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"Mo No Boy": The Negative Rhetoric of Nation in the Work of Wayson Choy

Deborah L. Madsen

The term "mo no" appears repeatedly in Wayson Choy's fiction to signify the "no brain" condition of his Canadian-born characters, individuals who lack a "China-born" way of thinking, responding, and behaving. For me, and my title obviously gestures towards this, the term echoes the title of John Okada's now classic novel of the Japanese American Internment experience, *No-No Boy* (1957). By evoking Okada's text, I intend to suggest that the immigrant condition of a failure to belong, both to the nation of ethnic origin and also to the nation of residence, is a powerful constituent of Choy's work as well. I do not want to pursue a possible connection between the two writers beyond this echo, though I do want to stress the role of both as members of a first North American-born generation and to stress the difference in historical reception of this rhetoric of "unbelonging." By the latter I mean that Okada was writing in the US at a time before the advances wrought by the Civil Rights Movement; Wayson Choy, however, writes from within a multicultural (or intercultural, as he prefers to describe it) Canada where such a discourse of double exclusion takes on very different resonance ("Intercultural, Not Multicultural" 279).

As is well known, Okada took his title from his protagonist's response to the questions posed in the loyalty questionnaire administered by internment camp officials: "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States in combat duty wherever ordered?" and "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attacks of foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese Emperor, to any other foreign government, power, or organization?" (Cheung: n.p.). Ichiro replies "no" to each question, refusing to pledge absolute allegiance to either the US or Japan; he refuses to proclaim loyalty to the United States, the nation that has interned his family and branded them potential traitors; he refuses equally his mother's unquestioning loyalty to Japan, which he does not share. Caught between these conflicting demands, caught in the complications of a hybrid immigrant identity, Ichiro can only respond negatively to the demands of national identification. Writing in the aftermath of his own involvement in the Pacific War, in the period following the 1948 reform of US immigration laws, and in the years immediately preceding the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, Okada articulates the impossible situation of first-generation US-born Asian immigrants. Resisting the residual identification of their parents' migrant generation, not yet fully integrated into the social and economic structures of the US as their third-generation offspring would become, writers like Okada express a conflict or tension between the claims of the "homeland" passed on by foreign-born parents and the claims of "Americanness" inherited by US-born children for whom a term like "Japanese" serves to qualify but not to replace the noun "American" in the hyphenated designation "Japanese-American."

This status, as a member of the first Canadian-born generation growing up in Vancouver's Chinatown, was instrumental in shaping Choy's approach to his writing, as he has explained. In a 1998 interview with Rocío Davis, Wayson Choy describes his late turn to

writing as a consequence of his upbringing, as a first-generation Canadian of Chinese ancestry:

I was part of that time when Vancouver was dominated by a white majority and the Anglo-Saxon culture and my belief – which was what most of my community accepted – was that you had to integrate right away. You couldn't go back to China. So we had to look for our place in North America. And then citizenship was offered to Chinese-Canadians in 1947. So more and more of my generation realized they needed to integrate, they needed to be more Canadian than ever. I thought, what would I write about? I looked back at my past and saw that it was not spectacular, it was not glamorous, there was really nothing to write about ("Intercultural, Not Multicultural" 270).

This sense of liminality, of living "between worlds," as Amy Ling so famously phrased the condition of Chinese writers of immigrant descent, is pervasive in Wayson Choy's writing: in his two novels, *The Jade Peony* (1995) and *All That Matters* (2004), as well as his memoir, *Paper Shadows* (1999). The perception that a return to China is impossible, combined with the lack of an obvious model for finding what Choy calls "our place in North America," creates the emotional context for Choy's deployment of the term "*mo no*." But the term does much more than just this, it encodes within the textual rhetoric a discourse of non-belonging, of double exclusion, that disturbingly recalls the exclusions of the previous era it deliberately invokes.

The call for a move towards an aesthetic, as opposed to ethnographic, approach to Asian North American literature has come from scholars like Rocío Davis, following such critics as Shirley Lim, Garrett Hongo, Donald Goellnicht, and others.¹ My emphasis here upon the rhetoric of Wayson Choy's writing, as well as of the other Chinese Canadian writers to whom I will make brief reference in the conclusion, contributes to this effort to interrogate complex ways in which this body of work seeks to create new forms of expression and new kinds of cultural meaning. However, Rocío Davis, like those whom she follows, tends to assume a celebratory or liberatory tone when referring to these new and innovative literary forms which, while perhaps accurate in some interpretive situations, is not necessarily the case for all Chinese immigrant writers. Indeed, Chinese Canadian and Chinese American writers are as free to produce conservative or even reactionary rhetorical styles as writers identified with any other group or community. There is no imperative that minority writers must "challenge dominant ideologies," as Davis claims (4). Glenn Deer rightly warns in his editorial introduction to the special issue of *Canadian Literature*: "Asian North America in Transit": "We must be wary of how critical energy spent on the celebration of multiculturalist diversity can often serve to distract us from ongoing systemic forms of racism" (Deer: n.p.). In what follows, I will argue that the rhetoric of nation that is used in the work of Chinese American and Chinese Canadian writers such as Wayson Choy is entirely consonant with "dominant ideologies," that this rhetoric works with rather than against systemic forms of racism, and that this accounts in part for the popularity of these writers.

One of the most successful of these popular writers is Amy Tan, comparison with whom is often made by Choy's commentators. In *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), her second novel, the protagonist Winnie is advised to tell her history by her friend Helen who counsels: "They'll understand. Maybe they'll be happy to know something about their mother's background. Hard life in China, that's very popular now" (80). Tan's fiction is surely characterized by more than just stories about difficult lives in Old China, but this element must not be underemphasized: the resolution of immigrant family problems by a cathartic

return to China marks many popular works of the emergent Chinese diasporic canon. The "Amy Tan Phenomenon," identified by Sau-ling Wong, is grounded in a contradictory claim to both Chinese ethnic authenticity and to North American national belonging, which dissolves, under narrative pressure, into moments of sentimental Orientalist fantasy (such as the "Hard life in China" story) that appeals strongly to white Western readers: readers like Sau-ling Wong's "sugar sisterhood" of Amy Tan fans. Wayson Choy's novel *All That Matters* also ends with the revelation of Grandmother Poh-Poh's "hard life in China," though *The Jade Peony* ends with the story of Meiying's "hard life in Canada." All are stories of unbelonging, of failing to be at home in the place that should be home. I want to suggest that dominant texts enshrined in the emergent canon of diasporic Chinese literature, such as Wayson Choy's three books, use narrative structures that echo the conservative and ultimately exclusionary fictional models of Amy Tan's work.²

These texts can be read as structurally centered upon a logic of what I am calling the rhetoric of the "neither/nor": texts that display allegiance to neither the "national" (the American culture of the hostland) nor to China (the "ethnic" homeland). This rhetoric of the double negative, otherwise termed by Sheng-Mei Ma as "the deathly embrace" of Orientalism, emphasizes irreconcilability or unassimilability as the characteristic of hyphenated Chinese experience, even as it betrays the residual power of nationalism in the context of diasporic community formation. I want to propose that canonical categorizations crystallize conservative images of "overseas Chinese communities," their relations with the "homeland" and allegiances to the "hostland" (the resident nation-state): to echo the phrases of Paul Gilroy's 1990 essay, for these diasporic writers "'It Ain't Where You're From It's Where You're At."

The emphasis upon "where you're from" is, of course, a rhetorical strategy of exclusion asserted by the dominant culture, a strategy that obscures the fact that members of overseas communities can never simply or easily return to "where they are from." This double exclusion, this sense of no longer belonging in the putative homeland or in the "hostland" has historical roots which should complicate our understanding of the Chinese diaspora as a sedimented process constituted by successive historical waves of emigration from China. I find it significant that many anglophone literary representations of Chinese diaspora focus on the nineteenth-century phase of emigration from South China, at the expense of both earlier and later waves of migration. In the work of Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Faye Myenne Ng, Wayson Choy, Sky Lee and others, "China" is identified with the village culture of coastal Guangdong province. Both Kingston and Choy comment upon their characters' use of *Sze Yup* or Four County village dialect. In *All That Matters* the narrator comments: "The majority of those who settled early in Vancouver's Chinatown came from the same Sze-yup [sic], Four County village district, or spoke related dialects from the Sam-yup, Three Counties areas, closer to Canton ... Everyone seemed to know someone in Old China who knew someone else closely related to them" (44).

This historical and cultural essentializing of Chinese diaspora runs against the grain of much contemporary diaspora theory. For example, in the inaugural issue of the journal *Diaspora* editor Khachig Tololyan writes: "*Diaspora* is concerned with the ways in which nations, real yet imagined communities (Anderson), are fabulated, brought into being, made and unmade, in culture and politics, both on land people call their own and in exile" (3). However, the very concept of diaspora involves some acceptance of a strategically essentialist understanding of an originary or authentic cultural identity. The strategy of essentialist Chineseness that binds all members of the overseas Chinese community into a "diaspora" creates the illusion of a "pre-culture"; that is, of a subjective condition that precedes culture and which is somehow identical with the homeland: "China". In this perspective, the concept of Chinese diaspora is an exercise in boundary-making that works hand in hand with

nationalism. Members of the "diaspora" are constrained to an identity based on "Chineseness," regardless of whether that individual has ever visited China, engaged in Chinese cultural practices, or speaks Chinese (we could think here, for instance, of the title of Ien Ang's 2001 book, *On Not Speaking Chinese*).

In many respects membership of the Chinese diaspora is a matter of *self*-identification. A migrant subject, traumatized by the experience of exclusion from the resident or host society, is empowered to adopt strategically an essentialist understanding of Chineseness and to claim allegiance to a transnational Chinese diasporic community. In this way, the "difference" that attaches to this essentialized Chineseness is used to effect a transcendence of the experience of dispossession and exclusion. However, this same "difference" is an ongoing occasion for the restatement of exclusionary attitudes: the Chinese diaspora can be claimed by those who seek a sense of belonging but can also be claimed for Chinese immigrants, both as individuals and as whole communities.

The understanding that all overseas Chinese are "children of the Yellow Emperor," who occupy the status of unassimilated minority groups within the borders of the nation-state, has given rise to anti-Chinese suspicion and hostility in many places at many times. More generally, the perception that Chinese national allegiance must lie with the Chinese "homeland" promotes that interest in "where you're from" that I mentioned before and which Henry Yu credits with inspiring his book, *Thinking Orientals*. In the preface he writes:

This study has been an attempt to answer why it is that an Asian American in the United States, no matter how long and for how many generations he or she might have been here, will still be regularly asked "Where are you from?" The inquisitors are never satisfied with the answers of Los Angeles, or Vancouver, or Canada. You are seen as an "Oriental" of some sort, and they need to sort you according to some foreign distinction (vi).

So the identification with "Chineseness" is a double-edged sword: available for strategic use but also a strategy of racial abuse as well. It is on this point of emphasis – use or abuse – that I part company with critics such as Eleanor Ty who argue that, while Wayson Choy's work is concerned with exclusion and the problematics of survival, emphasis must be placed on what Ty calls "a contrapuntal movement that celebrates the power of creativity and resistance, and the possibility of ethnic reinscription" (117). Ty argues that, in *The Jade Peony*, Choy's narrative focus on the transformation of his young protagonists, their *Bildung*, obscures Canada's history of Chinese exclusion, inequality, and discrimination. However, it seems to me that the conditions for growing up (the *Bildung*) in Vancouver's Chinese immigrant neighborhood are precisely prescribed and limited by the material conditions of ethnic marking. This becomes clearer in Choy's sequel, *All That Matters*, where the three intersecting narratives of the first novel give way to a single narrative point of view and a narrative that is nearly twice as long as the first. In this sequel the narrator is First Son, Kiam-Kim, who was born in China and brought with his father and grandmother to Canada at the age of three. For Kiam-Kim, perhaps more than his siblings, the issue of blood identity is crucial. Of all the children, only he could make a "return" to the ancestral village in China.

Ien Ang, following Rey Chow, observes that in the absence of Chinese cultural content (such as speaking Chinese or observing Chinese cultural practices), "blood" acts as a signifier or, what she calls, the "degree zero of Chineseness to which the diasporic subject can resort to recover his imaginary connectedness with China, and to substantiate, through the fiction of race, what otherwise would be a culturally empty identity" (Ang 49, see also Chow 24). It is blood that is somehow "pre-cultural," that permits access to a valorized "pre-culture" of immigrant or transnational Chinese kinship. However, Ang goes on to argue quite rightly that this essentialist appeal to blood identity is profoundly limiting not only of what an individual is but of what that individual can be. This fiction of blood kinship (Rey Chow's "myth of consanguinity") is narrativized by the story of "return" to China in texts by writers

like Amy Tan, where historical agency is surpassed by transcendent blood identity. In fact, I would want to argue that these narratives of return, which do assert what David Leiwei Li calls "the mystic and genetic inheritance of the kind for which Amy Tan is famous ...," nonetheless fail in the assertion of transnational kinship or belonging and this failure is precisely located in the text's commitment to "blood" (2004: 110).

What the narrative of return emphasizes is inevitably the historical disjuncture that characterizes migrant experience: the culture to which one returns cannot be the culture one left. The chronological displacement between "here" and "there" is comically represented in the "return" with which *The Joy Luck Club* concludes, when June (though she was not born in China and so does not, strictly speaking, "return") discovers that her Chinese vocabulary is that of the small child she was when she learned those words from her mother. The migrant can never "return"; blood cannot bridge the chasm of time that separates departure from any return. Such a failure to "return" marks the conclusion of Denise Chong's fictional family history, *The Concubine's Children*; the threat of return to a starving, wartorn, and chaotic China is pervasive in both of Choy's novels.

I want to highlight the narrative motif that powerfully characterizes this failure or inability to return: the diasporic motif of belonging "neither here nor there." What the conclusion of *The Joy Luck Club* emphasizes is the realization on the part of the diasporic subject that she belongs "neither here nor there": she is fully integrated into neither American nor Chinese culture. This motif is repeated in canonical texts of Chinese Canadian, Chinese American, and Chinese Australian literature; the frequency of the repetition is such as to suggest that this motif is in fact more than just a characteristic of individual texts but is characteristic of the shaping principles of the entire developing canon of anglophone diasporic Chinese literature.³ I should make clear that I see this as a retrograde development. I should state just as clearly that I do not mean to deny that migrant Chinese subjects in the settler states of the US, Australia, and Canada experienced exclusion, discrimination of the worst kinds, and a painful sense of rootlessness, recorded in a rich variety of writings. However, the simplistic opposition of nationalisms so that one must be either "American" or "Chinese," "Australian" or "Chinese," "Canadian" or "Chinese," both asserts the legitimacy of these national categorizations and at the same time naturalizes them. Wayson Choy's texts belong to a category of Chinese North American literary texts that repeat the same exclusionary formulations as the legal and social exclusions of the past, which are condemned in those same texts. The implicit claim in this formulation ("neither here nor there"), that one can authentically be only *one* of "Chinese" or "American" or "Australian" or "Canadian," is a rhetorical strategy by which subjects are interpellated into the national narrative but which works to exclude those who are identified by their migrant condition with more than one national affiliation. Maxine Hong Kingston evokes this rhetoric of exclusion in *The Woman Warrior*, when her protagonist is caught between being a "good American girl" and a "good Chinese girl," knowing that the demands of each role are mutually exclusive.

One of the most explicit usages of the motif comes in Wayson Choy's celebrated account of his childhood in Vancouver's Chinatown during the Depression era, *Paper Shadows* (1999). In this text, he describes his Canadian-born status as "neither this nor that," neither Chinese nor Canadian, born without understanding the boundaries, born "*mo no*." His hostile teachers at Chinese school "saw our peasant Chinese faces, but not our in-between souls. Rather, many of them felt the in-between, local-born children were *mo-no juk sum* – brainless bamboo stumps – truly spoiled and utterly stupid" (234). Of course it is the history of exclusion and prejudice that fosters an atmosphere of suspicion within the diasporic Chinese community. Fear that "*mo no*" children might inadvertently betray the truth of falsified family relationships, for example, to Canadian immigration officials underlies this

suspicion of the Canadian-born generation. However, as Choy recreates this sense of fear he also re-creates the conditions of exclusion that have given rise to it.

"Knowing everything and nothing" is an alternative definition Choy offers of *mo no* and we might rethink this phrase as *remembering* everything and nothing (*Paper Shadows* 287). The Chinese dimension of this remembering operates through the figures of ghosts; the past is symbolized alternatively by ghosts or spirits, or as a place: the past as "another country," which in this case is the China left behind (*Paper Shadows* 283). It is interesting to recall here Walter Benn Michaels' point concerning ghosts and African-American "re-memory." Benn Michaels argues that "the ghosts are not merely the figures for history as memory, they are the technology for history as memory; to have the history, we have to have the ghosts" (189). Ghosts enable the inscription of the past within the present and, in *Paper Shadows*, Choy uses the conventions of life writing to make his ghosts seem real. Wayson Choy might not want to remember but his family ghosts do: at one point Choy comments "I had not counted on the will of ghosts; I had not realized that there were ghosts who do not always care for silence, who will not stay unremembered" (307). Indeed, the most significant of these assertive ghosts comes to overwhelm the ostensible motivation of the text. Initially, Choy tells the story of how he discovered, in middle age, that he was adopted. The identity of his birth parents and the circumstances of his adoption fade into relative insignificance, however, as Choy's paternal grandmother, the disgraced First Wife who never left China, makes her ghostly presence felt. She is the narrative technology that, for Choy, enables Chinese family history to function as personal memory. Late in the narrative, as Choy records his elderly father's answers to questions about his mother, he is disconcerted by the spectacle of his father staring hypnotically into space as if looking at someone standing before him. When Choy rewinds the tape recording, he hears only static interference which he interprets as the sign of a ghostly presence. First Wife's metaphysical presence here enables a spectral narrative of return, a reassertion of virtual genetic inheritance, as family secrets are resolved through the revelation of the Amy Tan-style narrative motif that I introduced above: "Hard life in China." *Paper Shadows* affirms Wayson Choy's "neither/nor" status by failing to resolve the question of his "blood" – the identity of his birth parents – leaving him poised between China and Canada. He is told that being born on an astrological cusp means that his is a "between worlds" condition, though the positive interpretation – "the best of two worlds" is based on spurious data (324). Not knowing his exact time of birth, his mother simply invents a time, emphasizing the liminality of his origin.

The Jade Peony shares the diasporic "neither here nor there" motif. The third narrative, by Sek-Lung or Third Brother, follows that by Jook-Liang, his only sister, and Jung-Sum or Second Brother. Sekky, as he is called, unlike his older brothers, was not born in China and so it is he who expresses the sentiment of belonging "neither here nor there," as he reflects on his exclusion from the public school on the grounds that he may carry tuberculosis:

... even if I was born in Vancouver, even if I should salute the Union Jack a hundred million times, even if I had the cleanest hands in all the Dominion of Canada and prayed forever, I would still be Chinese.

Stepmother knew this in her heart and feared for me. All the Chinatown adults were worried over those of us recently born in Canada, born "neither this nor that," neither Chinese nor Canadian, born without understanding the boundaries, born *mo no* – no brain (135).⁴

The weight of the narrative's judgment comes down upon these "no brain" Chinese Canadian subjects. Sekky's narrative concludes with the death of his teenage babysitter, Meiying, who also fails to understand "the boundaries": in her case, the boundary between "Chinese" and

"Japanese." Under the pretence of taking Sekky out to play, she literally transgresses the boundary between Chinatown and the Japanese neighbourhood, where she secretly meets her Japanese lover. This transgression is punished with death after Meiying botches an attempted abortion. Just what is most scandalous though – the illegitimate pregnancy or the fact that the father of the unborn child is Japanese – remains ambiguous. It is important that in this novel the possibility of a hybrid Sino-Japanese character (the unborn baby) is impossible. Such a crossing of nationally-defined boundaries is impossible.

In *All That Matters*, this episode is retold from the perspective of Kiam-Kim, who emphasizes the effect of Meiying's death on his Stepmother. It is in the aftermath of the loss of her young friend that Stepmother confronts her husband with her ambivalence concerning the continuing practice of "Old China ways" in the new world of Canada. She cannot hate the Japanese as her Chinese neighbors do and she resents deeply the inherited kinship pattern that relegates her to a position of inferiority. Like her Canadian children, she is no longer "pure" Chinese in her thinking and her values. However, as with every other depiction of this dilemma, the narrative stops with the representation of double exclusion, from Chinese and Canadian cultures, with no gesture towards the possibility of a condition of double belonging: a condition of being at home "here and there." Unlike a narrative such as *The Woman Warrior*, which presents an ironic distance between Chinese American characters and the "old China" stories they tell – like the the aggressive Brave Orchid's stories about feminine passivity – novels such as *All That Matters* and *The Jade Peony*, offer no such ironic distance. Rather than articulate a distance between what each character is and what s/he is said to be, Choy brings mythical figures into the reality of the primary narrative: characters like Wong Suk, Liang's Monkey King in *The Jade Peony*, or the CPR trains that young Kiam-Kim mistakes for dragons.

The complaint that one belongs "neither here nor there" is a restatement of the desire to belong "either here or there": it is profoundly nationalistic sentiment. And this sentiment, this patriotic nationalism, is precisely the ideological foundation of the concept of a Chinese diaspora: a community living "here" but allied politically and culturally "there." And in the absence of any political or cultural content, then, an appeal to the mystical power of "blood" cements this structure. This is why Meiying's mixed-blood baby has no place in Choy's novel. However, the appeal to nationalism cannot provide the conditions for complete belonging or subjective authenticity. David Leiwei Li describes "the Asian American as an identity in process, simultaneously a diasporic subject enabled by trans-Pacific crossings of culture and capital and an ethnic subject caught in the persistence of an American national imaginary yet to transcend the specificity and hierarchy of race" (2003: 621). But the formation of diasporic identities is more complex even than this. Diasporic identities are formed on three axes: the nation-state of residence, the local diasporic community with its links to a transnational diasporic network, and the imaginary, originary homeland. A single nationalism cannot provide for a full sense of belonging in a subject constituted along these diverse axes of identity.

Christopher Fung and others have observed that not enough critical attention has been focussed on the complex dynamic processes of diasporic identity formation, particularly the influence of the resident nation-state on diaspora communities. Fung explains,

While much has been made of the "separateness" of the Chinese in particular, there is more than enough evidence to suggest that there was sustained and meaningful contact between members of the diaspora and other communities. In Australia, for instance, one might investigate the relationship between Anglo-Australian conceptions of identity and the ways in which Chinese did (or did not) respond to these concepts (empire, outpost

of civilization, new frontier, and so on). Chinese Australian diaspora self-conception needs to be contextualized alongside metropolitan concerns in both China and the United Kingdom and the Anglo-Australian response to these (22).

In the parallel case of Chinese Canadian self-conceptions, in *The Jade Peony*, Wayson Choy engages both the concerns of Japanese-occupied China and the colonial Dominion of Canada as powerful influences on the way his characters think about themselves and each other. The novel opens with the older brothers playing a game called "Enemies of Free China," which involves chopping the heads off cardboard Japanese figures with toy swords. Reminders of the war converge with the "neither here nor there" motif when the eldest son, Kiam, confesses his desire to join the Canadian military. In response,

"You're not a citizen of Canada," Father said calmly. "You were registered in Victoria as a *resident alien*. ... When the Dominion says we are Canadian, then we will all join up!" (196. Emphasis in the original).

Kiam is able to fight for China neither as Chinese nor as Canadian. But the simple opposition between China and Canada is undercut by the novel's pervasive reference to Canada's colonial status. When Jung-Sum seeks an appropriate non-Chinese name for his pet turtle, he chooses to name it after the ruling monarch: King George. And Sek-Lung's schoolteacher encourages her class of migrant children to speak English in the manner of British royalty: "'Their Majesties always enunciate perfectly,' Miss Doyle informed us, loudly" (177). If the complex colonial attitudes within Canadian society form an important environment for the shaping of Chinese diasporic identity – locating these migrants at the margins of the imperial margins, as it were, as "aliens" residing in an outpost of empire – it is still not, in this novel, an occasion for the promotion of cultural hybridity. Rather, this multivalenced colonial identity formation ("Canadianness") provides that against which the struggle for Chinese cultural authenticity is staged. In *The Jade Peony* and *All That Matters*, and Choy's memoir *Paper Shadows*, as in SKY Lee's novel *Disappearing Moon Café* and Denise Chong's fictionalized family history, *The Concubine's Children* – all set at least partly in Vancouver's Chinatown – authentic Chineseness is seen to derive from mainland China. A new intersubjective form of Chinese Canadian identity remains only nascent in these texts, emphasizing in its absence the trope of the "neither/nor" and the status of diasporic Chinese communities as object, not subject, of/in Canadian national culture.

Lisa Lowe, in *Immigrant Acts* points out: "The presence of Asia and Asian peoples that currently impinges on the national consciousness sustains the figuration of the Asian immigrant as a transgressive and corrupting 'foreignness' and continues to make 'Asians' an object of the law, the political sphere, as well as national culture" (19). This passage is quoted by Glenn Deer in the *Canadian Literature* editorial mentioned above. He goes on to point out the continuing identification of the Asian with the "Outsider," *l'étranger*, the alien who belongs nowhere. Deer discusses the case of media representations of Adrienne Clarkson, shortly after her appointment as Canadian Governor General, and highlights the juxtaposition of a story in *The Vancouver Sun* (September 9, 1999, page 1) concerning illegal "Boat People" with an article about the new Governor General:

The setting of the Clarkson story beside the illegal migrant story could be interpreted in various ways, but both speak to the quality of the migrant story: one is a story of meritorious claims and achievements, while the other is one of criminal smuggling, military alert, and a fourth undetected "ghost

ship." Yet if Clarkson is implicitly held up as the model refugee migrant, the fully assimilated Canadian, the language also subtly embeds her in the category of the Other, the "new" Canadian. And why? ... the constant identification of the governor general with a strained refugee status shows how people of visible Asian descent cannot escape a label that makes them less Canadian than their caucasian counterparts. The Asian label is not one that Clarkson went seeking—it was applied to her in order to promote the image of Canadian social inclusiveness: however, the label both professes the mobility of the individual while limiting it by implying she is somehow less Canadian because of her refugee past (Deer: n.p.).

As I have argued, the essentialist diasporic paradigm, which draws on an understanding of singular national allegiance and ethnic "blood" identity, is more powerful in its effects than a hybrid transnational paradigm of identity that refuses singular allegiances and essentialist myths of blood kinship. To refuse to acknowledge the dynamics of this rhetorical power in some of the most popular of Chinese diasporic texts is to refuse to confront the profound difficulty of multiculturalism in a nationalistic culture. In literary narratives, as in public discourse, the assumption that one citizen can be "less Canadian" than another by reason of ethnicity must be challenged wherever this rhetoric appears. The "neither/nor" logic of canonical texts like *The Jade Peony* and *The Concubine's Children* articulates "China" as a mythical point of origin that is in fact specifically Cantonese and of the Qing dynasty and of the mid-nineteenth century. But the elevation of historical and cultural particulars into a generalized imagined origin is less important than the emphasis on "real" and essential links between a diasporic "Chineseness-that-transcends-culture" and a world of migrant rootlessness and displacement. The neither/nor logic of these texts compels a critical appraisal of the principles underlying the developing Chinese diasporic literary canon, in Canada and elsewhere, and the larger understandings of the dynamics of transnational migrant communities to which these literary representations lend legitimacy.

NOTES

1. Rocío G. Davis, *Transcultural Reinventions: Asian American and Asian Canadian Short-Story Cycles* (Toronto: Tsar, 2001) and *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing*, ed. Rocío Davis & Sue-Im Lee (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005); Shirley Lim, "Assaying the Gold; or, Contesting the Ground of Asian American Literature," *New Literary History*, 24 (1993), pp. 147-69; Garrett Hongo, "Asian American Literature: Questions of Identity," *Amerasian Journal*, 20. 3 (1994), pp. 1-8; Donald Goellnicht, "Blurring Boundaries: Asian American Literature as Theory" in King-Kok Cheung, ed., *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 338-95.
2. Shirley Lim's argument concerning the appropriation of Asian American texts by United States culture can, I believe, be applied here. In her essay "Immigration and Diaspora," she argues that "the subject of Gish Jen's immigrant fiction, *Typical American*, suggests that assimilation into this corporate [Americanized] world is innocent, natural, inevitable, or valuable; in the progression from 'origin' to metropolitan inhabitant, the natal 'home' is constructed as less than already past – it is always already absent." (Lim 300).
3. Paradigmatic Chinese Canadian texts include the work of Wayson Choy, Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children*, Evelyn Lau's *Runaway*; Chinese American texts include the

- work of Jade Snow Wong, Amy Tan's novels, Faye Myenne Ng's *Bone*; Chinese Australian texts include Hsu-Ming Teo's *Love and Vertigo*, Simone Lazaroo's *The World Waiting to be Made*, and such novels by Arlene Chai as *The Last Time I Saw Mother* and *On the Goddess Rock*. See, for a discussion of Chinese Australian texts, Deborah L. Madsen, "'No Place Like Home': The Ambivalent Rhetoric of Hospitality in the Work of Simone Lazaroo, Arlene Chai, and Hsu-Ming Teo," *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 27. 1-2 (Feb-May 2006), pp. 117-132.
4. In *All That Matters*, the sequel to this novel, First Brother tells his story and of his sense of belonging between "Gold Mountain" and "Old China"; he confesses to feeling caught between his blood and his education. It is in narrative dynamics such as this that Choy illustrates, as Eleanor Ty rightly notes, "the complexities of racialized subjectivity not only by way of friction between grandparents, parents, and their children, but also through protagonists who are of the same generation. ... factors such as gender, economic status, and position in the family affect the ethnic subject," *op. cit.*, pp. 116-7.

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