only one shape for self” and actively seeks the state of cultural “corruption to break out of the pomegranate shell of being Chinese and girl” (64).² Educated in the British educational system, Lim claims English as her mother tongue and yet at the same time is conscious of the danger of being dispossessed of this very language. As a Chinese Malaysian author, moreover, she discovers that her writing in English is marginal to the nationalist cultural agenda which privileges writings in indigenous Malay. Like other Malaysian writers in English, she is therefore “doubly dispossessed.”³ In both her creative and critical writings she reveals what is at stake for a transnational woman. For many readers, Lim is unique because she has formulated multinational attachments in her migratory trajectory while identifying strongly with the Asian diasporic subject who travels because of historical contingencies and different configurations of power.

Moreover, as a Chinese Malaysian now residing in the United States, Lim exemplifies the model of multiple migrations common in this age of transnationalism, and which places her squarely, in her own words, in the “tradition of writing by transnationals of multiple diasporas” (“Immigration and Diaspora” 289). “Such works,” as Lim observes in a critical essay that explores the different discourses of immigrant and diasporic literature, “construct a confrontational relation between place and identity and compose a tradition of ‘global literature’ complexly differentiated from the tradition of nationally bounded and divided identities that has conventionally organized our understanding of ‘world literature’” (“Immigration and Diaspora” 299). Clearly, Lim’s own writing contributes to this tradition of global literature. Hence we understand her unease at the label “expatriate writer” and why she feels it necessary to distinguish First-World expatriate writing from the Third-World model. For Lim, the difference lies in that, on the one hand, in First-World expatriate writing “home is not only always possible but has never been abandoned, merely put on temporary hold”; the Third-World expatriate imagination, on the other hand, “is webbed by interstices falling

² Pomegranates symbolize traditional Chinese values and familial system. The crimson color of the juice of the fruit represents “the original color of Chinese prosperity and health.” To Lim, her “Chinese life in Malaysia up to 1969 was pomegranate, thickly seeded” (*Among the White Moon Faces* 64).

³ Lim points out that it is “symptomatic of an emerging group of Malaysian writers who, in the process of nationalism, find themselves doubly dispossessed. For, initially dispossessed by their use of English, after the introduction of Bahasa (Malay) as the national language, now find themselves dispossessed a second time in a country in which both their native and adopted cultures have only a minority status” (“Gods Who Fail” 49).

between citizen and alien, exile and immigrant, traveler and refugee, national and cosmopolitan. Not either/or or both/and but transient, contingent, identity-in-process, under the gun of obliterating history, a marginal subject that is centrally narcissistic, and potentially political in its unsettling of the regulations of state-craft identity” (“First-World ‘Expats’ and Expatriate Writing” 3). While Lim’s writing, inspired by the Third-World expatriate imagination, certainly represents her individual negotiation with her diasporic experience, her works, as part of the tradition of Southeast Asian writing in English that grows out of colonial and postcolonial conditions, are also historically and geopolitically specific. To better situate *Joss and Gold*, in which Malaysian post-independent history looms prominently, an account of these specificities is needed to fully address issues of identity, language, and gender. These issues, essential to Lim’s writings, have become problematic due to Malaysia’s colonial history and postcolonial nationalism.

The history of the Chinese settling in Malaysia goes as far back as the thirteenth century (Comber 1); the first Chinese settlement in Peninsular Malaya took place in the fifteenth century, during the time of the Malacca Sultanate (Yen 2). Before the twentieth century the native Malays did not feel seriously threatened by the commercial prosperity and dominance of the Chinese since the majority of the Chinese did not intend to settle permanently in Malaya. When an increasing number of local-born Chinese began to demand citizenship rights and political involvement, and when the 1931 Census showed that for the first time the Malays were outnumbered by the non-Malays, serious Sino-Malay conflicts of interest were looming on the horizon (Comber 4-6). As Tan Chee-Beng points out, in the process of nation-building in Malaysia, each ethnic group tends to have a heightened sense of its own ethnic identity (“National-Building” 155) since politically “the communally oriented political processes of post-independence Malaysia have increased rather than decreased the ethnic consciousness of all ethnic groups” (159). In another study of Southeast Asian Chinese identities in the global context, Tan observes that even today the position of the Chinese in the region is still precarious due to China’s growing prosperity. Since 1990 the rapid economic growth of China has propagated “the China theory,” which has now extended into a “Chinese threat theory.” When ethnic Chinese communities invest in the Chinese market, their connection with China is formulated as a new form of “red terror” or “yellow peril”; thus “Chinese in Southeast Asia endured the suspicion and discrimination propagated by narrow communal nationalism and the fifth column theory during the Cold War period of 1948 to 1989. The China and Chinese threat theories amount to a revised fifth column view applied to ethnic Chinese worldwide” (“Chinese in Southeast Asia” 210-11). Apparently ethnic Chinese communities in the Southeast Asian region are always under suspicion regarding their na-

tional loyalty, exacting from them a heavy toll in all aspects of their lives.

In addition to the question of national loyalty, there is also the sustained problem of linguistic affiliation, which is of special importance for creative writers in the region. The choice of an official language in a multiracial and multiethnic society is never easy. Under a nationalist mandate in postcolonial Malaysia, indigenous Malay is the official language, and the government persistently promotes this language policy with all kinds of propaganda materials. In 1967, for instance, the Malaysian government passed the National Language Act, and the former Prime Minister Abdul Rahman advocated the use of Malay as the national language under the slogan "*Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa* (Language is the Soul of the Nation)," appealing directly to the nationalist sentiment of the Malay community (Comber 62). For the Chinese community, however, the fundamentalist definition of Malaysian identity is unjustly based on a policy of enforcing homogenous language, religion, and ethnicity: "To be Malay, therefore, is to speak Malay and to practice Islam....Malaysia demands standards of assimilation which, in effect, will debar the mass of the Chinese from Malay identity and from the rights and privileges that go with it" (Pan 254). This practice of linguistic, religious and ethnic monologism becomes a *de facto* "form of internal colonialism," as Eddie Tay argues (294). The Chinese Malaysian community is thus faced with a postcolonial dilemma, virtually obliged to decide upon their national identity. Moreover, choices of identification become yoked to choices of linguistic expressions.

Writers who choose to write in the colonial language of English find it even more difficult to resolve the tension between the nationalist mandate and artistic choice. Under *Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa*, writing in the colonizer's language becomes almost an act of treason. Lim succinctly points out the postcolonial legacy that stands in the way of the development of literature in English for the former British colonies and its paradoxical standings in the postcolonial context:

Literature in English rose from the historical situation of English as the language of colonial administration and its contemporary position as the language of government, inter-ethnic equality and communication, international trade and social prestige. National literatures in English, therefore, occupy paradoxical positions in the national culture: they are suspects as carriers of colonial attitudes and as products of a negative imperialist domination. They are attacked as posing a regressive obstacle to the advancement of indigenous culture and sentiments. At the same time, also, they are perceived (sometimes by the same observers) as evidence of the nation's international standing and participation in the broader world community and as manifesting a successful modernization process. (*Nationalism and Literature* 12)

With all the complex emotions involved in the creation of literature of English, however, Lim still chooses English as her medium of artistic expression because she regards it as her “first step out of the iron cage and into a voice,” as stated in the epigraph. And yet this choice can hardly be an easy way out; moreover, as mentioned earlier, it can lead to a marginalized state of “double dispossession” typical of the postcolonial condition. In an essay entitled “Dispossession, Possession and Domestication,” literary historian Koh Tai Ann explores the relationship of English writers of Chinese descent in the Southeast Asian region with the language they use in terms of possession, dispossession, and domestication. Her analysis in fact identifies a pattern for many postcolonial nations in terms of linguistic and literary developments. In their struggle to take possession of the colonizer’s language, postcolonial writers have to either domesticate or creolize the language. Anglophone writers therefore experience a sense of linguistic dispossession or double dispossession.⁴

Ironically, the emergence of literature in English in the Straits Settlements and peninsular Malaya, which came into being only after the Second World War, was in fact inspired by a utopian vision that literature written in English could transcend ethnic and linguistic barriers, and hold the diversified nation together. As Koh puts it,

The emergence of a literature in English in Malaya and Singapore thus coincided with the realization among intellectuals of the English-educated class that in a multiracial society they must cease to perceive or merely articulate themselves as ethnic entities. As the community which comprised the majority ethnic group in Singapore and a large minority in Malaya/Malaysia, the Chinese of more recent immigrant origin must regard themselves as no longer sojourners or *huaqiao* [overseas Chinese] while the strait-born Chinese whose interests coincided with those of their British rulers should no longer define themselves in terms of their colonial identity as the ‘Queen’s Chinese.’ (“Dispossession, Possession and Domestication” 154)

While this view of English as a bridge language among the different racial groups in the former British colonies echoes a class-bound colonial ideology, it also highlights the wish among the younger generations of Chinese Malaysians for a way out of the linguistic impasse. Neither *huaqiao* nor the

⁴ According to Koh Tai Ann, the main reasons for the lack of literature in English in this region are “an absence of the historical conditions which generated the nationalistic impulses that eventually motivated the creation of the literature in English in Malaysia and the Chinese community’s lack of a sense of a common or shared identity” (“Literature in English by Chinese in Malaya/Malaysia and Singapore” 124).

“Queen’s Chinese,” postcolonial Chinese Malaysian writers are expected to use English as an alternative medium to create a new identity for themselves and their communities.

In important ways, Shirley Lim exemplifies those Chinese Malaysian writers who have to reconstruct a new manner of dealing with these identity and linguistic issues, though her case is further complicated by personal history and migratory trajectory. As she explains in her memoir about her status as a Chinese Malaysian, Lim is already of mixed ancestry since her father is the son of a *sinkeh*, “recently-arrived China-born Chinese immigrants” and her mother is from the *peranakan*, local-born Chinese.⁵ Through the title of the Singapore edition, *Among the White Moonfaces: Memoirs of a Nyonya Feminist*, Lim specifically highlights her identity as a Nyonya, a local-born Malaysian Chinese woman. Interestingly, the title in the American edition by the Feminist Press is *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir of Homelands*. This difference of course responds to the marketing concerns of the publishers.⁶ Yet it also reflects her different locational identities—she is a Nyonya, “a Malayan-native Chinese woman” just like her mother (12); a feminist who breaks away from tradition in Malaysia; and an Asian American who is negotiating with her many homelands in the United States. The identity of “Shirley Geok-lin Lim” changes as she writes about herself in different geographical locations, and these changes best exemplify her fluid and creolized diasporic identity .

When she chooses her literary identity, for instance, Lim is heavily influenced by her colonial education. She once identified herself as “the Wordsworthian-influenced reader on the equatorial line” who discovered “the mysterious value of the subjective self” (“The Dispossessing Eye” 132). This British influence also marks her choice of subjectivity and individuality against the demand of creating nationalist literature. As Koh Tai Ann observes from a rather idealistic perspective, because Lim is “committed to be an individual” instead of nourishing any nationalist enterprise, she can “take on and slough off identities at will—*peranakan*, Chinese, Malaysian, woman, Asian American, or to be all of these at once” and “cross many cultural and

⁵ Koh points out the differences within the Chinese community in the region: “By the late nineteenth century, the Chinese as an ethnic group could be roughly divided into the more recently-arrived China-born Chinese immigrants or *sinkeh* (meaning ‘new guests’ in the *Fujian* dialect spoken by the majority of Chinese who emigrated here) and the *peranakan* or Strait-born Baba Chinese” (“Literature in English by Chinese in Malays/Malaysia and Singapore” 124).

⁶ While a book includes the word “feminist” in its title may sell better in the Euro-American book market, the use of “Nyonya” can certainly create a more intimate local connection for readers of Southeast Asia. As Tamara S. Wagner points out, during the last decade or so there is “an increasing investment in Peranakan culture both in Singapore and, more slowly, at the international market-place” and there is “much more insistent fascination with Nyonyas (Peranakan women) rather than with Babas (Peranakan men)” (40).

national boundaries and join in the stream of international writing in English rather than belong to a national canon of writing—which in Malaysia anyway, is the literature in Malay” (“Literature in English by Chinese in Malaya/Malaysia and Singapore” 153).

Nevertheless, the negative side of this fluid identity is Lim’s sense of non-belonging. As Lim confesses, “[b]ecause my family was Straits Settlements Nyonya/Baba, I was considered Chinese by some groups; but because I could not read Mandarin and spoke very little Hokkien, I was called a Malay *ghost* by some Chinese” (“The Dispossessing Eye” 131, emphasis added). This sense of a “ghostly” existence derives from her being constantly excluded from various communities because of her ancestry, ethnicity and language.⁷ And yet it marks the vantage point from which Lim creates volumes of poetry and academic essays. It is nevertheless in her first novel that she embodies and thereby confronts the ghosts of her past.

Embodying National History

Shirley Lim’s sense of a ghostly existence is clearly embodied in her protagonist Li An, a complicated character whose identification has strong overtones of historicity and gender politics. In *Joss and Gold*, a gendered politics of representation is clearly evidenced in the different patterns of identification for men and women. In addition to being a showcase of Chinese Malaysian womanhood, these engendered representations also become indirect and yet important interventions into Malaysian national history within a transnational framework. And Lim appears to provide a solution to interracial conflicts and confrontations through the creation of the character of Li An’s Amerasian daughter. Together, the representations of women in *Joss and Gold* offer a feminist vision of Southeast Asian history that is rooted in female bodily experiences. What follows is a reading of the embodied narration of history and the practice of feminist body politics in the novel.

In *Joss and Gold* men and women employ different patterns of identification: whereas the male characters in the novel uphold relatively fixed nationalist or racial identities, the women, who are often faced with either a lack or a surplus of paternal presence, appear to be fluid and migratory. These distinct patterns in a way coincide with Stuart Hall’s two different views of cultural identity in his seminal “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation.” Hall posits that two axes or vectors simultaneously frame Caribbean identities—“the vector of similarity and continuity, and the vector

⁷ Eddie Tay identifies the triple exclusion suffered by Lim as stemming “from the nation-state origin because of her Chinese ancestry and her choice of using English for creative practice, and from British and American academies that traditionally confer second-class status on non-British or American writers” as well as “from patriarchal oppression” (303).

of difference and rupture” (72). These two framing vectors correspond to the two positions of defining cultural identity respectively. As Hall contends, the first position is about a stable and unitary self; in such a position “our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people,’ with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (69). In the second position, however, cultural identity is constantly being challenged by historical interventions and contingencies, and “is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’”; in this position “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narrative of the past” (70). And Hall reminds us that the second position allows us to understand “the truly traumatic character of ‘the colonial experience’” (70). If we adapt Hall’s two vectors/axes of identity formation to the reading of *Joss and Gold*, the men in the novel seem to be aligned with “the vector of similarity and continuity” whereas the women represent “the vector of difference and rupture.” In other words, as the men are more or less bounded by the discourse of descent, some of the women’s narratives can allow more room for the discourse of consent.⁸ This pattern is by no means conventional in terms of the norm of Chinese patriarchy. However, Lim draws precisely upon this unconventionality to explore the Chinese diasporic condition in Southeast Asia. While the men are not stock characters, the women clearly are the center of refraction and reflection. And the marks of history are written on the bodies of the women.

In *Joss and Gold* Lim creates an unconventional female protagonist that allows her to engage gender as well as racial issues. On the one hand, Li An can be read as the novel’s representation of Chinese Malaysians caught in the historical juncture of post-colonialism and nation-building. On the other hand, she is unconventional because of her orphan status. Fatherless at an early age and symbolically motherless when her mother remarries and builds another family, Li An stands outside of the traditional Chinese patriarchal structure and, therefore, has more freedom to choose her identity than her peers. Her love for English literature further reveals the fact that she is a product of a colonial education and an advocate of individuality. And yet for all her love of independence she chooses to marry the very conventional Henry, whose father is a formidable Chinese patriarch. So with her choice of marriage partner Li An virtually writes herself into a conventional familial plot. Then she breaks away from tradition again by having an affair with Chester. But in fact she is more attracted to what Chester represents, which is her aborted American Dream. The significance of the character Li An clearly

⁸ This is an allusion to Werner Sollors’s theory of descent and consent in *Beyond Ethnicity*.

lies in the fact that she is situated at the center of the race narrative, on both national and transnational levels.

Seen in the light of race narrative, the first book, "Crossing," is about the interactions of different races and the climax should be the 1969 race riots when indigenous Malays vented their anger against the Chinese Malaysian victory in the national elections. In the novel Lim carefully builds up this climatic moment with the introduction of Li An's diary entries and successfully weaves the personal in with the political. The eight entries become a countdown toward the eventful night of the riots. However, the climax appears paradoxically anti-climatic in that the riots are not directly represented. As witnesses of history in the making, Li An and Chester watch the city on fire from a remote distance and in complete silence. The narrative almost discretely follows a rule of classical tragedy that violence is revealed indirectly. The body of Henry's father, for instance, is not released to the family "for fear of further public disorder" (100). Only metonymic signs for the act of violence are presented—broken porcelain, torn pieces of fabric, the jadeite goddess Kuan Yin used as a club on Mr. Yeh, and a disoriented Mrs. Yeh, who hides inside a cupboard as they beat her husband to death. Li An's perception is the only direct lead for the reader to access the traumatic incident. For her, however, the significance of the night of the riots lies in the consummation of her relationship with Chester. In this way, the consequences of a historical event are presented through a woman's bodily experience. Interracial conflicts generate an interracial liaison and a child of mixed race is conceived: the irony here is too obvious to be missed. Of course, the May 13th incident is more than a device to facilitate the consummation; it is also a real historical event that bespeaks a racial hatred that still haunts the nation. Nevertheless the way in which Lim chooses to represent this historical incident through a woman's corporeal experience foregrounds the ways female bodies are inevitably racialized and underscores the importance of interracial discourse in the text.

For Li An, it is also a moment of disillusionment. Like most of the Chinese Malaysians, she has been optimistic about the future of a multiethnic society and thought of Malaysia as *rojak*, "if mixed right, it will be delicious" (44). This *rojak*, a dish of "hot salad with mango and bean curd and peanuts" (45), serves as an ethnic marker in the novel and is comparable to other culinary metaphors, such as a tossed salad for American multiculturalism, or a callaloo for Caribbean identity. But the recipe obviously is not exactly right for the national appetite and it is a moment of disillusionment for many Chinese Malaysians. This marks a point of no return in Malaysian history. And the first part ends on this note of broken dreams.

The setting of the second book, "Circling," moves from Southeast Asia to the American east coast more than a decade later. At first, this take on

middle-class white American life seems somewhat out of place in a story about Southeast Asian women. For Lim, however, feminist theorization of the relation of language to gender must always incorporate the categories of race, nation, and class to account for “postcolonial, exilic, and Third World women of color and their specific positions” (*Writing S.E./Asia* 50). Like many Third World feminists, Lim remains critical of the “colorless” Anglo-American feminism and insists that “[t]he relation between Asian woman and Anglo-American feminist theory must be continually interrogative and provisional as long as it remains a relation of unbalanced power, with Anglo-Americans formulating the theory and Asians consuming it” (*Writing S.E./Asia* 41). Similarly, a comparative approach may be one of the most effective ways to show the differences between First- and Third-World women. Thus, the New York story of the second book crucially unveils the concerns of white feminism. Meryl’s insistence on her rights to her body and the importance of her career echoes the familiar rhetoric of second-wave feminism. She is not treated without sympathy because she had to face the traumatic experience of having an abortion on her own at the beginning of her relationship with Chester. Yet her perspectives and concerns as a white feminist appear quite remote from those of Chinese Malaysian women, and thus reveal the gap between First-World and Third-World feminisms that belies any illusion of a universal feminist agenda.

“Circling” also functions at the level of emplotment as it provides the background for Chester’s visit to Singapore in the next section and for the witness to the “white panic” of middle-class white Americans in the face of Third-World migration at the levels of transnationalism and postcolonialism.⁹ Chester is seen as the selfish person he always is, tinted perhaps with the shadow of Pinkerton from the Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*, since he never considered visiting his daughter until after his vasectomy. His career as an anthropologist implicitly comments on the colonial mentality embedded in (white/First-World) anthropological enterprises as well. Another First-World/Third-World contact point in Book II is Dan’s hostility toward Roy Kumar, a scientist from India. Roy’s presence in the novel recalls the growing population of Third-World professionals in the United States after the Second World War. While the U.S. government invites the residency of top-notch scientists, bigots like Dan inevitably feel threatened by the physical presence of Others.

⁹ See Henry Giroux’s essay “White Panic” in which he observes how white Americans imagine themselves as “the new besieged group...in the age of political correctness.” Giroux is describing the white bourgeois reaction to the increasing urban crime rate. Within the context of this chapter it could relate to the ways in which Third-World professionals are treated as threats and Other in the First-World countries. See <<http://www.zmag.org/zmag/articles/mar95giroux.htm>>.

The most significant character in *Joss and Gold* is Li An's biracial daughter Yeh Suyin, the embodiment of the First-World/Third-World encounter. The name of the character can allude to the well-known Eurasian writer Han Suyin, who has resided in and written about Malaysia as an expatriate. As mentioned in the earlier chapter, Han Suyin's novel *A Many-Splendored Thing* has been adapted into a Hollywood feature film, thereby creating a literary heritage for the character and the novel. Lim's Suyin is, therefore, not a figure without historical and literary ancestry, and more importantly, her existence is a materialization of a hybrid body and a locale upon which the novel's central concerns of interracial, postcolonial, and gender issues converge. Her pre-adolescent body is the focus of contention in Book III "Landing." The scenario is almost tragically comedic: first she has three mothers but no father; then she has a surplus of fathers as well. And her rite of passage into puberty is interestingly presented partially as an interrogation of patrilineage: she is expected to choose between Henry, the Chinese Malaysian who gives her his family name, and Chester, her biological American father. The battle over paternal claim in this case is mainly determined by the vicissitudes of patriarchal and racial power structures. Two men, one Asian and the other American, struggle to "father" the girl child, and their respective claims of legitimate "ownership" are articulated like territorial disputes.

Most importantly, through Suyin, Lim reformulates and rewrites the trope of the "tragic Eurasian," who is always caught between worlds. In a school play Suyin is assigned the role of Madame White Snake, another borderline mythical character who is semi-human and semi-reptile. While Suyin is too young to comprehend the insulting implication of the role, Li An is keenly aware of and greatly pained by the implicit way in which Suyin has been marked as an Other. However, Lim refuses to make Suyin a victim of miscegenation. Despite the fact that the birth of Suyin in *Joss and Gold* is regarded as scandalous in that she is the physical evidence of Li An's extra-marital affair with a white man, she in fact embodies a new model of Eurasian/Amerasian. Suyin rejects the predetermined categories of racial identity: "a bui doi, child of dirt" (170), "a con lai, a mixed animal" (199), or "Chap-cheng-chap-cheng-kwei," mixed-up devil (204).

Examining the Madame Butterfly paradigm of the novel allows us to understand the way Lim revises the Orientalist narrative. In the book's "Afterword," Leong Liew Geok rightly observes that Lim's novel "provides a provocative alternative to the Madame Butterfly myth" (267). While Li An with her strong personality is certainly neither a Madame Butterfly nor a Miss Saigon, more significant is how the "re-Orienting" of the Butterfly narrative allows Suyin, the silent child in the original drama, to speak, think, and decide her own future. As Jonathan White points out, in different Ma-

dame Butterfly narratives there is always “a Western man who has journeyed to Asia, where he pursues his vision of the Orient by ‘marrying’ a woman there” (5). What is often ignored in the discussion of these various narratives is the child born out of the interracial liaison. In Puccini’s version, for instance, a crucial plot element that leads to Cio-Cio-San’s eventual suicide is that Lieutenant Pinkerton comes back with his American wife to claim the biracial child, named Sorrow.¹⁰ *Joss and Gold* reworks the Butterfly myth by giving voice to the biracial child and putting paternal discourse into question. While Pinkerton in *Madame Butterfly* is the epitome of unscrupulous white men indulging in Orientalist exploitations of Asian women, there is no question of his paternal authority. Paternity in this novel, on the other hand, is presented as a myth, a riddle for this postcolonial girl child to decipher.

About to cross the threshold into womanhood, the eleven-year-old Suyin is imminently transformable. At the end of the novel Lim makes it clear that the new generation of biracial children must seek their own identities. When Ellen questions Li An’s decision to bring the two fathers into Suyin’s life, Li An responds, “It’s Suyin who has to answer these questions, and there is no way on earth, godmother,...that you or I can stop her from answering them the way she wants to” (305). In contrast to the way in which Lin An used to guard her daughter with strict vigilance (represented by Suyin’s ironed clothes), this endowment of choice signals the beginning of Suyin’s maturity. To offer Suyin this freedom, with its attendant responsibility, effectively reconfigures the Eurasian plot since it is a freedom that is hardly available to Suyin’s literary predecessors, such as Mimi Lambert in Diana Chang’s *The Frontiers of Love*.

Embedded in the novel is the narrative of a biracial woman, whose bodily presence belies the miscegenative narrative represented by the tragic subplot of the interracial relationship between Li An’s friend Gina and Paroo in Book I. Gina, descended from a traditional Chinese Malaysian family, chooses suicide over the option of having a civil wedding with her Indian Malaysian boyfriend because she will be disowned by her father if she marries “a keeling-kwei, a Tamil devil” (53). The Malay nationalist character in the novel, Abdullah, states matter-of-factly after Gina’s death: “Very difficult this interracial affair....Better that like stay with like. Indian and Chinese cannot mix, too many differences—food, custom, language. To be husband

¹⁰ Jonathan Wisenthal observes that France, Italy and the United States are the three nations mainly responsible for the production of the Butterfly narratives. Giacomo Puccini’s opera *Madame Butterfly* (1904) is based partly on John Luther Long’s novella *Madame Butterfly* (1898), and the novel in turn is inspired by Pierre Loti’s semi-autobiographical novel, *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887). Later Long’s novella is adapted into a play of the same title by David Belasco (1900). In the post-Vietnam era David Henry Hwang’s play *M. Butterfly* (1988) and musicals such as *Miss Saigon* (1989) are all American variations of the Butterfly prototype (3-4).

and wife must share same religion, same race, same history. Malay and Chinese also cannot mix, like oil and water” (58). Hence the taboo against interracial marriages is set up by paternal authoritative figures, and upheld by the daughter in the name of the father. To Li An, Gina becomes a victim of history: “She hadn’t been able to imagine what kind of life she could have without being Chinese. History taught no lessons about changing one’s race. It only taught about war and violence between people, even people of the same color and blood. Gina hadn’t been clever enough to rise above history” (60). If Gina’s tragedy is a result of rigid racial categorization, Suyin’s narrative existence presents the possibility, indeed the inevitability of hybridization in postcolonial Southeast Asian countries.

In an interview with Jennie Wang, Shirley Lim points out that from the very start her writing is about “insertion”—“the insertion of my own space, my own country, and my own reality” (154). Her view on identity is that it “is always in evolution, in conflict, in crisis” and through her writing she can deal with her multiple identities, both “the historically situated” Malaysian identity and the identity of the American “promised land” (156). And the tentative title of *Joss and Gold* was “The Farther Country: Circling, Crossing, Landing” (160).¹¹ The published title obviously changes the perspective from a distanced one to that of one engaging in traditional ancestor worship since both joss and gold are essential to the worshipping ceremony. Joss sticks, or incense sticks, are lighted during the ceremony in order to get in touch with ancestral spirits; and piles of gold money, the gold foil paper shaped into gold nuggets or the stack of paper squares with bits and pieces of gold foil attached, are regularly burned as offerings to the ancestors so that they will be sufficiently funded in the underworld. This reference to the actual practice of ancestor worship makes the change of title an interesting case since, in one of her early critical essays on Malaysian and Singaporean literatures in English, Lim specifically identifies the use of ancestral religions as evidence “of the existence of substantial minority cultures outside the nationalistic one, cultures which although non-dominative are validated by their historical position in the region and by their majority status elsewhere” (“Gods Who Fail” 50). The title *Joss and Gold* by no means suggests a return to the essentialist concept of a Chinese Malaysian identity which, as the novel has shown in the case of Gina’s tragedy, brings no future for their children. Nevertheless, it makes a statement about the necessary recognition of the existence of Chinese ethnicity as a protest against the monocultural

¹¹ The subtitle is later turned into the titles of the three books in the novel; they are “tropes of motion, of moving and [of] flying” (Wang 161) that reinforce the heightened sense of mobility and fluidity in terms of identity formation.

and monolingual policy of the Malaysian government. It also marks the diasporic writer repositioning or reinserting herself and her writing into national and ethnic discourses.

The allusion to ancestral tradition also complicates the argument about women's affiliation with the vector of difference and rupture in the novel, since the only direct textual reference to joss and gold is when Ellen and her mother clean the ancestral grave site at Ching Ming, the day for the annual visit to the ancestral burial ground. A curious reference to maternal memory occurs in this scene: "Ellen worried that one day Mother would not be able to locate the graves. What would she do then? It would be like a disaster movie, except that instead of an approaching meteor or wall of fire, it would be the collapse of Mother's entire world. No more ancestors, no spirits, no family ties. No past, no future" (276). Although Ellen dismisses her mother as "an anachronism" and refuses to explain to Suyin the meaning of Ching Ming, this collapse of the familiar and conventional world still presents a real terror for Ellen. For a brief moment she seems to recognize the important role of maternal memory in mapping and linking the past, present and future. This is of particular significance since Ellen truly breaks away from tradition by staying unmarried and choosing to set up an unconventional household by sharing the responsibility of raising Suyin along with Li An. She also represents a latent lesbian desire that cannot be acknowledged within the textual space. Notably, Ellen's mother recalls a familiar figure of the older generation of Chinese women who anchor familial lineage and safeguard ancestral memory, a figure that is not dissimilar to Brave Orchid in *The Woman Warrior*. Her brief presence in the novel further fleshes out the differences of womanhood in the Chinese diaspora and testifies to the reality of the women's multiple roles of maintaining continuity and effecting changes in the diasporic condition. Furthermore, her connection to the land strengthens the sense of earth-bound trajectory as suggested in the title of the last book. With the anchor of ancestral presence and re-territorialized linkage, the female characters in the novel along with members of the Chinese Malaysian community are able to step away from the ghostly shadow of being rootless. Through the bodily experiences of these women, Chinese Malaysians are finally seen as firmly connected to the land that they claim as their home.

By representing a spectrum of womanhood in the Chinese diaspora, Lim deliberately practices a feminist body politics that yokes the writing of the female body to national narration within a transnational framework. In her second novel, *Sister Swing* (2006), Lim allows her female characters to physically experience transcontinental migrations between Malaysia and the United States to further explore the issues of the American Dream and diasporic corporeality. In contrast to the rootless drifting through geographical

and psychological space and the various sexual encounters while searching for a self identity in *Sister Swing*, however, it is the subtle incorporation of Malaysian national history in *Joss and Gold* that instills a strong sense of historicity into the narrative, which allows the female characters to remain rooted while exploring different routings of identification. As Price and Shildrick point out, “At any given moment we are always marked corporeally in specific ways, but not as an unchanging or unchangeable fixture” (8). While the male characters can hardly step away from their various patriarchal and androcentric positions, the many racialized bodies of Chinese Malaysian women in *Joss and Gold* appear like true images of “history’s self” struggling in “the river/ of nationalism” (296) and are able to transcend nationalist ideologies and transform themselves in times of love, war, and peace.

Chapter 6

At Home and Elsewhere: Diasporic Imagination and Transnational Migration in Nieh Hualing's *Mulberry and Peach*

Women are both of and not of the nation. Between woman and nation is, perhaps, the space or zone where we can deconstruct these monoliths and render them more historically nuanced and accountable to politics.

—Caren Kaplan, et al.
Between Woman and Nation

[W]omen in diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by, a “home” culture and a tradition—selectively....They connect and disconnect, forget and remember, in complex, strategic ways. The lived experiences of diasporic women thus involve painful difficulty in mediating discrepant worlds.

—James Clifford
Routes

The very essence of repression is defined by Freud as a ‘failure of translation,’ that is, precisely as the barrier which separates us from a foreign language. If madness and literature are both ruled by the very thing that represses them, by the very thing that censors them in language, if they both—each in its own way—proceed from a ‘failure of translation,’ the attempt to read them will necessitate a crossing of the border between languages....To speak about madness is to speak about the difference between languages: to import into one language the strangeness of another; to unsettle the decisions language has prescribed to us so that, somewhere between languages, will emerge the freedom to speak.

—Shoshana Felman
Writing and Madness

In her afterword to the latest Chinese edition of *Mulberry and Peach* (1997), Nieh Hualing stresses the connection between her creative power and the language she is using: “When I moved to Iowa from Taiwan in 1964, for some years I could not write a single thing. Because of this uncertainty about my roots, my creative pen had been suspended between Chinese and English. During those years, I read; I lived; I experienced; I meditated; I explored. Finally I discovered only by writing in Chinese about the lives and affairs of

the Chinese could I feel at home and set free. Then and there I knew that my mother tongue is my roots. China is my native. Iowa is my home.”¹ As a diasporic woman, Nieh felt perched between languages and her creativity suffered from this linguistic and psychological uncertainty. Yet the suspension of her national and cultural identification, as the editors of *Between Woman and Nation* point out, also suggests a possible freedom to revise national discourse. In her own words, Nieh Hualing’s freedom of speech symbolically and literally emerged when she began writing *Mulberry and Peach* in the 1970s. In this instance, the creation of *Mulberry and Peach* at once salves the pain for the artist in exile, and frees her to explore different formations of female subjectivity as foregrounded in multiple geographical locations and historical experiences. In the interpenetrating chronotopes of *Mulberry and Peach*, Nieh skillfully records the story of a woman survivor and her psychosomatic reaction to traumas. At the same time, she also faces up to the challenge of accounting for one of the most predominant experiences of the twentieth century, that of transnational migration and immigration. Importantly, Nieh frames this story of (im)migrations and exiles with a clinical case of schizophrenia. Here schizophrenia is used metaphorically to illustrate artistic and national *dis-ease* and, literally, to depict the material suffering of a female trauma victim. The act of writing trauma can be regarded as Nieh’s effort to overcome what Shosanna Felman terms “failure of translation”: to speak or write to a listening party in order to lift repression and to translate one’s experience, thereby at least partially overcoming a linguistic barrier. It also enables the artist to shuttle back and forth among the different cultural and social landscapes of China, Taiwan, and the United States, and finally come to terms with her own roots and selfhood. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that Nieh Hualing is a survivor of historical traumas, and that *Mulberry and Peach* becomes a literary testimony that attempts to come to terms with human experiences of extremity. And, although Nieh continues to work linguistically with her deterritorialized mother tongue, like the character Peach in her novel she has also, and perhaps primarily, reterritorialized herself both psychologically and symbolically.

In this chapter I engage in a close reading of the formation of transnational female subjectivity in Nieh Hualing’s *Mulberry and Peach*. I begin by situating Nieh within the tradition of Chinese overseas literature, and discussing the politics of home as represented in the text. The second part of my analysis focuses on Nieh’s strategy of handling space, history, and social reality as microcosms. Specifically, I investigate the ways in which Nieh deploys liminality to represent the cycle of entrapment and renegotiation with

¹ This quote is translated from “Sangqing yu Taohong liu fang xiao ji.” (“Note on the Exile of *Mulberry and Peach*”; *Sangqing yu Taohong* 271). All the translations in this chapter are mine except for the English version of *Mulberry and Peach*.

selfhood as her protagonists travel through different geographical locations, and the construction of Chinese American affiliation in the diaspora as Peach journeys across the United States.

Politics of Home in the Diaspora²

Nieh Hualing was born in China in 1925 and spent her formative years amidst the Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists.³ She moved with her widowed mother to Taiwan in 1948, and there established her reputation as a skilled short story writer. Unlike the anti-Communist literary propaganda produced by most of her contemporaries, the stories she wrote primarily sought to portray the existential dilemmas faced by mainlanders on the island. She later became the literary editor of *The Free China Fortnightly*, a dissident journal—and the most vocal of these—in its opposition to the Nationalist government in the 1950s. In 1960, during the height of the Nationalist “White Terror,”⁴ Lei Zhen, the journal’s general editor, was arrested for treason. Nieh was also implicated. She was put under surveillance and her house was searched. Thus, Nieh herself experienced first-hand the “White Terror.” To get away from political oppression, Nieh left Taiwan for the United States in 1964 at the invitation of the Writer’s Workshop at the University of Iowa. During her tenure at Iowa, she and her husband Paul Engle founded the International Writing Program in 1967. Engle and Nieh were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976 for their contributions to fostering international understanding.

In *Mulberry and Peach*, Nieh transforms her own experiences of exile and oppression into the story of a Chinese woman, Mulberry, whose schizophrenia is manifested through her Chinese American other, the sexually uninhibited Peach. Mulberry becomes Peach after experiencing the war with Japanese imperialists, the Communist takeover, Taiwan’s period of “White Terror,” and the hunt for her across the United States by an agent of the U.S. Immigration Service. In the novel, the violence of what Stuart Hall terms “cultural *diaspora-ization*”—“the process of unsettling, recombination, hybridization and ‘cut-and-mix’” of diasporic culture (“New Ethnicities” 447)—appears in forms of psychosis. Thus we have two protago-

² The term “politics of home” is borrowed from Rosemary Marangoly George’s *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*.

³ Biographical information on Nieh comes from various sources, including the introduction to Nieh in *Nativism Overseas: Contemporary Chinese Women Writers*, Pai Hsien-yung’s two pieces “The Wandering Chinese” and “Shi ji de piao bo zhe” (“The Wanderer of the Century”), as well as Sau-ling Wong’s afterword to the English edition of *Mulberry and Peach*.

⁴ “White Terror,” as opposed to Chinese red Communism, refers to the political persecution and oppression of the Nationalist government in Taiwan that started in the 1950s. See Lin Shu-yan’s analysis of Taiwan’s White Terror in the 1950s.

nists—Mulberry and Peach—instead of one. The novel, in fact, begins with Peach's declaration of Mulberry's demise in her interview with the immigration agent—symbolically named by her as “Mr. Dark”—and ends with Mulberry's last appearance right before the car accident that metaphorically wipes out her consciousness. So the “death” of Mulberry, which in its most simplistic terms represents the Chinese side of the protagonist, is a necessary precondition for this narrative. Yet the Chinese part never completely disappears from the text. The novel proceeds to reconstruct Mulberry's life story as recorded in her three dairies, each introduced by an interlude of Peach's American adventures. From the diary entries, we know that Peach is always a part of Mulberry. Lurking behind the mask of the quieter and more traditional Mulberry, Peach sneaks out from time to time to enjoy herself. For instance, Peach witnesses Mulberry's first sexual experience while stranded in the middle of the Yangtze River during the Sino-Japanese War; she is also present in Taiwan when Mulberry walks out of the attic prison to seek a life of her own apart from her husband and daughter. In Part IV, through typological alternations, the author reveals Mulberry/Peach's internal struggle to gain control of personal as well as narrative consciousness and power of speech. As Mulberry is under the double pressure of carrying an illegitimate child and coping with the scrutiny of the immigration service, Peach appears more and more frequently, and eventually takes over completely.

Not only are the female protagonists schizophrenic, the text itself presents a kind of doubled formulation in terms of generic and typographical representations. The novel is a hybrid of the picaresque, the diary/epistolary, and the psychological novel. Apart from U. S. road maps inserted in the text, for instance, the English version includes illustrations of the Little Dot adventures. The text itself, like its protagonists, is a text in transformation. We may say one of Nieh Hualing's artistic achievements lies in her inward inspection through the external, picaresque form that generically involves extended, outward movement. Thus, *Mulberry and Peach* enacts a story of split personality even at the formal level.

However, this novel is not simply one of the formulaic stories of “immigrant schizophrenia,” as Sheng-mei Ma calls them in his *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures*. Rather, Nieh's novel ambitiously chronicles Chinese history from the 1940s to the 1960s and, later, American history in the 1960s is also interwoven into the narrative through Mulberry/Peach's American existence. Written and serialized in the early 1970s, more than a decade before the lifting of Taiwanese martial law, *Mulberry and Peach* takes stock of three decades of national suffering and represents it in the form of personal trauma.⁵ The *in medias res* narrative

⁵ Banned by Taiwan's Nationalist government in the middle of its serialization and censored by the Communist regime on the Mainland, *Mulberry and Peach* the text in an uncanny way has

structure allows the protagonists to look both backward and forward in their lives. It also allows the author to parallel the reconstruction of personal, traumatic memory with the inscription of (trans)national historiography.⁶

Mulberry and Peach, a textual representation of immigrant experiences and Nieh's first major work after her own immigration to the United States, has been categorized as an important text of Chinese overseas literature written in the United States.⁷ A brief survey of the tradition of this subgroup of writings can therefore better situate our discussion of this intricately em-plotted novel. Although the production of Chinese overseas literature began as early as the mid-nineteenth century, when the first groups of Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States, for Taiwanese and Chinese readers in

experienced a diasporic wandering similar to its protagonists' journey. Sau-ling Wong briefly outlines the novel's circuitous publication history: "Originally written in Chinese and published in 1976, in its Chinese version the book is read both as a political allegory (it was banned by the Nationalist government) and as part of an exile or émigré tradition; Nieh is seen as a peer of Pai Hsien-yung (Bai Xianyong) and Yu Lihua, who have written extensively on the lives of transplanted intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s. But as American critical interest grew in feminist non-Western works and in literatures of displacement and border-crossing, the translation of *Mulberry and Peach*, which first appeared in the United States in 1981, was reissued as a paperback in 1988" ("Chinese American Literature" 50-51).

⁶ The above introduction to the novel only partially shows the complexity of this modernist text. In fact, *Mulberry and Peach* has always been a controversial text that invites different readings. A review of the critical reception of the novel will help us understand its adaptability to critical interpretations. Pai Hsien-yung's investigation of the theme of exile in the novel is one of its earliest critical evaluations. Reading *Mulberry and Peach* along with Yu Lihua's *Again the Palm Trees*, another major piece of Chinese émigré literature, Pai places the novel within the exilic tradition initiated by Chū Yuan's "Li Sao" (4th Century B.C.), in which Chū uses literature to lament his fate as a political exile ("The Wandering Chinese" 212). Pai points out the allegorical aspect of both novels with "the Wandering Chinese" as the central image. According to Pai, Nieh designs this novel to be "a fable of the tragic state of modern China, whose political schizophrenia is analogous to the chaotic world of the insane" (210). Leo Ou-fan Lee continues Pai's allegorical interpretation and regards the novel as an example of what he calls "Chinese cosmopolitanism," praising it for giving "new meaning to being a self-exiled Chinese on the peripheries" because it deciphers and deconstructs the master narrative of modern Chinese history from her marginal location ("On the Margins of the Chinese Discourse" 230). Sheng-mei Ma discusses Nieh along with Pai Hsien-yung, Baharati Mukherjee, and Kazuo Ishiguro and argues that these writers "often opt for the identical formula of schizophrenic when it comes to the depictions of immigrants" (41). In her afterword to the English edition of the novel, Sau-ling Wong concentrates on cross-cultural and feminist aspects of the text. She specifically alerts the reader to an unusual practice in which the novel uses female characters to embody the fate of the Chinese people. Wong further points out that "the interest of the nation and the interests of women are, more often than not, at odds with each other, and the crises of nation are typically a contest between patriarchal structures in which women have no say" (220). David Palumbo-Liu places the text within the problematics of exile: despite that the diasporic subject still identifies with the home it left behind, s/he "must give itself up to the temporal and historical as it is resituated in a new sociopolitical sphere" (347).

⁷ The works of overseas Chinese writers are collectively called "Chinese student overseas literature" (*Liu xue sheng wen xue*), "Chinese overseas elite/intellectual literature" (*Hai wai zhi shi fen zi wen xue*), and "Chinese overseas literature" (*Hai wai wen xue*) (Kao 2).

general it did not become really popular until the 1960s and 1970s. Well-known authors such as Nieh Hualing, Pai Hsien-yung, and Yu Lihua, most of who were born in China and later moved to Taiwan, began to write about their immigration and exile experiences. Sheng-mei Ma observes that “[a]s spokesperson for an entire generation of overseas Taiwanese Chinese students, they represent the cold war exodus of young men and women from the third world to the Metropolitan West” (*Immigrant Subjectivities* 47). Their works are widely read by Taiwanese readers curious about life on the other side of the Pacific. From the writers’ own perspective, however, this journey to the west is a form of exile. Pai Hsien-yung, for example, presents a highly romanticized version of the émigré writers of his own generation as lonely and struggling talents trapped by history. While writing about Taiwan, these writers turn to “the individual psyche” in order to avoid the interference of government censorship (“The Wandering Chinese” 207). Ironically, despite the fact that most of the overseas authors in this period write about a profound sense of alienation and rootlessness, it nevertheless becomes a kind of fodder for the readers’ imagination about America and the First World.

Hence, Chinese overseas literature in the United States owes its existence largely to the exilic imagination and a sense of homelessness of the émigré writers. As Ma aptly observes, the rise of overseas student literature is “tied to Taiwan and the Pacific Rim’s postcolonial condition amidst the cold war era and beyond, as well as, specifically, to changes in U.S. immigration policies in the 1960s and the ensuing U.S. minority problematics” (*Immigrant Subjectivities* 94). “Three kinds of cultural forces...surface and join in these texts,” Ma further summarizes, “the Chinese tradition, the global postcolonial movement, and the minority problematics” (110). However, understanding the nuances involved in the creation of Taiwanese immigrant texts does not prevent Ma from criticizing these texts via Fanon as writings produced by “the ‘national bourgeoisie,’ a class deeply embroiled in and profiting from Westernization and modernization” (131). On the other hand, in her preface to a collected volume of creative and critical works by and about overseas Chinese women writers, Hsin-sheng Kao sympathizes with these writers while looking at their difficulties as immigrants. She contends that Chinese overseas literature is generally a quest for identity for the immigrant writers who “have experienced the dynamic processes of conflict between assimilation and resistance” (1). Kao delineates the major themes of this type of work with a strong emphasis on these writers’ continued affiliation with Chinese sensibility and reality: “works of the fifties and sixties by Chinese overseas writers stress the themes of rootlessness and the search for self-identity, as well as the concepts of assimilation and rejection, inclusion and exclusion, and internal

and external exile" (2).⁸ Kao's remarks are clearly an extension of C. T. Hsia's famous point about overseas writers' "obsession with China." Chen Ruoxi, also a well-known overseas writer, identifies this steady "homeward" look as a kind of Chinese nativism (13).⁹ After extended contact with the new land, however, this nativism begins to evolve and takes on "a double meaning, one for the new land and one for the old" (17). This double vision, in turn, allows immigrant writers to serve an idealistic function "as both voices of public opinion and bridges between the divided camp" (18). Also speaking from his own experience, Leo Ou-fan Lee envisions his overseas position as advantageous, and claims that "only by being at the true periphery of China—that is, overseas—can they hope to rise above it, because a true peripheral perspective affords them a distance sufficiently removed from the center of the obsession so that they can subject the obsession itself to artistic treatment" ("On the Margins" 232).

What surfaces from the brief overview above is clearly a spectrum of critical stances toward Chinese overseas or immigrant literature—from a critique of the middle-class "comprador intelligentsia" to a celebration of the "peripheral" position of the overseas artist—by academics who are themselves Taiwanese immigrants. A central issue that runs through this critical heteroglossia is the location of "home." Ma faults Chinese immigrant writers for the suspicion that they are overly identified with China. Indeed, this kind of "Sinocentrism" inevitably "subalternizes" Taiwan, and pushes the island back into a colonial situation while America is suspended between being a new home and forever a foreign land. The object of Chen Ruoxi's homeward gaze is also ambivalent since she "returned" to China during the 1960s and 1970s, despite the fact that she was a native Taiwanese. Nevertheless, her

⁸ Kao makes this distinction between Chinese American and overseas Chinese writers: "The difference lies not only in their writing in the Chinese language instead of English, but also in their efforts to remain identified with contemporary and historical Chinese culture. They also continue to publish in Chinese journals, periodicals, and newspapers in China, Taiwan, and abroad" (2). In the collection Kao focuses on five "representative" writers: Chen Ruoxi, Yu Lihua, Nie[Nieh] Hualing, Li Li, and Zhong Xiaoyang. In another essay Yin Xiao-huang gives a short summary of the history of Chinese-language literature in the United States and discusses the works of Lin Yutang and Lao She. Yin points out, "what distinguishes Chinese-language writers is their primarily persistent focus on immigration. The troubles of displacement and the mentality of being a marginalized person provide them with a unique angle to observe the losses and gains of life in a new country, as well as the differences and similarities between Chinese and other minority groups in multicultural American society. Their writing reflects the fact that the experience of Chinese immigrants does not fit the assimilation pattern or theories based on the experiences of other minority groups. It is such a depiction of many facets of immigrant life that makes Chinese-language literature so relevant to Chinese American reality, yet so different from works written in English" ("Worlds of Difference" 178).

⁹ It is interesting that Chen attaches the label of nativism to Chinese overseas literature since writers of Taiwanese nativist literature have charged many of the overseas writers as compradors of western culture. See chapter seven of Ma's *Immigrant Subjectivities*.

celebration of the bifocal vision, like Lee's embrace of the margin and Chinese metropolitanism, communicates a sense of reconciliation with her own transnational migration. However, this is a position that not everyone can achieve and enjoy.

The problematic location of home lies at the center of *Mulberry and Peach*. Mulberry transforms into Peach because she fails to achieve the kind of complacency with her multiple identities, as well as personal and historical sufferings, as Chen Ruoxi does. This unresolved tension makes *Mulberry and Peach* a pertinent text for the discussion of critical issues of the Chinese diaspora. In her essay on immigration and diaspora in Asian American literature, Shirley Geok-lin Lim expands the Saidian filiation/affiliation model to include the concepts of exile and diaspora.¹⁰ Unlike immigration, in exile the physical separation from one's filiative ties "is offset by continued bonds to the lost homeland, together with nonintegration into the affiliative order in which the exilic subject is contingently placed" ("Immigration and Diaspora" 296). Lim further alludes to *Mulberry and Peach* as an example of this kind of exilic condition.¹¹ I would argue that, in fact, the stories of Mulberry and Peach represent a whole spectrum of affiliations and filiations of the Chinese diaspora. The added subtitle in the English translation—"Two Women of China"—is both correct and misleading. The English subtitle correctly suggests that *both* Mulberry and Peach already exist in China. It is a misnomer because Mulberry and Peach are not just Chinese women, but also Taiwanese, as well as Chinese Americans.

The Saidian model reveals that in *Mulberry and Peach* there is a constant oscillation between filiation and affiliation; but the third part of the pattern that Said has posited, "a restored authority" (*The World, the Text, and the Critic* 19), never materializes. In Parts I and II, we see Mulberry's attempt to create affiliative ties when she is denied filiative bonds. Mulberry runs away from home because her mother refutes her rights to the jade griffin, a family heirloom passed down from her great grandfather that supposedly has a magical power to protect the male descendents in the San family. Mulberry

¹⁰ In his discussion of the relationships of filiation and affiliation in modern cultural history, Said contends that the distance from home makes it possible for Eric Auerbach to substitute filiation with affiliation and create *Mimesis* (6). He then suggests that when biological filiation is either too difficult or too unpleasant, one may look for an alternative in creating social bonds through nonbiological affiliation (*The World, the Text, and the Critic* 16-24).

¹¹ "When the relationship between affiliative identity (socialized self) and filiative place (homeland) is reified," Lim argues, "the resulting condensation of signification underlines national canonical categories and, arguably, also produces the condition of exile and diaspora" (296). Lim goes on to observe that diaspora in this text "denotes a condition of being deprived of the affiliation of nation, not temporally situated on its way toward another totality, but fragmented, demonstrating provisionality and exigency as immediate unmediated presences. The discourse of diaspora is that of disarticulation of identity from natal and national resources, and includes the exilic imagination but is not restricted to it" ("Immigration and Diaspora" 297).

rebels against this patrilineal law of inheritance by first stealing the griffin, then breaking it in an apparent accident, and finally giving half of it to Refuge Student, with whom she has no blood tie, but with whom she engages in her first sexual intercourse. The gang of orphan boys who unite and become local bullies represent this replacement of filiation with affiliation. The experience of being stranded on the boat can also be regarded as a heightened case of how Mulberry institutes new affiliative relations with her fellow passengers; so is the motivation for Mulberry's journey to the besieged Peking. Through her interview with Mr. Dark, we understand that Mulberry goes up to northern China after her father has committed suicide because she allows her brother, the only male heir in the family, to run off and join the Communist party.

Symbolically, Mulberry performs a double act of patricide and fratricide, since her brother later dies in the Communist army, and she cuts herself off from her family. Her seemingly irrational move to the north is in fact a search for a new filiative tie through marriage. Ironically, though her marriage with Shen Chia-ken creates this new filiation, it also leads to her imprisonment. The attic in Part III that houses Mulberry, her husband, and her daughter is an exaggerated representation of filiative bond/bondage, which again propels Mulberry to walk out and establish connections with people outside her immediate family. A crucial difference between Mulberry and Peach is that the latter chooses to keep her unborn baby, creating a new filial link while launching affiliative relationships with different groups in the United States as she wanders. In the end, rather than being severed from both filiative and affiliative relations, Nieh allows Peach to settle down with the possibility of creating a new home for herself and her Chinese American baby. In the text, therefore, we observe the suspension of national identity, rather than a restored authority, and the emergence of a new politics of home.

The specific form of the novel's plot, that is, the interweaving of Peach's wanderings with flashbacks of Mulberry's life, embodies the suspension of national identity of immigrant women. As diasporic women, they are the contact zones of James Clifford's "traveling cultures," in which cultural identity becomes ambivalent, and the concept of "home" becomes fluctuating and unstable. Crucially, the female protagonists in the text are always en route to somewhere else, but are nevertheless rooted in contemporary Chinese and American histories. Hence, Nieh posits a sense of rootedness, while suggesting a fluid politics of home. Writing about the entanglement of diasporic experiences, as Nieh states in the afterword of the Chinese edition, is a way to secure reterritorialization for the female protagonists and the author, who are always already deterritorialized.

Equally important is the language through which this goal of reterritorialization is achieved. In David Palumbo-Liu's interpretation, diaspora, an act of border crossing, is at once "an enabling fiction" and "a pretext for the

exposition of profound notions of the national, of race, ethnicity, and history” (355). Besides the fact of leaving home, he points out that another constituent of “diaspora” is the narrativization of this fact of separation. “It is that narrative form that locates the representation of diaspora in its particular chronotope,” as Palumbo-Liu argues, “This spatiotemporal construct approximates a psychic experience particularly linked to material history. It is only after the diasporic comes into contact with the material history of its new location that a particular discourse is enabled that seeks to mark a distance, a relation, both within and outside that constellation of contingency” (355). The following section offers a discussion of Nieh’s politics of representation in narrating the transnational migrations of Mulberry and Peach.

Writing the Liminal and Representing the Transnational

While historical temporality lies at the center of *Mulberry and Peach*, Nieh Hualing employs specific spatial imagery to describe the different geographical areas of her protagonists’ exile. On the Chinese mainland and the island of Taiwan, for instance, a common theme is the sense of entrapment, whereas expansion is the motif in America. I would argue that in the first three parts Nieh deploys an aesthetics of liminality to describe the state of affairs in China and Taiwan, whereas in the last part, as well as in Peach’s letters to the immigration agent, she tropes on the motif of mobility. However, it would clearly be erroneous to conclude that Nieh points to a dichotomous reading of Chinese and American cultures. After all, Mulberry enjoys a mobility beyond that of traditional Chinese women, although this freedom is mostly the result of war, and she always manages to get herself confined, such as in the stranded boat on the Yantzee River, the Forbidden City under siege, and the attic in Taipei. There are also numerous symbols of confinement in the portrayal of the United States, such as Betty’s basement and the Ford Building, described as “a huge glass tank” (187). By using different motifs to depict geopolitical locations, Nieh calls attention to the fact that geographical imagination is closely intertwined with historical consciousness and social reality. In this sense, Nieh seems to be an early practitioner of what Edward Soja terms “the Trialetics of Being,” a combination of “Spatiality” with “Historicality” and “Sociality.”¹² Nieh’s version of the “Trialetics,” however, is a distinctively gendered one so that in *Mulberry and Peach* it results in the repeated staging of her characters within various liminal spaces—spaces in which multiple temporalities converge to represent historicality and sociality on her own terms.

¹² Spatiality, Historicality, and Sociality are “summary terms for the social production of Space, Time, and Being-in-the-world” (71). For an elaboration on the Trialetics see Soja’s *Thirdspace*.

The concept of the liminal is particularly useful when it comes to interpreting the spatial imagination of diasporic peoples. In *The Wreath of Wild Olive: Play, Liminality, and the Study of Literature*, Mihai Spariosu carefully traces the development of the concept of liminality in anthropology and literary criticism. In anthropology, the liminal is the transitional stage of a rite of passage in which the normal structural order of the community is inverted or dissolved; the initiands thus experience “ambiguous social status as well as a temporary release from behavioral norms and cognitive rules” (Spariosu 33).¹³ In terms of literary liminality, Spariosu sees “literary discourse as a mediating, neutral space where new discursive games of power are being ceaselessly (re)created and old ones, constantly tempered” (53). Another important aspect of the liminal is staging. Analyzing Wolfgang Iser’s theory of literary anthropology, Spariosu observes that staging, “through which the literary work brackets an extratextual reality, putting into display, as it were, and thus allowing the audience to distance itself from and conceive possible alternatives to it” (51), is an important feature of literary play. In fact, political readings of Nieh’s novel often ignore the theatrical aspect of the work.

In each of the four parts of the novel, Nieh inserts various fragments of theatrical performances, such as the performance of “Flower Drum Song” by Refugee Student on the stranded boat, the singing of Chinese opera in the no-man’s land as Mulberry escapes from the besieged Peking, the circus performance in Taiwan, and again the recital of Chinese opera by Mulberry’s lover Chiang I-po. Through this emphasis on theatricality, Nieh metafictionally highlights textual performativity in her own novel. Although she aims to represent historical consciousness, Nieh wants to defamiliarize her own textual representation in a high modernist fashion, and the deployment of liminal spaces facilitates this strategy of defamiliarization. Although for Spariosu liminality is a general condition of literary discourse, it is of particular significance for diasporic peoples whose filiative and affiliative ties are both in a state of flux.

The idea of liminality is important for a reading of *Mulberry and Peach*, since the novel was written in an exilic and, therefore, liminal context. If we go back to Victor Turner’s classic definition of the liminal, the state of liminality marks a transition that always already suggests a possible onward movement. While I do not believe that Nieh is suggesting a developmental plot for the novel, I would argue that she uses the concept of the liminal to highlight specific historical and geopolitical moments that correspond to her

¹³ Anthropologist Victor Turner borrows the term liminal from Arnold van Gennep’s *Rites de passage* (1908). A rite of passage includes three stages: separation, transition and incorporation. During the phase of the transition, “margin,” or “limen,” the initiand will go through “an ambivalent social phase or limbo” and then “experience a blurring of all social distinctions or a ‘leveling’ process” (Spariosu 33).

protagonists' psychosomatic conditions. To embody their in-betweenness, in other words, Nieh repeatedly places her protagonists in liminal spaces to uncover sociohistorical traces behind their subject formation. If we take the liminal spaces as sites of contestation between nation and woman, writing liminality in the novel is in fact a gendered critique of the concept of nation itself. David Palumbo-Liu describes the striking images of interior spaces in the text as "ahistorical" and this particular temporality becomes invalidated when state power intervenes.¹⁴ While I agree with Palumbo-Liu's reading of the tension between individual spaces and state power in the diaspora, I argue that the concept of space and temporality in the novel is always dynamic. These interior spaces, as imagined by Nieh, can be characterized as liminal. The spaces of liminality in the text not only serve to demarcate the suspension between filiation and affiliation resulting from the changing stages in the lives of Mulberry and Peach, they are also spatial representations of Chinese, Taiwanese, and American sociohistorical reality. The transient nature of the liminal spaces in the text effectively reflects the characters' exilic condition. Through the textual deployment of these liminal spaces, therefore, Nieh situates her female protagonists historically and socially, and reveals her insights regarding the construction of diasporic subjectivity as an effect of interpenetrating historical and social discourses. Hence Nieh enacts a post-modernist agenda that includes unsettling the grand male model narrative of political history with her modernist discourse.

The stranded boat in Part I is a liminal space both inside history and beyond social regulations. Trapped in a water limbo, the passengers gain a provisional retreat from the reality of war. Yet the constant penetration of social reality, such as the invasion of the Japanese bombers and the passing by and sinking of other boats, reflects the chaotic outside world and reminds the reader of the tentative nature of this "retreat." Through divination, passengers on the boat engage in spiritual communion with historical figures—Tang poet Tu Fu and Han political strategist Chu-ko Liang—who are closely related to the area in which they are trapped. This spiritual communion creates a sense of historical continuity despite the fact that the messages are not really prophetic. The allusion to the Three Kingdoms (A.D. 220-280) through the figure of Chu-ko Liang further highlights the internal division of China during the Sino-Japanese War. The old man on the boat states: "Today China is also a country of three kingdoms; The National government in Chungking, the Communist government in Yenan, and the Japanese government in Nanking"

¹⁴ The full quotation from Palumbo-Liu reads: "The protagonists endeavor to create particular places from which history is bracketed out, and a new temporality takes over.... It is no coincidence that this ahistorical space is imaginable only when the state is relegated to the exterior. When that space is violated, time resumes; this temporality is particularly identifiable as one dictated by the state" (347)

(39). Thus his exclamation—“We’re stranded in the midst of history” (40)—is extremely revealing in regard to the text’s historical consciousness. As a mock utopia, moreover, the boat temporarily allows people of different classes and genders to suspend their moral discipline and, together, to engage in a carnivalesque moment of abandonment. Thus, it is not surprising that Mulberry is an “initiant” undergoing a heterosexual rite of passage on board. While a boat is the “heterotopia *par excellence*” for Foucault because of its physical mobility and the rich imagination it offers (27), Nieh’s text shows that even a boat aground can metaphorically move people around in history and outside of social constraints.

While the narrative in Part II mainly focuses on the description of the Forbidden City, with its architectural and historical specificities, and on the city’s warring state, the temple of the no-man’s land in which Mulberry, her husband, and ten other refugees stay overnight during their escape to the south is another important example of a liminal space. The temple is portrayed as a political vacuum between the two military powers of the Nationalists and the Communists, a symbolic space where literary imagination and play are possible. Somehow, the increasing tension of the Chinese civil war as experienced by Mulberry in Peking suddenly becomes suspended. In the ruin of the temple of the Ts’ai Village, as if gaining a temporary reprieve from the threat of the civil war, a carnivalesque spirit prevails once more and the group entertain themselves with Chinese operas and ghost stories in a festive mood. Although a moment ago these people were fearful for their lives, in the temple where “[o]nly the Laughing Buddha is intact, laughing,” they deliberately set out to forget about the war. As one character exclaims, “[i]n all of China this is the only place where there’s no fighting. Look, see how beautiful the moon is, feel how soft the spring breeze is. The trees on the hill outside the temple are sprouting green leaves” (107). Through the opera, the history of the Three Kingdoms is evoked again.¹⁵ New history is also made possible; instead of using their family names, these people begin to play a game of assuming different family names, as one character starts the game by saying, “I’ll stay in this dilapidated temple and become the ancestor of later generations. I’ll take the first name in the Book of the Hundred Names” (107-08). This practice of name changing indicates the fluidity of identity in the exilic state. There is even an on-the-spot wedding to reinforce this desired engendering of new family (national) history. Overall, good will and peace prevail in this space: people voluntarily provide the luxury of privacy for the consummation of the newly-weds, and Chia-kang momentarily forgets his obsession and jealousy of Mulberry’s sexual escapade before their marriage. Mulberry describes this

¹⁵ One of the refuges is singing a passage from *Beat the Drum and Condemn Ts’ao Ts’ao*, an episode from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in which a patriot condemns the Prime Minister Ts’ao’s attempt to usurp the Han empire.

only example of physical harmony in her marriage: “Chia-kang leads me to a small shed where hay is stored. For the first time, he tells me that I have a beautiful body” (109).

The attic in Part III is presented as a liminal space as well. In her diary entries from 1957 to 1959, Mulberry records family life in an attic after Chia-kang is wanted for a crime of embezzlement. Unlike the Dostoevsky type of underground stories, Nieh moves her characters into the attic, a potent symbol of the human mind and a fitting place for internal turmoil. The attic, stuffed with surrealist newspaper clippings of fantastic stories and all kinds of political propaganda, is emblematic of the island’s geographical, historical, and political situation.¹⁶ Here Nieh uses an enclosure to represent the psychological isolation and fearfulness of people living in the period of “White Terror.” A place for self-imprisonment, it is isolated, and yet at the same time, information from the outside world continues to filter in. The inhabitants even have a vantage point from which to observe society through peeping, eavesdropping, and reading newspapers. Nevertheless, this flow of information only serves to underscore the fact that lack of mobility is the inhabitant’s greatest punishment; while they can see and listen to the outside world, they cannot cross the invisible line that marks their liminality.

As Sau-ling Wong observes, Shen Chia-kang’s embezzlement is a reference to the Nationalist government’s wealth accrued through corruption, which greatly impoverishes the people of China (“Afterword” 219). Typically, women and children suffer the most for crimes committed by men. Thus, Mulberry and her daughter Sang-wa are locked in the attic to symbolically atone for “the sin of the father.” Significantly, Sang-wa imaginatively creates a mythical identity for herself as a way to explain away her grotesque predicament. As in the water boat episode, Sang-wa’s drawings—Adventures of Little Dot (127-28)¹⁷—become a kind of transhistorical hybridization that combines the current temporality of her confined existence with the mythical time of the coming into being of the first silkworm. That Sang-wa draws on the margins of used newspapers underlines women’s peripheral position. The allusion to the silkworm is of course connected to the legend of the origin of Chinese civilization.¹⁸ The dominant mode of violence in this story of

¹⁶ Pai reads the dusty and mice-invested attic with a broken clock as symbolic of the island of Taiwan “with its claustrophobia and temporal disjunction” (“The Wandering Chinese” 211). The repeated reference to the broken clock alludes to the stalled time in the attic. However, we can still see the sign of the biological time at the seam. For instance, Mulberry’s daughter Sang-wa can no longer stand up in the attic after staying in the attic for two years.

¹⁷ There is no illustration in the Chinese edition published by *China Times*. This omission, I think, is a great loss for Chinese readers.

¹⁸ Sau-ling Wong explains the Chinese connotation in the word “mulberry” in these terms: “The mulberry feeds the silkworm that produces silk, and the invention of silkworm cultivation by the mythical Leizu, the wife of Huangdi, is considered the beginning of Chinese civilization.

metamorphosis—the murder and flaying of the horse by the father—offers a historical lesson on the inevitable coupling of creation and brutality, and a personal note from the author regarding the extreme hazard faced by women in search of freedom and subjectivity. For Little Dot/Sang-wa, emancipation from (paternal) authority may happen only when they transform themselves into something else. Importantly, Sang-wa ultimately draws the attention of the police to the attic, leading to her father's arrest and, after his betrayal/vengeance, she becomes a lost daughter, as demonstrated in Part IV. Since Sang-wa is the only other character besides Mulberry and Peach who can voice her inner thoughts through writing, her “disappearance” becomes a rather curious lacuna in the text, further highlighting the breaking of filiative ties for the exiled Mulberry.

An easily neglected detail in Nieh's description of the attic provides a distinctive reference to Taiwan's colonial history and, again, metaphorically reconnects disrupted temporalities in this space of liminality. Mulberry describes the claustrophobic environment of the attic as such: “The attic is the size of four *tatami* mats. The ceiling slants low over our heads. We can't stand up upright; we have to crawl on all fours on the *tatami* mats. Eight-year-old Sang-wa can stand up. But she doesn't want to. She wants to imitate the grown-ups crawling on the floor” (118). *Tatami*, a Japanese word for straw mattress, alludes to the sedimentary layers of Taiwan's colonial past which are sources of constant political and ethnic conflicts on the island to this day.¹⁹ Upon moving to the island, inevitably Mulberry becomes implicated in Taiwan's colonial history and must face up to the complexities in herself.

Thus the mulberry is a sacred tree in China” (“Afterword” 212).

¹⁹ Ma's outline of Taiwanese history is worthy of quoting at length here to better illustrate the sedimentation of colonial history of the island: “The aborigines in Taiwan are of Malaysian-Polynesian, hence non-Chinese, origin, sharing biological and cultural characteristics with the original inhabitants of Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands region. The earliest reference to Taiwan in Chinese texts seems to be to the island of ‘Yichou’ in Chen Shou's *San-kuo-chi* (Chronicle of the three kingdoms) in the third century A.D. Various Chinese dynasties claimed Taiwan as part of their territory over many centuries. In 1544, the Portuguese reached Taiwan and named it ‘Formosa.’ The Japanese had tried taking over Taiwan since the sixteenth century. In 1622, a Dutch fleet landed in the Pescadores, islands offshore of Taiwan, and two years later, began constructing the city of Zeelandia in Tainan in southern Taiwan. In 1629, Spanish troops built the city of Santo Domingo (today's Hung Mao [red hair] City) in Tamsui in northern Taiwan. Cheng Ch'eng-kung, loyal to the collapsing Ming dynasty, occupied Taiwan in the seventeenth century as his home base to launch a campaign against the Ching dynasty. The Opium War between the British and the Chinese commenced in 1840, prompting the British to plan an attack on Taiwan. In 1854, Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry of the United States, having opened Japan to foreign trade, sent ships to Taiwan to investigate its mineral deposits. The Sino-Japanese War ended in 1895 and the Treaty of Shimonoseki ceded Taiwan to Japan. Taiwan was not returned to China until 1945 at the close of World War II. The Nationalist party (Kuomintang) led by Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan in 1949, after having been defeated by the Communists” (*Immigrant Subjectivities* 130-31).

Locked within this history of exploitation and colonization, Mulberry desperately strives to escape from confinement, but can only achieve a sense of freedom vicariously through imagined fantasies—"I write page after page of escape stories. Getting away to the mountains, getting away to the coast. How else could we escape?" (138). Mulberry's act of writing is no doubt a metafictional reflection on the creation of *Mulberry and Peach* as a way to aestheticize traumatic experiences. Moreover, the description of the cramped attic comes right after the metaphor of Taiwan as "a green eye floating alone on the sea" (118). This surrealist image highlights the island's geographical isolation. There is also a possible pun on the English eye/I, which doubly emphasizes the sense of seclusion.²⁰ The eye imagery also alludes to the sense of surveillance as the attic-dwellers constantly feel watched by invisible eyes. In a time when every citizen was constantly cautioned to watch for signs of communist espionage, and one could be imprisoned under the martial law for supposed communication with Chinese Communists any minute, the eye and the attic effectively embody the extremity of political oppression on the island. What Mulberry's family experienced in this state of liminality is, therefore, also part of the collective memory of the Taiwanese people.

In sum, liminality is the most prominent *modus operandi* of the novel's spatial representations because it corresponds to the psychological mappings of the protagonists and the author. Diasporic migration is portrayed as a recurring process of moving from one liminal space into another. With each exit, they acquire the added burden of knowledge about their peripheral status as women and "aliens." Through this repeated deployment of spatial suspension, Nieh accents women's marginal status in history since it is the female body that emerges from this narrative of space as liminal. The highlighting of women's liminality not only affords a critique of the standard (male) version of national discourse but also escorts women back to the center of historical and geographical discourses.

Significantly, while the text focuses on the liminal status and the gradual disintegration of a schizophrenic woman, the epilogue of *Mulberry and Peach* tells another myth of metamorphosis. A princess was drowned by the East Sea and turned into a sparrow. Wanting revenge, the sparrow travels daily to a nearby mountain to carry pebbles, hoping to fill up the sea and, according to the myth, she is still at it to this day. Sau-ling Wong identifies a western equivalent to the Princess Bird in Sisyphus. She goes on to observe that the epilogue "suggests the inability of the Chinese people to repair past traumas and fulfill their destiny" ("Afterword" 212). My interpretation of this allegorical figure is somewhat different. A figure out of a traditional Chinese parable of perseverance and determination, the Princess Bird in the context of

²⁰ Although the text was originally created in Chinese, it is possible that Nieh had this English pun in her mind at the time she wrote the episode since she was an English teacher in Taiwan.

Nieh Hualing's novel symbolizes the deterritorialized diasporic woman forced out of the familiar realm of life and who remains on the road, trying to create a new meaning for her changed existence.

Mulberry starts this reinvention of identity with her "performance" as a servant, Mrs. Chiang, when she walks out of the attic to experience a piece of "normal" life. Peach further embodies this desire to fashion a new meaning in a different world. Compared to the relatively passive Mulberry, Peach boldly takes the initiative to create her own subjectivity. She actually identifies herself as a direct descendant of Nūwa, the Chinese goddess of creation at the beginning of the novel (6). By inserting Peach into the divine genealogy, Nieh clearly suggests that her character is a creator of new identity. Peach knows that as a transnational migrant she is a stranger wherever she goes (6). It is through this status as an "alien"—someone without an identification card—that she frees herself from nationalist affiliation and recreates new identities for herself in her picaresque journey around America. Shiao-ling Yu suggests that Peach's existence resembles "a Kafakaesque nightmare in which her past traumas are juxtaposed to her current flight" (141). Rather, Peach's flight across America revises one of the gothic conventions in which relentless villains pursue "a damsel in distress."²¹ Instead of being a helpless victim, the resourceful Peach leads the chase; she even teasingly provides her pursuer with road maps. There is no denying, however, the real danger in this pursuit. Symbolically dressed in oppressive black, the immigration agent as a representative of state power is an uncanny reminder of the disciplinary surveillance during Taiwan's era of "White Terror." By repeatedly interrogating Mulberry, the agent also becomes the direct cause of Mulberry's schizophrenic split into Peach. Moreover, this interrogation, as Palumbo-Liu perceptively observes, "marks the intervention of the state in the construction of ethnic identity and attests to its need to recuperate that figurative subject into its political field" (347).

This state intervention, in turn, allows Nieh's protagonist to reinvent her diasporic identity. Through her exchange with the agent, Peach is in a strategic position to reexamine her Chinese past and reflect on American reality. Her transnational migration to the United States, in Palumbo-Liu's terms, *at once* produces diaspora and ethnicity (346). Although Peach insists on killing Mulberry off, she allows the latter a "ghostly return" to tell her Chinese stories through the diaries in the first three parts. In the meantime, Peach focuses on observing American society. In Peach, the author creates a Chinese American character whose existence is strongly influenced by American history as well as her Chinese past. The trajectory of Mulberry's migration, which finally

²¹ Sau-ling Wong has identified other gothic elements in the text, such as "decay, confinement in claustrophobic spaces, ghosts, vampires, women endangered, ancient secrets uncovered" ("Afterword" 209).

leads her to the United States, is also historically determined. As Lisa Lowe points out, post-1965 Asian immigrants in the United States mostly come from areas already disrupted by colonialism and neocolonial capitalism: “The material legacy of the repressed history of US imperialism in Asia is borne out in the ‘return’ of Asian immigrants to the imperial center” (16).

Peach’s adventures on the road evince a close affinity to the tradition of the Beat Generation. At the same time, the grotesque people she encounters are a multicultural collection of the wounded—the Polish lumberjack who is also a Holocaust survivor, and Mr. Smith the honeymooner and Vietnam veteran with a hand made of stainless steel, for instance—representing a spectrum of American people in the 1960s. Furthermore, Nieh deliberately highlights the transnational aspect of this American identity in numerous instances. In Peach’s first letter to Mr. Dark she talks about the antiwar movement. Coming from someone whose life has been war-ridden, this allusion at once gives a historical context to Peach’s experience, and communicates a universal desire for peace. Furthermore, Mr. Smith’s honeymoon van is jam-packed with antiques from all over the world, which reminds the reader of the transnational extension of American militarism and exploitation. Peach’s chance encounter with the lumberjack is also described as a meeting of foreigners. When the lumberjack introduces himself as a Polish Jew, Peach jokingly identifies herself as “an Asian Jew,” and thereby creates an interracial connection between the two. They are, after all, sharing a similar diasporic condition. These details serve to underlie the multiethnic composition and the countless traumatic memories embedded in the national discourse of the United States. If Nieh shows signs of “obsession with China” in the novel, as many critics have pointed out,²² she is equally obsessed with the observation of American reality. This keen observation of contemporary American society finally helps to move *Mulberry and Peach* out of the confines of Chinese literary tradition, and into a Chinese American one.

Compared to the narratives of entrapment in the Chinese and Taiwanese episodes, Peach’s American narrative emphasizes mobility. In Peach’s letter to the agent, she deliberately praises the friendliness of people in the West: “The further west you go, the friendlier the people get. In the East, not even little children will pay attention to you, but in the West, even policemen wave!” (61). The survival story of the California-bound Donner Party who got stranded in the Sierra Nevada mountains is repeatedly told to highlight the hardship, as well as the determination, of the early West-bound pioneers. This emphasis on Westward movement certainly echoes the rhetoric of American expansionism.²³ However, as Sau-ling Wong points out in her discussion of

²² See Pai, Lee, Kao, and Ma’s *Immigrant Subjectivities*, for example.

²³ In her first letter, Peach mentions the city of St. Louis, whose landmark structure, the Arch, is a monument celebrating the Westward movement in American history. The iconic significance

the politics of mobility in Asian American tradition, “when an Asian American mobility narrative consciously alludes to Westward movement as a possible structuring principle, the effect is typically ironic” (*Reading Asian American Literature* 127). The irony lies in the gap between the promises of golden opportunities and the harsh reality of hardship and discrimination. Moreover, Peach’s mobility narrative is anything but westward. If we match Peach’s instructions to the immigration agent against a standard American roadmap, we discover that she actually moves in a circle. When she claims to be moving west, she is actually turning east. For instance, in her second letter, Peach announces that she is heading west on Interstate 80 from Wyoming; presumably, this would take her all the way to the Pacific. In her next letter, dated twenty days after the previous one, however, we find her living with the Polish lumberjack in a water tower near Des Moines, in the heartland of the Midwest.

This contradiction in directions can be taken at face value: the inclusion of the three fragments of American map and the instructions may simply be decoys set to mislead the Immigration Service. The spirit of anti-authority is certainly evident in Peach’s teasing tone to Mr. Dark—“If you want to chase me, come on” (11). Peach’s nomadism, on the one hand, exemplifies how an immigrant woman can subvert the map of the (American) empire with her on-the-road mobility (Liang 87). On the other hand, Leo Ou-fan Lee regards the map of the American Midwest as a symbol of the remapping of China in the mind of the exiled Chinese intellectual: “it is history; it is also myth” (“Zhong hua *Sangqing yu Taohong de di tu*” [Re-mapping *Mulberry and Peach*] 281). Through this kind of psychological remapping, Nieh also conducts a formal experiment that embodies a psychological transformation. Peach’s circular movement in fact corresponds to the narrative form of the novel: the ending actually leads to the prologue, where we witness the direct confrontation between the liberated Peach and the immigration agent.

Besides being a challenge to nationalist authority, a remapping of remembered China, and a formal experiment, Nieh’s representation of this disoriented directionality is what makes *Mulberry and Peach* a Chinese American text. Without wanting to ignore ideological problems involved in nationalist and immigration issues, I nevertheless believe that *Mulberry and Peach* is a story about how a Chinese diasporic woman turns American. Instead of “Chinese ethnocentrism,” as Ma contends (*Immigrant Subjectivities* 47), Peach “claims” America through her nomadic exercises. Her insistence in providing identifiable place names in each of her letters reveals a desire to create a new affiliative location, or home, for each of her new avatars. Her parodic imitation of the wording on the plaque left by the American astronauts

of the Arch is explained by the museum exhibits in its basement area.

on the moon—"A WOMAN WHO CAME FROM AN UNKNOWN PLANET / ONCE LIVED IN THE WATER TOWER/ 22 FEBRUARY 1970-21 MARCH 1970/ I CAME IN PEACE FOR ALL MANKIND"—at once satirizes man's urge to conquer through marking, and a desire to inscribe herself into American landscape. As a travelling "alien," Peach also pointedly proclaims her mission of peace.

Significantly, Peach's plaque is left at the site of another space of liminality, the water tower where she had led a brief, experimental hippie life with the Polish lumberjack. The ancient wooden tower used to supply water to Indian soldiers. When Peach and her companion move in, it becomes the link that conjoins the past memory of the dispossession of Native Americans and the present condition of transnational displacement. As a historical monument, this water tower bears traces of American history in its formative years. In its present state, the tower once again creates a sense of temporal continuum. Whereas it was once used for military purposes, the two exiles have temporarily transformed the monumental structure into a utopian homeplace. Although the tower would be torn down, it has already fulfilled its symbolic function by placing the narrative in an ironic mode, and communicating the characters' pacifist desires. On an allegorical level, this is also the story of giving birth to a new Chinese American, as Peach announces her intention of finding a place to deliver her baby at the end of her last letter. Ultimately, the goal of her trip across America is to locate a home for this new baby and to make herself the inventive Madonna of this new race.²⁴

Claiming Justice

I would like to end this chapter by turning to a short personal narrative. As a descendant of parents who moved from Mainland China to Taiwan at the time of the Communist takeover, I grew up with stories of wars and migrations. I know by heart the story of how my father became an only child when my grandmother lost three other children to epidemic diseases during the Sino-Japanese War. At fourteen my mother was separated from her father, who was stranded in China and away from the rest of his family. The family never heard from him after that and my mother did not learn of his death until years later, when cross-Strait communications resumed. Before my maternal grandmother passed away, for as long as I can remember she faithfully celebrated my grandfather's birthday even though, as we now know, he died be-

²⁴ The Madonna implication is hard to miss, considering that Mulberry is teaching at the Holy Conception Highschool. Shiao-ling Yu also identifies the symbolic meaning of the name Peach in Chinese tradition as personification of life-giving sexuality (142). However, instead of representing sexual degeneration and pure sexual appetite, like Yu argues about the character Peach, I believe that Nieh is also stressing Peach's reproductive potency.

fore I was born. No one in the family had the heart to tell her that he had died. While I have no intention of recounting family histories, I nonetheless want to stress that what happened to my family was typical of the time when wars and natural disasters were rampant in China. These stories are part of the history of the Chinese diaspora. Men, of course, have their stories of woe; women pass on these stories and more to their daughters. Mulberry/Peach's journey could have been my mother's, except that my mother remained in Taiwan. Most significantly, Nieh frames her story with a transnational context of immigrant experience, another important part of the Chinese/Chinese American diaspora, and which makes this novel a significant part of Chinese American literature. Hence I strongly believe that it is crucial to situate immigrant experiences within the context of diasporas and transnationalism to do them justice.

In *Mulberry and Peach* Nieh successfully captures the turmoil in East Asia at the second half of the twentieth century, and presents different patterns of transnational (im)migration. Frederic Jameson's now infamous argument that Third World texts are necessarily "*national allegories*" (69) has certain truth-value when it comes to the reading of this text. It might also be classified as Deleuzian "minor literature," characterized by the deterritorialization of language, the individual's connection to a political immediacy, and the collective value (17-18). As a minority discourse, the novel is "the product of damage" in which "the sublimation of misery requires to be understood as primarily a strategy for survival, for the preservation in some form or other of cultural identity, *and* for political critique" (JanMohamed and Lloyd 7-8). However, Nieh's story, instead of simply representing historical and political allegories, dynamically recreates history through spatial imagination. These literary interactions become part of Chinese/Chinese American women's "survival literature," in which the struggles for survival of diasporic women are delineated. Speaking as a true survivor, Nieh Hualing once praised the resilience of the Chinese people: "To be Chinese in the twentieth century is to suffer all the wars, revolutions and family tragedies, but the Chinese survived. Of course there are reasons for that survival, but I think one of the reasons is the primitive life force of the Chinese."²⁵ Relying on literature to mediate traumatic experiences and recreate new affiliations, Nieh's text, admittedly class-bound, is materialistically based on the migrating female body. Through the bodies of these women that simultaneously connect with and distance themselves from nationalist discourses, we can intelligently reconstruct a nuanced history of the Chinese diaspora. Rey Chow remarks, "what distinguishes modern Chinese writings is an investment of suffering, an investment that aims at exposing social injustice" (*Writing Diaspora* 102). Nieh's work aims at exposing such injustice, and more.

²⁵ This comes from Nieh's 1981 interview with Peter Nazareth (12).

Chapter 7

Remapping Chinese American Literature: The Case of Yan Geling

The past is not waiting for us back there to recoup our identities against. It is always retold, rediscovered, reinvented. It has to be narrativized. We go to our own pasts through history, through memory, through desire, not as a literal fact.

—Stuart Hall
“Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities”

Whereas identity politics—with its stress on cultural nationalism and American nativity—governed earlier theoretical and critical formulations, the stress is now on heterogeneity and diaspora. The shift has been from seeking to “claim America” to forging a connection between Asia and Asian America; from centering on race and masculinity to revolving around the multiple axes of ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality; from being concerned primarily with social history and communal responsibility to being caught in the quandaries and possibilities of postmodernism and multiculturalism.

—King-Kok Cheung
“Re-Viewing Asian American Literary Studies”

Asian American literary studies in the new millennium appears fully energized, as evinced by the accelerating rate of publication of Asian American literary texts and scholarly books mentioned in the Introduction. This “renaissance” in Asian American literary studies suggests that the field has reached an important maturity. And yet, the fundamental question of how to define Asian American literature remains. Besides geographical and racial factors, a linguistic issue has emerged—an issue that further complicates the problem of remapping Asian American literature. Scholars have for some time advocated for a transnational expansion of the field to include texts written in languages other than English. The LOWINUS (Languages of What Is Now the United States) project of the Longfellow Institute at Harvard University, for instance, argues for a multilingual approach to American literature. From this perspective, works created in the mother tongues of Asian immigrant authors should also be regarded as part of Asian American literature.¹ While I support this breaking down of linguistic hegemony, at

¹ In his paper, “Redefining Chinese American Literature from a LOWINUS Perspec-

the same time I strongly believe we must also require relevancy in terms of subject matter. That is, such works should at least address social and cultural experiences of immigration and issues about American society. The Chinese novels and stories about transnational migrations by Yan Geling, who emigrated from China to the United States in 1989, become exemplary in this case.² I will therefore base my discussion of remapping Chinese American literature on Yan's two Chinese-language novels about Chinese immigrants in the United States, *Fu Sang* and *Ren Huan*.

Yan Geling's texts about Chinese diasporic experiences are, by my definition, a part of Chinese American literature. We may classify Yan as an immigrant writer because she has been writing about the immigrant experience in the United States ever since she left China, and because she always refers to herself as a writer of immigrant literature. The complicated political and linguistic issues inside the text and behind the writing and publishing of Yan Geling's works make her a crucial figure as we attempt to remap Chinese American literature. In fact, after carefully going over the collective body of her work, we can detect a pattern in Yan's immigrant writings, which involves a systematic exploration of Chinese American women of different temporal locations and geopolitical positions.

Yan Geling's immigrant writings pose a challenge to English linguistic hegemony in the study of ethnic American literatures. Here we come across the thorny problem of classification, which is closely related to the politics of inclusion/exclusion of "canon" formation. As such, we need to address at least the following two questions: Is there an "official" language for Asian American literature? Can someone who writes in a language other than English be regarded as an Asian American writer? With the hindsight of a post-colonial perspective, we can certainly interrogate the legitimacy of claiming any official version of history or language. However, multilingual or transnational approaches are not without their limitations. In his essay on redefining Chinese American literature, Te-hsing Shan aptly pointed out the difficulties involved in the LOWINUS project.³ In "Denationalization Recon-

tive—Two Recent Examples," Te-hsing Shan discusses in detail how the LOWINUS Project helps open up a new terrain of possibilities for American literature. This essay is anthologized by Werner Sollors in *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature*.

² Yan Geling was born in Shanghai in 1959 and joined the People's Liberation Army at twelve, serving in ballet and folk dance troupes. She began her writing career when she worked as a correspondent for the Sino-Vietnamese border war. After the Tiananmen massacre she went to America to study for a MFA degree at Chicago's Columbia College. She started published in Taiwan in 1990. Yan has won numerous prestigious literary awards in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Two of her short stories, "Xiao Yu" and "Celestial Bath," are well received internationally and have been adapted into films.

³ According to Shan, there are several dilemmas while trying to put the LOWINUS perspective into practice: first, English as a common linguistic tool is still needed; second, even under

sidered,” Sau-ling Wong also voiced her reservations of what she terms “denationalization” in current Asian American cultural criticism, which includes the easing of cultural nationalist concerns, growing permeability between the terms “Asian” and “Asian American,” and a shift from a domestic to a diasporic perspective. Nevertheless, both Shan and Wong earnestly and actively promote the inclusion of Chinese texts into the field of Chinese American literary studies. Personally, I consider the reorientation to a diasporic perspective a necessary step in the process of breaking away from Euro-American cultural hegemony, and remapping Asian America literature. Nevertheless, I concur with Wong’s insistence that “claiming America”—“establishing the Asian American presence in the context of the United States’ national cultural legacy and contemporary cultural production”—should be the basis of Asian American cultural politics (“Denationalization Reconsidered” 16). The definition of Asian American literature should not be limited to the amorphous concept of “Asian American sensibility,” as prescribed by the *Aiiieeee!* editors, nor any arbitrary determinant based on geographical location. The deciding factor should be whether a conscious effort is made to claim America for Asian immigrant groups. *Fu Sang*, for instance, with its retrieval of forgotten Chinese American history, its construction of mythical folk memory and its practice of difficult cultural translation, *is* a Chinese American text.⁴ As well, the exploration of traumatic experiences resulting from the Cultural Revolution and transnational migration in *Ren Huan* also reveals specific concerns for the immigrant condition. Taken together, the different emphases of the two novels in fact effectively embody the “shift” in Asian American literary studies identified by King-Kok Cheung.

This chapter will demonstrate how non-English texts can also contribute significantly to American minority literature by reading the representations of Chinese immigrant women in Yan’s two novels. Specifically, I examine issues of race, gender, and space in *Fu Sang* and the double action of remembering China and constructing Chinese American identity in *Ren Huan*.

the general rubric of Chinese American literature there already exist several sub-groups; third, those languages included in the LOWINUS project somehow are replicating the linguistic hegemony enjoyed by English since they are relatively strong and powerful in comparison with those not included; fourth, there is an imminent danger of geographical determinism in the LOWINUS perspective that needs to be dealt with; finally, one needs to be aware of a possible trap of Sinocentrism while trying to contest U.S.-centrism or Eurocentrism (“Redefining Chinese American Literature from a LOWINUS Perspective” 118-19).

⁴ An English translation of *Fu Sang* by Cathy Silber, entitled *The Lost Daughter of Happiness*, was published in 2001. Chinese American actress and filmmaker Joan Chen has been working closely with Yan on a film adaptation of the novel. The English version of *Fu Sang* and its film adaptation certainly further ensure the enlargement of its circle of readership.

Surviving in the Land of the Gold Mountain in *Fu Sang*

In contrast to Fae Myenne Ng's Chinatown as a site of ethnic memory, Yan Geling surveys the space of San Francisco Chinatown from an immigrant perspective. Interestingly, Yan's Chinatown fictions have thus far always addressed the period during which this urban enclave was still in its formative stage, which gives these works a distinct sense of historical retrospection unlike that in writings by other Chinatown immigrant women, such as Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Yan's first novel about Chinese women in the United States, *Fu Sang*, archives the life of a nineteenth-century Chinatown prostitute through whose body Yan allegorizes the early history of Chinese America. The rediscovery of a buried and unsightly past of Chinatown history counts as Yan's first contribution to Chinese American literature since none of the fictional texts in English has paid much attention to this important subject matter. *Fu Sang* courageously forays into forgotten history and expands our understanding of Chinese America. And the title character Fu Sang, with her perseverance and generosity in the face of material suffering, is an appropriate, though somewhat mystified, figure of the Chinese American foremother.

Although neglected by writers, there have been numerous historical studies on the lives of the Chinese women transported to the Gold Mountain to satisfy male sexual desire. Historian Benson Tong sketches these women's difficult position: "In the minds of Euro-Americans of the Victorian period, the champions of middle-class respectability, Chinese women deserved pity and sympathy but not respect. These 'public women'—women who were willing to associate with all men, not just one—occupied the lowest rung in the social hierarchy, both within the Chinese community and without" (xvii). Nevertheless, Tong insists that these "public women" who were "pressed into commercialized sex in this cosmopolitan city of the American West" were not passive victims of their fate "but ones who possess[ed] the 'powers of the weak'" (xix). Arguing that Tong's monograph and other research on Chinatown prostitution in nineteenth-century America are insightful but "narrow-focused," Huping Ling offers a broader and more comprehensive perspective of the Chinese sex industry, positing these public women as "victims of the exploitation of global capitalism" (54). It matters little whether these women were victors or victims; at issue here is the undeniable materiality of their sufferings and their struggles for survival in a particular moment in the history of the United States. These sufferings and struggles demand to be addressed, and Yan Geling could not have chosen a better subject through which to enter Chinese American literary tradition.

A close reading reveals Yan's conscious effort to describe the difficult conditions early Chinese immigrant women suffered, embodied in Fu Sang.

This character, a slave woman abducted from China in her teens, falls in love with a white teenager named Chris. Somewhat melodramatically, Fu Sang's owner, Da Yiong (the Brave), a chameleon-like Chinese trickster and gangster, turns out to be her long-lost betrothed. Finally, Fu Sang rejects Chris's proposal and marries Da Yiong on the day of his execution. Da Yiong is executed; Fu Sang survives but disappears.

Besides this intricate "inner story" of a melodramatic love triangle, the author further complicates the plot by adding a metafictional frame to this semi-historical novel with autobiographical overtones. Yan employs a first-person narrator, a recent immigrant from China who describes herself as "a fifth generation Chinese American," to unearth some 160 volumes of historical documents about San Francisco Chinatown, and to piece together a story of the title character. This deliberate act of inserting herself into Chinese American genealogy shows the narrator's—and the author's—determination to claim a Chinese American identity and to create a Chinese American text.

Although the narrator and the protagonist have apparently different lived experiences—Fu Sang is forced into prostitution after her abduction, while the narrator is a voluntary immigrant and a middle-class intellectual—the author establishes a connection between these two women. Authorial intrusions constantly penetrate and interrupt the third-person "story proper," at once reflecting the fragmentary nature of the narrator's research and the physical violation involved in prostitution, as well as creating a dialogue between the narrator and the female protagonist. The narrator often addresses Fu Sang directly in her self-reflective comments, whereas Fu Sang speaks to the other woman through her photos and her silence. These two women are also similar in another respect: they both are involved in interracial relationships. The narrator has a Caucasian husband; Fu Sang, a white lover. The close affinity between the narrator and the protagonist bridges the gap of different temporalities—more than 128 years in total—between the two women. But what really connects them across time is their shared immigrant status. This metafictional frame obviously aims to highlight the major theme of the novel: immigration. It is the situation that is closest to the author's heart, since the uprooting experience of immigration provides her with a chance to scrutinize human nature in its most extreme state—a kind of "human aquarium," as Yen has called it in an interview (Hsu 41).

Fu Sang is the one chosen for close inspection in this text. As someone who has always been gazed at, she is textually constructed by a relay of visual codes. Our first encounter with Fu Sang is actually guided by the gaze of the narrator. Through a unique second-person point of view, the narrator appears to address Fu Sang directly while subjecting her to a gaze of appraisal through detailed external description:

So this is you.

You are the woman in that scarlet satin jacket, rising slowly from a screeching bamboo bed. The elaborate embroidery work on your jacket weighs more than ten pounds....

Turn up your chin a bit higher and bring your mouth closer to this dim light. There. That's good. Now I can really see your face. That's all right. Although your face is kind of short and flat, it will only be seen as something truly Oriental. Your every imperfection was a special feature for hunters of exoticism at your time.

Come on. Turn around. Just like what you used to be doing at every auction block. A beautiful prostitute like yourself gets to know your own price through one auction after another.... (1)⁵

Fu Sang's to-be-looked-at-ness has its origin in how the author first comes across this image of a nineteenth-century Chinese woman.⁶ More significantly, Fu Sang is further dehumanized and commodified with the reference to human auctions. Staging this slave woman as the central character comes close to selling her as a piece of Oriental curiosity, a fact of which the narrator is clearly aware. The narrator is very conscious of the fact her project of recovering a significant part of Chinese American history could very easily objectify and Orientalize her protagonist. She could well be accused of providing a guided tour around the pre-earthquake San Francisco Chinatown, a suspicion that constantly haunts the subgenre of Chinatown literature. Thus, with a self-conscious address to Fu Sang—"You know that I am auctioning you off, too" (3)—the narrator acknowledges her possible collusion with an Orientalist enterprise. Nevertheless, her strategy of frequently quoting official historical documents that openly exoticize and objectify Chinese women bring us straight to the source of this racist and capitalist gaze, and subtly reveals the fact that she is actually advancing an anti-Orientalist project, a point on which I will expand later.

Fu Sang is also constantly exposed to the male gaze since, as a prostitute, she procures customers by showing herself at the window of her cell or crib, which again constitutes an important part of her immigrant experience.⁷

⁵All the quotations from Yan's works in this chapter are my translations and the page references are for the original Chinese texts.

⁶In Yan's lecture at Williams College, she points out that the image of Fu Sang derives from a photo exhibit in a historical museum inside San Francisco Chinatown. Interestingly, Yan describes how she was fascinated by this image of a Chinese prostitute of the 1880s after a prolonged engagement of gazing: "I watched the photo for a long time. Suddenly she became a riddle-like fantasy to me" (*Po xi mi ya lou* [Villa Bohemia] 203).

⁷The practice of "crib prostitution" was a regular feature in the early days of North American Chinatowns.

In fact, what brings Chris to her in the first place is his fascination with the sight of this Asian woman. The narrator describes how Chris used to hide and peep at Fu Sang: “Fu Sang was not aware that he had already surveyed every part of her with a small mirror. Ever since the early days of his childhood, he had learned to use this mirror to collect all the spectacles of the big wide world, making them his instant possession and acquisition” (9). The source of this gaze partially originates in the Orientalist mystique generated from the physical segregation of Chinese prostitutes.⁸ Chris’s voyeurism is both hormonally and racially determined. Armed with his mirror, he represents those Caucasian boys who go to Chinatown for a taste of exotic sex, as such practice is well recorded in historical documents. His obsessive watching reflects his emergent sexual desire and aggressive possessiveness, and his boyish curiosity mirrors the racial ideology of his elders. Here the author seems to furnish us with an ironic rendition of the Wordsworthian axiom, “The child is father of the Man.” This child in fact has the full potential of growing up to be a racist man.

While Fu Sang is subject to various levels of gazes, the author also gives her the power to undermine any prescribed boundary. The relationship between Fu Sang and Chris illustrates this. Yan’s emphasis on the relationship between Fu Sang and Chris represents the quintessential encounter between east and west. Chris’s entrance into Fu Sang’s world was intended as a mere rite of passage for a white teenage boy. He hoped that through the purchase of this “alien” body he could gain access to adulthood and participate in a family tradition, since every man in his family has a mistress of a different race. Presumably, this mandatory rite of passage would make him a man, which also implies a psychological separation from his mother. However, his sexual desire is deferred by Fu Sang’s natural aura of maternal love. Once he recognizes this special aspect of Fu Sang, he can no longer use her for cheap sexual pleasure. The narrator shows us how an aged Chris realizes that he is actually attracted by Fu Sang’s maternal appeal:

When Chris was sixty, one day he recalled a moment in the past—when he was twelve. In a narrow alley in Chinatown, he saw a Chinese prostitute. Seen from the darkened window, she looked as perfect as the bust of a goddess. Her red shirt was so close to the darkness behind her that she would have merged into that duskiness had she just leant back a bit further. She had a pointless smile on her face, but so

⁸ Benson Tong describes the reaction of mainstream society about Chinese women in Chinatown: “The Chinese female subculture as transplanted to America puzzled Euro-American society. Segregation from the male population in public places like Chinese theaters, self-confinement within residences, and donning traditional attire comprised aspects of their daily existence that made them objects of curiosity, ridicule, and derision” (156).

honest and warm. That was how maternity and prostitution existed side by side in her.

There was no longer any smoke coming out of Chris's pipe, but his eyes were getting smoky. He looked at this woman in his mind and understood the reason why he had plunged into her life was none other than—maternity!

Extreme exotic imagination had lured him to study her closely. Years later he discovered that it was actually a fascination with maternity. It was an ancient sort of maternity, the specialty of an early civilization.

His definition of maternity included suffering, forgiveness, and willingness to self-destruction.

Maternity was the highest form of femininity. She opened up herself and allowed you to plunder and invade her. The way she offered neither resistance nor preference was the most graceful representation of wantonness. (104)

Chris's memory of the maternal Fu Sang is always paradoxically mixed with reverence and profanity. Although dangerously close to Orientalist stereotyping, this view of maternity actually reflects the author's own complicated relationship with the maternal figure.⁹ It also demarcates Fu Sang's transformation into an archetypal figure of maternity that goes beyond the arbitrary dichotomy of chastity and wantonness, mother and whore. In fact, an incident that illustrates Fu Sang's maternal virtues occurs when she forgives Chris for joining a group of white men in gang raping her during a raid of Chinatown. The brass button from Chris's jacket that Fu Sang hides in her topknot is the only reminder of that night of violation. Paradoxically, this item retrieved during the rape became a token of love. A symbol of power and status beyond the reach of Chinese immigrants, the button becomes a navel that connects these two lovers of different races and classes. For Chris, Fu Sang is both a mother and a lover. Their quasi-incestuous liaison also reflects the taboo against interracial sexuality in American history.

A further example of Fu Sang's power to cross over set boundaries occurs during another voyeuristic moment, when the fourteen-year-old Chris watches her entertain her tenth customer of the day through her window:

Chris could hardly believe what he had seen. Her skin was the finest sand on the beach that drifted along with the currents. At certain moments it was formless and dissolved by the waves....

⁹ In the award acceptance talk of the 1998 *China Times* Million Dollar Fiction Award for the writing of *Ren Huan*, Yan Geling admits that in her previous novel she has idealized Fu Sang and other maternal figures because of her ambivalent relationship with her own mother (“*Wen xue shi wo de zong jiao*” [“Literature Is My Religion”]).

You might think the ocean was dominating the sand with its turbulence. But you would be wrong. The sand was the master. The sand contained the ocean, no matter how expansive and tyrannical it was...

Suddenly he felt an overflow of tears. Because he could see pleasure in her misty eyes, the lowliest kind of pleasure that had nothing to do with anything spiritual.

The pleasure was peaking.

The pleasure was not only for her. It spread to the man through her trembling body; it spread to Chris when their eyes met. (60-61)

The metaphors of ocean and sand embody the shift in power relations. Just like the sand that dominates the mighty ocean, Fu Sang is not simply the sexually oppressed. The tide of events turns with Fu Sang's orgasm. Chris's vicarious pleasure through voyeurism is a fascinating moment of intersubjective sharing and bonding. In this erotic *ménage à trois* we see another illustration of Fu Sang's extreme generosity. By sharing her body and claiming her pleasure, Fu Sang is able to transcend imposed physical exploitation.

Nevertheless, there is a limit to this experience of sharing. Only years later does Chris finally understand the source of Fu Sang's pleasure:

At that moment she managed to release herself with the help of destruction.

Her torn, tarnished body gained a momentary nirvana; when she rose from the bed all sweaty, her private part oozing blood, and covered herself with a tattered red silk shirt, she was a phoenix rising up into cloud nine.

This was the freest body, because it was not ruled by the soul. In front of this equality between body and soul, the age-long definitions of many concepts, such as humiliation and suffering, were no longer valid.... (105)

Physical destruction paradoxically ushers in renewed life force. Like a phoenix, therefore, Fu Sang is capable of rebirth, and this regenerative capacity allows her to go beyond physical bondage. Although Fu Sang's apparent passivity might seem problematic, the author deliberately elides any oversimplified feminist interpretation. Instead, she focuses on this slave woman's power to transform and to transcend. In a somewhat clichéd way, Fu Sang embodies the eternal principle of Yin that is capable of unsettling the external violence of the world of Yang; any preconceived conception of her thus becomes meaningless. She accepts all and is affected by none.

Moreover, in her passivity Fu Sang also represents a philosophy of survival adopted by early Asian immigrants. Throughout the text she is charac-

terized as a traditional Chinese woman of extreme compliance and gentleness—as gentle and generous as a cow, as the narrator notes (11). This gentle and generous creature adapts easily, illustrating the kind of survival instinct Sau-ling Wong defines as “Necessity.” When everyone thought that she would die of tuberculosis, for instance, she gets up and eats the rice left by a dead woman to keep herself alive. Out of survival-driven Necessity, however, Fu Sang manages to gain something “extravagant”—that is, personal freedom and sexual pleasure—out of her suffering and undermine another set of binaries.

Fu Sang’s power of transformation is perhaps most clearly represented by the two illustrations on the book jacket. The front cover portrays the back of a naked woman stranded on a bare rock, with a *sampan* sailing away from her. This picture visualizes Fu Sang’s sense of extreme isolation and vulnerability after her involuntary voyage across the Pacific. On the back, however, we see a smiling woman dressed in a formal Mandarin outfit of the late nineteenth century. Instead of the bare rock, this woman is standing on an open shell, posing as Botticelli’s Venus. Between these two cover drawings, the illustrator has skillfully translated for us what has happened inside the text with visual language; we see how Fu Sang has metamorphosed from a slave woman into a goddess of love.

It is also interesting that the illustrator chooses to highlight Fu Sang’s transformation in terms of space. Throughout the text, Fu Sang is exoticized not only in visual codes but also in spatial terms and her otherness is always demarcated by spatial and geographic references. Even in the Chinese American community she is an “other” because she comes from an inland province instead of the oceanic Canton, where most of the early immigrants originated from. Physically, Fu Sang is locked inside Chinatown, a miniature replica of the “mysterious Orient,” the epitome of evil and corruption in the land of freedom according to white imagination. Her alien features, including her bound feet, personify the “inscrutability” of the Orient, at least to Chris: “Every move of this Oriental woman surprised him. She was the demonic Orient in his mind” (101). During the raid, her violated body symbolizes the devastated Chinatown. As seen from the sand and phoenix metaphors, her exploited body transforms into a space wherein she can achieve inner freedom and rise above the restrictions imposed by any institution. From her objectified and exploited body, the author creates a utopian “her-land” for Fu Sang. In this textually constructed space, Fu Sang finally finds a place where she belongs. No longer is she the enslaved waif stranded in an alien country; she is now the heroine of a new Chinese American myth. Thus Chris finally recognizes the fact that Fu Sang has long risen above the dialectics of liberation and enslavement: “Whether you liberated her or enslaved her, her boundless freedom only belonged to her inner self” (144).

In addition to *Fu Sang*, the anonymous narrator also has the power of crossing over. In constructing a narrative that bridges two cultures, the narrator assumes the role of cultural translator. Not only does she literally translate English documents into Chinese, she works as a translator at more than one metaphorical level. Through her translation of the early records of Chinatown, the narrator also “translates” the psychological characteristics of these Caucasian authors—their xenophobia and racial ideology, to name a few—into plain language. Like many of Yan’s characters, this narrator articulates the author’s self-conscious concern about her immigrant status, and her keen awareness of the linguistic and historical imbalance of the two cultures between which she is moving back and forth. Ultimately, she “translates” forgotten historical documents into a story about different generations of Chinese immigrants. The narrative itself, moving within different time frames, also becomes a piece of translated work within which multiple layers of temporalities are interwoven. Through this “translation” across time, the narrator constructs mythical “folk memory” for Chinese Americans, and uncovers what official history has discredited. As Tejaswini Niranjana points out, “[a]n ethnographer’s translation of a culture occupies a privileged position as ‘scientific text,’ and is not only more powerful than folk memory, but also constructs folk memory” (83). While I do not intend to downplay the problematic power politics involved in ethnographic writing, I submit that from the outset the narrator of *Fu Sang* undertakes a project that comes very close to ethnographic research, although she is very self-conscious of the danger of Orientalist entrapment all around her. The narrator also carefully constructs her own image as a researcher in order to create a quasi-scientific aura for her work. As well, all her sources are dug out by her husband with the help of modern technology, such as computers and microfiche machines (*Fu Sang* 275). The construction of folk memory here is clearly meant to claim America for Chinese immigrants. This act of “claiming America,” in turn, like Peach’s setting up a plaque near the water tower in *Mulberry and Peach*, also stakes a claim for *Fu Sang* as Chinese American literature.

Upon winning the *United Daily News* Critics’ award in 1996, Yan Geling wrote about her motivation for writing *Fu Sang* in a short essay, “*Wa jue li shi de bei fen*” (“Digging into History’s Sorrow and Anger”). She describes how her strenuous excavation of documents about early Chinese immigrants led her to conclude that history is subject to different interpretations. Her personal interpretation, in turn, develops from her immigrant position:

I finished those history books in a mood of sorrow and anger. How Chinese people had been maltreated and oppressed was astounding and these historical facts triggered my reflection: it was a reflection upon the endless conflicts and frictions between east and west and upon the great

virtues and flaws of Chinese people. The state of being an immigrant—the most fragile and sensitive state of life form—forces one to react to the cruelty of one’s environment in a most truthful fashion. It is fated to be dramatic; it is fated to be tragic. (*Fu Sang* v)

In *Fu Sang*, besides the desire to record the drama and tragedy of immigration, Yan also constructs a textual link between herself and her maltreated and oppressed forbears/ancestors. As in Kingston’s *China Man* and Ng’s *Bone*, unearthing their overlooked and hidden histories becomes Yan Geling’s way of paying homage to early Chinese immigrants. In *Fu Sang*, therefore, a “ghost” of Chinese American past speaks to the present through photos and historical documents. The task of the narrator who lives in the Chinese American present is to piece together these historical fragments in order to create a Chinese American future liberated from institutional and historical amnesia.

Remembering China and Turning American in *Ren Huan*

As a companion piece to *Fu Sang*’s archeological project where Yan reenacts the life of a first-generation Chinese woman in America, in *Ren Huan* she takes stock of her formative years in China, thereby providing a comprehensive perspective on her American present. Ingeniously interweaving the two extreme tests of humanity—the Cultural Revolution and immigration—in a single text, *Ren Huan* is Yan’s creative experiment that results in a psychodrama of a Chinese woman’s internal development as she weathers personal and political traumas as well as transnational migration. The original title of the novel, *I Want to Be Normal*, speaks for an almost quixotic desire of generations of Chinese who have suffered the traumas of wars, revolutions and exiles. In *Ren Huan*, Yan specifically sets out to write the mental history of a contemporary diasporic Chinese woman who craves normality. At the end of the novel the narrator is tentatively granted this sense of normality as she finally leaves her exploitive American lover and the deadening struggle for power. This hopeful ending may have been vicarious wish fulfillment for the diasporic author. By making her the same age as the People’s Republic of China, the narrator’s personal story is inevitably entangled with national history and the history of the Chinese diaspora, and becomes a kind of “national allegory.”¹⁰ However, Yan never deviates from a personal perspective. Like *Fu Sang* and Nieh’s *Mulberry and Peach*, Yan’s text is materialistically based on the migrating female body, while relying on literary expression to mediate traumatic experiences. Furthermore, in this novel about trauma and

¹⁰ This idea of national allegory came up in my personal interview with Yan.

narration, Yan interweaves memories of China with immigrant experiences, creating a kind of textual bilingualism with monolingual Chinese to highlight the immigrant's condition of linguistic deterritorialization. This fusion of multiple layers of lived and linguistic experiences, to me, exemplifies what a Chinese American text could and should be in this age of transnational (im)migration.

In her analysis of "Threshold: A Dance Theater of Remembering and Forgetting,"¹¹ Vera Schwarcz points out the necessary geographical and linguistic distance for artists to remember home: "At home, historical memory is an all-pervading authority. It is synonymous with the native cultural tradition. Abroad, memory becomes an opportunity—however danger ridden—for a new kind of self-becoming that benefits from forcible distance from the mother tongue" (65). Historical recollection is performed through creative art in a "transitional space."¹² Such a space, as Schwarcz goes on to explain, is "a unique inner and outer marginality, a protected time away from native authorities that is not available to compatriots in the repression-burdened motherland. In this transitional space, Chinese abroad seek to create some continuity between past and present, between old selves imprinted by the mother tongue and new ones invented with painful freedom."¹³

Ren Huan can be regarded as Yan's attempt to create such a textual "transitional space" for the first-person narrator to simultaneously remember China and construct her diasporic subjectivity. Apart from geographical and linguistic distances, Yan provides a temporal frame for this act of textual remembrance. She structures her novel as a series of monologues that take place during fourteen sessions of psychotherapy, in which a forty-six-year-old immigrant woman from China speaks to a Caucasian therapist, who helps her look back at her developing years. Embedded in the text is a sense of uncertainty coming from a first-person narrator whose reliability is always already undermined by the very act of remembering, since her memory has been transformed by the distance of time, space, and use of a second language. Thus, in a metafictional and metahistorical fashion, in *Ren Huan* Yan comments on contemporary Chinese history, the immigrant condition, academic power politics, and western psychoanalytic paradigms. Thus her novel contributes a significantly different perspective and historicity to the existing literature of Chinese America.

In *Ren Huan*, Yan Geling portrays a woman who survives exploitative

¹¹ It was performed at La MaMa Theater, New York, to commemorate the 1989 Tiananmen massacre.

¹² Schwarcz borrows this concept from Leon and Rebecca Grinberg's analysis of exiles.

¹³ Here one is keenly reminded of Leo Ou-fan Lee's celebration of the peripheral in "On the Margin of the Chinese Diaspora."

relations with paternal figures, which suggests a subtle critique on Chinese women's engagement with patriarchy throughout recorded history. What the protagonist confesses to her analyst are survival stories, including the experience of the Cultural Revolution in China and her struggle within the power structure in American academia. Her memory of China is closely connected with an obsessive and semi-incestuous infatuation with her father's best friend, Ho Yi-chi, a Communist official who has turned the father into a ghostwriter and a traitor. Later, as she studies for her doctoral degree in the States, she becomes involved in an adulterous relationship with another older man, Professor Schultz, who chairs the department in which she works as a teaching assistant.

From the beginning, Ho is portrayed as a great proletarian hero of Communist China. He became literate at eighteen and created a socialist literary masterpiece at twenty. Although Ho is awarded the title as a revolutionary intellectual, he is also depicted as a shrewd politician who knows how to manipulate people. This characterization of Ho provides a sharp contrast to the narrator's father, an impractical *literati* from a bourgeois family with no political wisdom whatsoever to protect him from harm or exploitation. The narrator is well aware of Ho's domination over her father. And she reacts to it with both love and hate. The narrator's obsession with a heroic figure like Ho, on the one hand, portrays the younger generation's infatuation with the mystified and heroic genesis of the People's Republic of China. "Yes, I was in love with the mythical Uncle Ho," the narrator admits (254). Yan also assigns this love for Ho to a conquistador complex. As the narrator in a self-analytic mode points out, her emotional attachment to Ho manifests power worship: "Young girls secretly worship and dedicate themselves to their conquerors of the enemy tribes. Their infatuation originates in being overpowered. The power and control after the conquest deepens their obsession. So the deepest obsession actually comes from hatred. Hatred. But [they are] powerless to say anything" (184). On the other hand, she wants to rebel against this kind of conquest. The narrator confesses that from the age of eleven she secretly entertained the thought that she could liberate her father from mental enslavement should she succeed in seducing Ho—"If Uncle Ho has sinned against me, my father would be saved" (232). Through the triangulated relationship of Ho, the narrator, and her father, Yan's protagonist also orchestrates a subtle psychological drama of revenge against Ho's, and by extension the state's, power and exploitation.

The narrator's American lover also symbolizes the power she needs to account for in order to survive. Again, Ho is the third party in this emotional triangle as the narrator continues to compare the sixty-something Schultz with the aged Ho, a comparison that highlights the manipulative relation between the narrator and Schultz. Importantly, this second triangulation

suggests that the narrator's (Chinese) American identity is always mediated by her memory of China. This state of mediation aptly stresses the entanglement involved in the process of turning American for a diasporic Chinese. As Tu Wei-ming observes, "the ubiquitous presence of the Chinese state...continues to loom large in the psychocultural constructs of diaspora Chinese. For many, the state, either Nationalist or Communist, controls the symbolic resources necessary for their cultural identity" (18-19).

In terms of remembering China, the Cultural Revolution represents the ultimate trauma in the early history of the People's Republic. I would argue that it would be most fruitful to read *Ren Huan* within the context of the Cultural Revolution since the text is strongly informed by the aftermath of this particular catastrophe, and therefore must be read within this specific narrative tradition. This digression into the Cultural Revolution narrative also provides an important historical context to the experiences of recent immigrants from China and may illuminate a new development of Chinese American reality.

In fact, in one of her earlier short stories, "*Wo bu shi you ling*" ("I Am Not a Spirit"),¹⁴ Yan already endeavored to work out the relationship between an elder man and a much younger girl whose emotional entanglement is mediated by the memory of the Cultural Revolution. In the story, nineteen-year-old Sui-zi falls in love with Han, a middle-aged artist who was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution and completely lost his faith in humanity. Although his talent is again appreciated and his works much sought after in the narrative present, Han cannot bear to paint human forms again. Significantly, Yan underscores the fact that Sui-zi's desire for Han originates from the story narrated by her father about how Han was humiliated and persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. In Sui-zi's first love letter to Han, she passionately confesses, "I get close to you because of your story of misery; I fall in love with you because your past was lack of love, without love. Please allow me to support your body that is permanently wounded and to shoulder your unbearable load of suffering" (*Xiao Yu* 166). The sentimental and melodramatic tone of the letter reveals a young girl's infatuation with and romanticizing of traumas and sufferings. The letter also serves as a trope of the younger generation's obsession with the memory of the Cultural Revolution. As in Yan's other stories, in *Ren Huan* the author rewrites and further complicates this mediated infatuation with the added elements of power struggle and emotional manipulation.

The analysis of the impact of the Cultural Revolution on the contemporary Chinese diaspora can hardly be exhausted. As Peter Zarrow insightfully observes, "the Cultural Revolution, which shattered the lives of intel-

¹⁴ This piece of short story is collected in *Xiao Yu*.

lectuals, students, and others with the ability and means to express themselves, remains a potent signifier of totalitarian disaster” (186). Paradoxically, it also becomes the source of literary creation for many contemporary Chinese writers. After the death of Mao Tse-tung in 1976, the “literature of the wounded” or “literature of suffering” and other kinds of narratives revolving around the theme of the Cultural Revolution were created *en mass*. Politically, the creation of this type of writings served to realign power structures and to assign guilt in post-Mao China. Psychologically, as many critics are quick to point out, writing about the Cultural Revolution is in fact tantamount to an act of survival. For example, in his book-length study of the Cultural Revolution narrative, Xu Zidong argues that very few contemporary Chinese writers can avoid the task of remembering and making sense of the Cultural Revolution. They need to narrate and explain the stories of the Cultural Revolution; otherwise “many Chinese writers (and readers) will probably not be able to ‘survive’ this trauma of cultural and moral fragmentation and the loss of any sense of value. It will be difficult for them to maintain the spiritual connection with traditional culture and the May Fourth spirit” (11).¹⁵ Xu contends that “‘the Cultural Revolution novels’ are all but variations of the same structure, retellings of the same ‘story,’ and narrative types of the same ‘collective memory’” (36) because “consciously or unconsciously, what a fiction writer needs to do for one’s self and for the reader is to provide certain ‘form’ or ‘meaning’ to the experiences of the Cultural Revolution” (207).

Another interesting phenomenon in terms of literary production is that Cultural Revolution memoirs and, more recently, fictional works, have appeared in the last four decades on the English literary market. According to Zarrow, both the writing and reading of these English-language Cultural Revolution memoirs are shaped by a Cold War ideology. These memoirs, many written by former Red Guards, “are commodities mediating traumatic experiences into the putatively universal languages of the social sciences and psychology. But as representatives of violence and pain, the memoirs also make a compelling moral argument, demanding a response to political repression and pain and promising to teach us something” (167). The few English novels by Chinese American authors which touch upon such traumatic experiences, such as Wang Ping’s *American Visa* (1994) and Anchee Min’s *Katherine* (1995), mostly appear ideologically simplistic when they write in a dichotomous fashion about Chinese suffering and American salvation.¹⁶

¹⁵ All the translations of quotes from Xu’s text here are mine. Following Vladimir Propp’s formalistic approach, Xu analyzes fifty texts of the Cultural Revolution and comes up with twenty-nine “plot functions.”

¹⁶ *American Visa* is collection of short stories about a central character Seaweed who moves from her home to a peasant village and finally to Flushing, New York. The protagonist in

Chinese cultural critic Dai Jinhua's analysis of the "consumption" of these memories in China further elucidates the obsessive relationship of Chinese cultural production and the Cultural Revolution. Throughout the 1980s, Dai points out, the Cultural Revolution was an omnipresent subtext whose chain of signification rapidly multiplied; yet, it soon became a metonymic representation for discursive taboos. The booming industry that developed from the experience of trauma actually displaced honest political reflection: "although 'literature of the wounded' has rapidly transformed from a voice of the other into the cultural mainstream, yet its necessary extension, literature of political reflection, is soon aground. For undoubtedly a reflection on the Cultural Revolution is bound to become a query of history and a questioning of reality that will lead to an interrogation of institution and power machine" (41-42).¹⁷ For Dai, the "literature of the wounded" is just "a rewriting of reality rather than a disclosure; a new cultural covering up and a successful ideological practice rather than an unprecedented exposure or a 'national reflection after the catastrophe'" (8). The production and consumption of the Cultural Revolution narrative is thus part of an act of political masking that actually aims to replace actual violence with a discursive one.

Although the wrenching experiences of the Cultural Revolution are deeply burned into the consciousness of the first-person narrator, Yan's treatment of this collective trauma differs significantly from that of the "literature of the wounded." In fact, she denounces these popular stories as works of kitsch and bad taste, revealing how the ideological education of the Communist government has effectively wiped out any possibility of independent thinking. Yan describes her reaction when she comes across some of the "true stories" written in English:

The way the authors tell the story is far from being true. Maybe it is because they are writing in English. They cannot well control the degrees of precision of the language and become dominated by the language.... Another far more important reason is because these authors are the direct product of an authority of bad taste. While most of these works are trying to accuse this authority, the authors fail to recognize the

Wang's second novel *Foreign Devil* (1996) follows the same trajectory of migration. Anchee Min's first book, *Red Azalea* (1994) is an autobiography with an interesting lesbian subtext. *Katherine*, her first novel, narrates the relationship between a student and her American teacher, Katherine, and how the latter helps her leave China. As the title suggests, the novel has a Eurocentric perspective that condemns Chinese ways as corruptive and backward. Min's book about the Cultural Revolution, *Becoming Madame Mao* (1999), is a fictional biography of Jiang Chin that simplistically attributes the cause of the cultural disaster to Madame Mao's frustrated sexual desire.

¹⁷ All the quotes from Dai's text are my translations.

fact that its only success is to typeset the mind of several generations of [Chinese] people. No matter how real the story is, within this fixed mentality there can be no truth. (*Po xi mi ya lou* 185)

Since Yan herself has written a novel in English, *The Banquet Bug* (2006), obviously she does not reject English for literary creation *per se*. What she challenges here are the works of kitsch and bad taste as well as the poverty of imagination that arise from a culture under totalitarian rule.

Despite Yan's revulsion against the kitsch exploitation of the Cultural Revolution, contemporary Chinese history is so closely knit with this horrendous memory that the specter of the Cultural Revolution inevitably haunts her texts. Even in *Fu Sang* the narrator cannot help but slip in an allusion to her personal experiences in the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen massacre to describe the perverse sexual drive behind the racist raid of Chinatown (208). In *Ren Huan*, references to the Cultural Revolution are numerous. However, though many of the details of the novel come from her lived experience, *Ren Huan* is not and does not intend to be a fictional memoir. Yan's ingenuity lies in the ways in which she displaces sensational description of the totalitarian holocaust with a personal narrative of love and seduction. By appealing to love, a basic human affect, she unmasks the disguised distortion of humanity involved in the memory of the Cultural Revolution and, by implication, alludes to the violence in another experience of extremity, immigration. Through a carefully psychologized narrative of seduction, she further highlights the power struggle involved in political survival. The purpose of such displacement is not to sensationalize, but aims to offer personal insight into the trauma through a close inspection of how human beings react in extreme situations. The double narrations in the novel, therefore, are mutually enlightening and indicate a new direction of Chinese American writing.

The distortion of humanity is best represented by the father's public humiliation of Ho during the Cultural Revolution. After years of serving as Ho's ghostwriter, the father slapped Ho when the latter was undergoing political criticism. The author attempts to hammer home the impact of this slap on the face, which as a symbolic act is fraught with all the violence and betrayals of the Cultural Revolution:

My father's right hand was on its way back from the slap, the tips of his five fingers were numbed by the after shock. Uncle Ho raised his left hand towards his cheek, to register the slap. My father looked into Ho's eyes. They were so traumatic. It was like someone who was hit by a bullet on the side or the back when he was trying with all his might to dodge the bullets in front of him. This bullet came from a gun that was

too close to him; the one holding the gun was a person who he thought was bonded to him in eternal friendship. Ho's eyes never left my father. He wanted both of them to acknowledge this evidence. My father suddenly understood that he could never take his right hand back from the slap on Uncle Ho's face. He could never quiet the after shock upon his fingers. He could never wash this slap from his hand. (82)

For all the exploitation he has suffered, the father chose the most inappropriate moment to claim justice. Most importantly, Yan reveals how this crazy mode of collective hatred perverted basic human dignity and turned decent people into traitors.

The pattern of exploitation and betrayal is repeated in the narrator's relationship with Schultz, who, armed with his academic status, practically forces himself on her. In one episode the narrator describes how Schultz deliberately prints out a recommendation letter for her and then tears it into pieces in front of her (26). The cruelty of this deliberate act that aims to hurt, and the explicit show of power must be interpreted within the context of the narrator's "alien" status. The threat of no recommendation jeopardizes her chance of finding a job upon which her legal status and livelihood depend. Yet the narrator refuses to become his opponent in this game, and thus renders Schultz powerless. Her nonchalance shows that she has seen through the mechanism of manipulative power game since she has been thoroughly educated by the episode between her father and Ho. Despite this rational perspective, she somehow projects her obsession for the older Ho onto Schultz, and vicariously consummates the suspended romance in her present relationship with a much older Caucasian man.

Underneath her cool and rational appearance, the narrator nevertheless becomes suicidal under the heavy strain of the power struggles in which she is engaged. This gives Yan the chance to create a narrative frame of psychotherapy for the novel. According to Yan, the writing of *Ren Huan* originated in her personal experimentation with psychotherapy. For three months, she visited a Caucasian female therapist. Yan recalls, "she was a careful listener and kept on making notes. Before the next session she would locate several questionable points and went over these questions with me, trying to discover the abnormal influence during the development of my personality and the traumas—be them cured or not—of my early life" (*Po x imi ya lou* 220). Yan was singularly fascinated by the therapist's notebook, from which she believed "a story, a personal story about me narrated by fragmented, sometimes with improper, English" should surface (*Po xi mi ya lou* 221). Hence the fiction writer set to work and what came out of these sessions of Freudian "Talk Out" was *Ren Huan*, a narrative of remembering China and reconstructing a new identity for a Chinese diasporic woman.

In the novel Yan has adapted a classical Freudian psychoanalytical paradigm in which the transferential relationship with one's therapist is basically a linguistic one: to speak to this listening party implies lifting the repression, translating one's experience, and overcoming a linguistic barrier. It enables the narrator to shuttle back and forth between the past in China and the present in the United States, and to finally come to terms with her diasporic identity. In a sense, writing performs this function of transference and makes narrativization possible. Speaking from the position of a therapist who is also a Holocaust survivor, Dori Laub observes that the process of constructing testimony is really a collaborative work between the survivor and the therapist:

The survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both. To undo this entrapment in a fate that cannot be known, cannot be told, but can only be repeated, a therapeutic process—a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of *re-externalizing the event*—has to be set in motion. This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside. Telling this entails a reassertion of the hegemony of reality and a re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim. (69 original emphasis)

The survivor has to put the horrendous experience into narrative forms to start the healing process. The fictional testimony of the Cultural Revolution and transnational migration in *Ren Huan* is clearly rooted in the act of narrativization. The novel testifies to a Chinese woman's survival, as she lives to remember the traumas of contemporary Chinese history. And the reader becomes the therapist who enables this articulation and transmission.

However, Yan also inserts several twists in her narrative as critiques of the Eurocentric paradigm of psychotherapy. First, the reliability of Yan's narrator is deliberately put into question in the text. In the novel, we see a patient well versed in the theories and principles of psychoanalysis. Although she seems to cooperate with the therapist, Yan's narrator controls her act of remembering. In the final session the narrator voluntarily undergoes hypnosis in an attempt to uncover any possible childhood trauma. In this hypnotized state she tells a Lolita-type story of how Ho may have been tempted by her budding eleven-year-old female body and touched her during a train ride. This psychoanalytical breakthrough, since the therapist obviously tries to pin down the source of the narrator's mental "dis-ease" in Ho's pedophilic act, becomes highly doubtful since Yan purposely highlights the

fact that it is unclear whether she is telling the truth or simply indulging in her own fantasy. As the narrator forewarns her therapist, as well as the reader, “[m]aybe what you get is not truth, but daydream” (257). Hence, by framing the narrative with psychotherapy, Yan at once exploits a potential transference bonding between the analyst and the analysand, and deconstructs this supposed transference with the presence of an unreliable narrator. Moreover, in her final phone message to the therapist, the protagonist identifies the latter as Dr. Sade. This appellation, loaded with cultural allusions, is another ironic comment on psychotherapy. Instead of a helping hand, the therapist is implicitly compared to the sadist author of sexual perversions. Thus Yan inserts an implied criticism of Freudian preoccupation with sexology. Through her narrator’s resistance to formulaic diagnosis, then, Yan subtly comments on the heavy reliance on psychotherapy in American society and more pointedly questions the appropriateness of imposing western psychoanalytical theories and culture on Chinese people.

Furthermore, in *Ren Huan* Yan represents Hall’s “process of cultural diaspora-ization” by creating an illusionary bilingualism. Yan’s text most significantly contributes to Chinese American literature, I believe, through her creative way of challenging the hegemony of English by problematizing the use of language. Whereas Chinese American literary works written in English often represent bilingual experiences with transliteration of Chinese dialects, Yan constantly highlights the intrinsic conflicts in the narrator’s linguistic mode of representation as she tries to communicate in a language that is not her own. Her choppy, fragmented sentence structures mimic the way in which the narrator carries on an English conversation with the therapist. Right from the beginning we hear the first-person protagonist speak about her different personalities while using different languages:

English makes me rude. The English-speaking me is someone different. It makes me act uninhibited; the imprecision in my expression is my camouflage. It is a prop, a costume for you to cover yourself up so that you can speak the lines and perform in the most authentic way. In another language hides my other personality. Just like these plastic figurines. On this sandbox you can always rebuild and wipe out everything. Kids can use them to play out all their dreams and fantasies. Yes, I’ve heard about this kind of therapy. So is English. It makes me both correct and incorrect. So I have nothing to hide. (1)

Here the theatrical allusions underscore the nature of performance in linguistic practice. Most strikingly, the author ascribes a therapeutic function to the use of a language other than one’s mother tongue. The linguistic limbo lamented by many non-native speakers becomes a freedom zone from which

one can articulate vital truths. Of course, Yan is not so naïve as to disregard the sense of deterritorialization involved in a translingual situation. The immigrant woman living in the bilingual mode also appears schizophrenic in the passage. Yet Yan is nonetheless ingenious in associating the form of the narrative—literally sessions of psychotherapy—with reflections on the nature of bilingual practice and accomplishes this sense of heteroglossia in a monolingual mode of written Chinese.

Becoming a Cultural Translator

There is never an easy answer to the question of language in terms of literary categorization. With the acceleration of transnational migration and the challenge against the spread of global English,¹⁸ we can no longer resort to a simple monolingual approach to define fields that are deeply rooted in diasporic transmutations such as Chinese American literature. In this case the process of *diaspora-ization* in fact changes both the fields of Chinese and Chinese American studies. Yan Geling labels herself and other Chinese immigrant writers as “nomads of Chinese literature” because in terms of geographical and psychological positions in society, they are at once estranged from the mainstream of the Chinese mother tongue and perched on the cultural margin of another country. This double marginalization, according to Yan, results in a creolization of written Chinese (*Po xi mi ya lou* 149). However, I strongly believe that this nomadic condition is perhaps the most strategic position for a Chinese American “cultural translator.” Just like Nieh Hualing “translates” the formation of a Chinese American identity with the story of Mulberry’s metamorphosis into Peach, Yan Geling also plays the role of a cultural translator by re-presenting different aspects of Chinese American history and female subjectivity, and negotiating between different experiential fields in her two novels. Her perceptive observations about the immigrant condition based on her position as a cultural translator considerably expand the scope of Chinese American literature.

My effort to redefine Chinese American literary studies here also gives me an opportunity to reflect upon my own critical position. While working on these Chinese texts that delineate specific Chinese American lived experiences, I, with my linguistic practice of translation and critical practice of interpretation, have also become a cultural translator. This engagement with cultural translation is one of the advantages as well as responsibilities of being a “bilingual intellectual.” We bilingual intellectuals who work in the field of minority literary studies, in the final analysis, should value our role as cultural translators, whose task involves more than simply translating lin-

¹⁸ See Rita Raley for a discussion of the ideological issues involved in the concept of global English.

guistic and cultural codes from one country to another, but moving beyond linguistic barriers to facilitate cultural agency, as Gayatri C. Spivak has reminded us.¹⁹ Only then can we contribute productively to the continuous remapping of the existing fields of literary studies.

¹⁹ In "The Politics of Translation," Spivak admonishes, "[t]he translator has to make herself, in the case of third world women writing, almost better equipped than the translator who is dealing with the Western European languages, because of the fact that there is so much of the old colonial attitude, slightly displaced, at work in the translation racket. Poststructuralism *can* radicalize the field of preparation so that simply boning up on the language is not enough; there is also that special relationship to the staging of language as the production of agency that one must attend to" (189).

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98 學年度移地研究報告

本人本年度的移地研究參訪印度，所完成的具體工作報告如下：

1. 赴德里購買研究相關書籍及影視資料。
2. 探訪當地學界，諮詢並討論後殖民文學與離散文學之發展與理論，並實地了解印度宗教與社會人文之特性。
3. 同時也訪問國科會駐德里辦事處，探詢與印度學界進行國際學術合作之可能。

無衍生研發成果推廣資料

97 年度專題研究計畫研究成果彙整表

計畫主持人：馮品佳		計畫編號：97-2420-H-009-003-				計畫名稱：漂泊離散的女性：閱讀當代華裔美國女性作家	
成果項目		量化			單位	備註（質化說明：如數個計畫共同成果、成果列為該期刊之封面故事...等）	
		實際已達成數（被接受或已發表）	預期總達成數（含實際已達成數）	本計畫實際貢獻百分比			
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	成果項目	量化	名稱或內容性質簡述
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	課程/模組	0	
	電腦及網路系統或工具	0	
	教材	0	
	舉辦之活動/競賽	0	
	研討會/工作坊	0	
	電子報、網站	0	
	計畫成果推廣之參與(閱聽)人數	0	

國科會補助專題研究計畫成果報告自評表

請就研究內容與原計畫相符程度、達成預期目標情況、研究成果之學術或應用價值（簡要敘述成果所代表之意義、價值、影響或進一步發展之可能性）、是否適合在學術期刊發表或申請專利、主要發現或其他有關價值等，作一綜合評估。

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專書已完成並由德國 LIT 出版社出版

3. 請依學術成就、技術創新、社會影響等方面，評估研究成果之學術或應用價值（簡要敘述成果所代表之意義、價值、影響或進一步發展之可能性）（以 500 字為限）

Diasporic Representations: Reading Chinese American Women's Fiction 由德國 LIT 出版社出版，集結了本人過去十年以來華裔美國女性書寫的研究論文，為國科會專書出版補助計畫之成果(NSC 97-2420-H-009-003)。導論部分回顧 1970 年代以來的亞美研究專書，並據此提出進行族裔研究時在政治與文化研究之外，文本閱讀與美學研究之重要；同時，本人指出華裔美國女性作家在美國族裔文學研究中佔有重要地位，因此出版專論華裔美國女性書寫論文集有其一定之意義與重要性。其導論之外，專書以七大章節分別探討 Fae Myenne Ng、Amy Tan、Gish Jen、Amiee Liu、Sigrid Nunez、Shirley Lim、Nieh Hualing(聶華苓)與 Yan Geling(嚴歌苓)的小說文本以及所代表的不同文學傳統。