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Artefact, Commodity, Fetish: The Aesthetic Turn in Chinese American Literary Study

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This essay addresses the move away from sociological and cultural interpretations of texts at a time when the commodification of ethnicity is a dominant characteristic of late capitalism. I am interested in the way some scholars of Asian American literature are calling for a turn away from cultural approaches towards the aesthetics of the text. I would like to question the definition and role of the “aesthetic” in this critical move, a development that appears to be in contradiction with transnational constructions of American identity and the contemporary globalization of cultures, especially the global market in ethnic artistic and cultural commodities. Focussing upon the work of Gish Jen, I want to question this idea of the “aesthetic” and the ways in which art is constructed and consumed in the Chinese American literary context.

Bonnie TuSmith, in her 2002 MELUS Presidential Address, gave an account of two dominant ways in which the cultural context of a literary text can be approached: directly, using a “mirror” model of the relations between the text and the “real” world, or indirectly, via the aesthetics and especially the language of the text. Her point is that either approach will bring the reader or student to an appreciation of both the literary qualities of the text and the cultural environment out of which the text has emerged. TuSmith’s comments can be seen as a reaction to recent calls for a turn to the aesthetics of the text, particularly the ethnic text, and away from sociological approaches that treat the text as a direct access to the lived lives of individuals. This latter approach has been identified by Elaine Kim, in relation to the efforts of critics and readers to “define Asian American realities through literature,” as she argues in her 1990 essay of that name. She describes how Asian identities are essentialized through literature, which is assumed to give privileged access to “real” Asian lives. Asian American literature is, she argues, assumed to be “authentic” like the subjectivities it represents. The denial of aesthetic freedom implicit in this style of reading motivates calls for greater attention to the aesthetic texture of Asian American literature. However, the quest for specifically “Asian American” aesthetic qualities or characteristics seems to be a doomed enterprise, given the heterogeneous and dynamic nature of the category “Asian American.” If the pursuit of “Chineseness” is a complex effort with no easy answers (as the work of Ien Ang, for example, demonstrates) then the quest for “Asian-ness” must be even more difficult. And this difficulty is only compounded when we ask how this speculative “Asian-ness” is to be distinguished from “American-ness” in Asian American literary texts. Some critics point out as characteristic the multiple generic crossings of many Asian American texts, which blur fiction with history, myth with autobiography, sociology with story telling. In this view, Asian American aesthetics is shaped by the struggle to represent aspects of subjectivity, history, and community that are not available for representation in mainstream American literary forms; in particular, the untold histories (Chinese American “paper sons,” for instance, or the Japanese American wartime internment experience). But this strategy of cross-genre writing is used also by Native American and Mexican American writers who also

are attempting to tell untold or invisible histories for which no obvious representational form exists in canonical American literature.

The point I wish to make is that treating the text as an aesthetic artefact may not get us very far in the attempt to analyse literary representations of “Asian American-ness” or “Chinese American-ness.” The futility of such efforts is underlined by the growing indeterminacy of such identity categories under the influence of contemporary globalization. In the essay “Asian American Literature: Leavening the Mosaic,” Shirley Geok-lin Lim points out that:

... national identity borders are viewed as more porous, a result of and contributing factor toward a globalization of cultures and of the world's economies under the forces of free market operations, paralleled by a shift toward a greater transnational construction of U.S. identity. [The] consciousness of bicultural, binational aesthetics and linguistic formation ... mediate between new texts and historically constructed U.S. literary traditions, between social locations and literary identities of the communities for and to which the texts are speaking. Together, recent works of Asian American authors – transnational, immigrant and native Americans alike – underscore the phenomenon of rapid publication and the continuous reinvention of Asian American cultural identity.

(<http://bangkok.usembassy.gov/services/docs/work29.htm>)

It is this understanding of transnational identities formed under conditions of global exchange and commodification that I want to explore, though more in the context of *transcultural* rather than *transnational* negotiations. The cultural context, understood not as an extra-textual “mirror” to which literary texts can be held but as a transcultural space in which both text and reader is located, offers a more fruitful avenue of inquiry into the construction and consumption of the “Chinese-ness” or “Asian-ness” of contemporary Chinese American literary texts.

I want to focus upon the transcultural mediation performed by the activity of consumption – the constitution of the racialized self through the purchase and use of ethnic commodities. Relevant here is Gish Jen's 1996 novel, *Mona in the Promised Land*, which deals with a Chinese-American family and their American-born children. It is significant that, unlike such writers as Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, or Fae Myenne Ng, Jen does not use Chinatown as the setting of her fiction. The narrative opens with the Chang's move to suburban Scarshill. From the outset, this suburban space is given a racial character as an affluent Jewish suburb. But the Changs believe that they belong there, as the narrator observes, “For they're the New Jews, after all, a model minority and Great American Success. They know they belong in the promised land” (p. 3). Much of the comedy of the ensuing narrative arises from the fact that they both belong and yet do not belong. As “Orientals” in a Jewish community, the Changs enjoy an exotic value, which the narrator likens to being “permanent exchange students” (p. 6). When a Japanese boy temporarily joins Mona's class, she is selected to escort him around and ensure he learns what to do. In fact, Sherman awakens Mona's ethnic consciousness by asking questions she has never thought of before. Take the following exchange, for instance:

[Sherman asks] Does she like it here? ‘Of course I like it here, I was born here,’ Mona says. Is Mona Jewish? ‘Jewish!’ She laughs. ‘Oy!’ Is she American? ‘Sure I'm American,’ Mona says. ‘Everybody who's born here is American, and also some people who convert from what they were before.

You could become American.’ But he says no, he could never. ‘Sure you could,’ Mona says. ‘You only have to learn some rules and speeches.’
 ‘But I Japanese.’
 ‘You could become American anyway,’ Mona says. ‘Like I *could* become Jewish, if I wanted to. I’d just have to switch, that’s all’ (p. 14).

This notion of “switching” becomes a major theme of the narrative, as Jen proposes an ethnic identity that is without essence, an American identity based on ethnic performance and consumption. Within the Chang family, the parents seek to assimilate; Helen explains that she has raised her children to be Westernized, not even to speak Chinese, so they may become truly American – not Jewish. But here is the crux of their problem: as Mona points out, to be American is to be whatever one chooses to be. “‘Jewish is American,’ Mona says. ‘American means being whatever you want, and I happen to pick being Jewish’” (p. 49). It emerges that Mona is not alone in her ethnic “switching”: her friend Eloise Ingle switches between being Jewish and WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant); Mona knows some Jewish boys who want to be black and adopt what they can of African American culture by wearing their hair in a “Afro” style and eating “soul food”; and her eventual husband Seth Mandel goes through a phase when he lives in a teepee in his mother’s backyard.

If there is a “bottom line” to the ethnic relativism represented in the narrative, it is experienced by African Americans who cannot “switch” in the way Mona and her Jewish friends do. Alfred, the cook in Ralph’s pancake restaurant, reminds Mona emphatically of his situation: “nobody is calling us Wasp [sic], man, and nobody is forgetting we’re a minority, and if we don’t mind our manners, we’re like as not to end up doing time in a concrete hotel. We’re black, see. We’re *Negroes*” (p. 137). A Chinese-American person may attempt to “pass” for black (we might think of the example of the contemporary Chinese American rap music artist Jin, for a “real life” example of this) but a person racially marked as black may not pass for anything else. K. Anthony Appiah ends his 1997 essay “The Multicultural Misunderstanding” by writing, “it is not the black culture the racist disdains, but blacks” (p. 36). Appiah points to the complex conflation of racially marked difference with cultural difference; black culture can be appropriated and consumed by non-blacks but black people are not free to consume or perform alternative ethnicities.

It is this perception that within a multicultural ethos not all cultures or races are equal that Gish Jen addressed in her 1996 *New York Times Magazine* article, “An Ethnic Trump.” Jen observes:

That my son, Luke, age four, goes to Chinese-culture school seems inevitable to most people, even though his father is of Irish descent. For certain ethnicities trump others; Chinese, for example, trumps Irish. This has something to do with the relative distance of certain cultures from mainstream American culture, but it also has to do with race. For as we all know, it is not only certain ethnicities that trump others but certain colors: black trumps white, for example, always and forever; mulatto is not a kind of a white person, but a kind of a black person.

To be a transcultural amalgam of, say, Chinese-Irish-American is to be constructed in American society as “Chinese”; to be Anglo-African-American is to be constructed as “black.” Jen points perceptively to the hierarchy of racial difference that exists in the transcultural context of the United States, a hierarchy that is grounded in some perception of what she calls “the relative distance of certain cultures from mainstream American culture.”

I want to pause here, to consider the implications of this racial hierarchy. These hierarchically organized ethnic cultures are experienced as cultural artifacts: as what one wears, what one eats, how one speaks, or the manners one adopts in relation to other ethnic groups. In the debate between nature and nurture as the primary determinant of individual identity, nurture here takes precedence. Jen represents ethnicity as being without “essence”; rather, ethnicity is a historicized consequence of patterns of commodification and consumption. The freedom to commodify and to consume ethnic identity is repeated throughout the narrative as the essence of what it means to be American. As Amy Tan has remarked of the novel, “Gish Jen bravely skewers what we think we mean by assimilation, cultural diversity and the uniquely American right to forge a new identity and then patent it” (Tan, cover blurb).

Jen’s fictional characters seek authenticity, an alternative to the vacuum of being “only themselves,” by pursuing the status of ethnic commodity fetish. This means that not only do Mona and her friends consume ethnic commodities but they are also themselves consumed as representative of the ethnic Other. So Mona at school is valued for the “Oriental” advice she can dispense to her classmates (Mona makes much of her special access to “Chinese” mysteries such as how to get pregnant with tea or how to eat live monkey brains). Later, when Mona is helping out her sister who is working in a summer resort as a waitress, she encounters Eloise Ingle and her family. Mona is invited to dine with the family so they can observe at close quarters someone who is not only Oriental but is also related to one of the serving “help.” Mona is marked as Other in both racial and class terms, and derives an exotic value from these marks of difference.

It is here that we encounter an example of what Graham Huggan calls “the postcolonial exotic.” He builds upon Tzvetan Todorov’s identification of the “constitutive paradox” of exoticism – that it is incompatible with knowledge yet knowledge is required to praise the exotic Other, but “praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be” (p. 23). Huggan adds:

There is a further paradox here; for in the “global” cultural environment of the late twentieth century, exoticism becomes a function not of remoteness but, on the contrary, of proximity. Exotic artifacts from other cultures circulate as commodities within the global economy – it is precisely their availability that renders them exotic (p. 23).

Huggan sees postcolonial literatures as complicit in this commodification and exoticization of the Other. In the contemporary global economy then, knowledge is replaced with the proximity of the Other, an ethnic Other consumed via ethnic, racialized, artefacts or commodities.

Let me approach my conclusion by posing the difficult question raised by this practice of ethnic commodity consumption: why does the mainstream American market want to consume these racialized commodities? Why is there a market for ethnic difference? I hinted above at what I see as at least a partial explanation of this phenomenon when I referred to Mona and her friends as seeking authenticity, an alternative to the vacuum of being “only themselves,” by pursuing the status of the ethnic commodity fetish. They consume ethnicity in order to acquire for themselves an ethnic value. But in what does this value reside? In her influential book *No Logo* (2000), Naomi Klein answers this question by attributing the appeal of poverty-stricken black ghetto kids to affluent white middle-class youth simply to the power of marketing, which she describes as “mainstream America’s gold rush to poverty” (p. 74). I find this explanation unsatisfactory because Klein does not account for why it should be that black street-culture appeals to white suburban consumers. I think we must look to Karl

Marx who, in the section of *Capital* entitled “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof,” argues that:

[with commodities], the existence of the things *qua* commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.

The fetish serves to obscure the historical nature of the products of labour – it allows us to forget that commodities are produced, by people, within social relations. The social relation that defines the fetish value of the ethnic commodity is the specific racial positioning of the consumer (“a definite social relation between men”) in relation to the ethnic Otherness that is being consumed (“the fantastic form of a relation between things”). As Gish Jen says, this relation is defined by distance from mainstream (white) American society.

Of greatest value, in the community of Mona and her friends, are black cultural commodities, products of a social relation that displays maximum distance from the white mainstream. As a consequence of this distance, and the fact that individuals marked as “black” cannot attempt to “pass” for any other race (despite a long and complex history of African Americans “passing” for white), black culture acquires the status of an “authentic” culture: a culture that cannot become, or “switch” into, anything other than itself. This authenticity, then, endows the black commodity with the value of a fetish and it is this which white, and Jewish, and Chinese American consumers find so powerfully compelling. Of course, black and white occupy positions on the American racial hierarchy that define the top and the bottom. And only some of Mona’s friends want to enjoy a vicarious identification with African Americans through their consumption of fetishized black commodities. Mona wants to become Jewish; her sister, Callie, wants to become “Chinese.”

In her desire to become authentically Chinese, Callie suddenly announces that the family should no longer have a Christmas tree because Christmas trees are not “Chinese.” Her mother responds by claiming not only to have had Christmas trees in China but, living in Shanghai, to have had access to everything she wanted – including bagels for breakfast. But Callie wants to recapture some of the authentic “Chineseness” which her parents never experienced. From her new college room-mate, Naomi, who is herself seeking an “authentic” African American identity, Callie learns to accuse her parents of colluding with the Western imperialists who introduced them to such things as Christmas trees. The irony of the situation is that Callie falsely essentializes her Chinese identity by adhering to the Orientalist values of the very imperialists she attacks. It is her mother, who wants above all to “fit in” as an American, who has an appreciation of historical contingency. Helen shocks her daughter by remarking that they didn’t mind when missionaries tried to convert them to Christianity: “‘Oh, well, we are still Buddhist after we are baptized,’ explains Helen. ‘We are Buddhist, and Taoist, and Catholic. We do however we want’” (p. 42).

Callie's character betrays the desire that motivates the consumption of commodities that are constructed as authentically "ethnic" – black, or Chinese, or American Indian – in her ironic quest for an essential Chineseness that does not and never has existed. She projects a false view of Chinese culture as monolithic and homogenous, a view that is shaped by the aesthetics of the racialized commodity fetish. Her simplistic view of China, as constituted by commodified icons and popular media images, is answered by the range of products available to her; products of specific social relations that place her middle-class Chinese American identity in relation to an authentic ethnic Other that she recognizes as "Chinese."

I would like to conclude with the suggestion that the great popularity of some anglophone overseas Chinese writers is attributable to precisely this identification of a compensatory, and authentic, "Chineseness" with commodified icons and media imagery. The Chinese Canadian writer Wayson Choy concludes his memoir, *Paper Shadows*, with an appeal to the lucky Chinese knot – a favoured tourist souvenir – as he sees his life without beginning or end, like the symbolic knot. His novel *The Jade Peony* similarly appeals to iconic images of Chineseness: jade stone and the peony flower. At the end of the novel the child Sekky presents his grieving stepmother with the jade peony pendant given to him by his grandmother. This gesture asserts a shared family connection in the context of loss and grief but it does so through the assertion of a shared Chinese identity which somehow inheres in this commodified icon of "Chineseness."

Similarly, it seems to me that Amy Tan's writing could be profitably explored in this context: the novels like *Joy Luck Club* and especially *Hundred Secret Senses*, which have enjoyed enormous global popularity. I suspect that the very processes of ethnic commodity fetishism which are so humorously and perceptively represented in Gish Jen's novel are acted out here, in the world of the global economy. Amy Tan offers a body of work that offers the mainstream white consumers of the world a seemingly "authentic" and exotic, though admittedly vicarious, experience of "Chineseness" which confirms their position in a hierarchy of racialized social relations. In the economy of the global bourgeoisie, the literary artefact becomes an ethnic commodity, fetishized in a transcultural process that transforms the aesthetic into a complex location for the negotiation of the value of difference.

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