

“BACKDAIRE”:  
CHINATOWN AS CULTURAL SITE IN FAE MYENNE NG’S *BONE*  
AND WAYSON CHOY’S *THE JADE PEONY*

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ABSTRACT

This essay will analyze the representations of Chinatown as a complexly multi-layered cultural space in Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* and Chinese Canadian Wayson Choy’s *The Jade Peony*. Chinatown has occupied an important place in Asian American writing, as the site for a reconstitution and retransmission of originary national culture, as well as a location for important cross-cultural communication. Ng and Choy formulate the borders of Chinatown in terms that suggest movement and continual shifts, signaling a critical junction in the workings of Asian American subjectivity and rearticulating the very notions of space, belonging, and heritage for Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians. Borders are crossed in these novels on many levels, creating a complex network of relationships that help define or describe Chinatown as a unique cultural site for evolving subjectivities.

KEYWORDS: Wayson Choy, Fae Myenne Ng, Chinatown, secrets, ethnicity, space, escape, transitivity.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo analiza la representación del barrio chino en las novelas *Bone*, de Fae Myenne Ng, y *The Jade Peony* del escritor chino-canadiense Wayson Choy como un espacio multicultural y multiracial rico y complejo. “Chinatown” siempre ha ocupado un papel predominante en la literatura asiática-americana, como un sitio para la reconstrucción y la transmisión de la cultura nacional originaria, y como un lugar importante para la comunicación intercultural. Ng y Choy definen las fronteras de Chinatown en términos que sugieren movimiento y variaciones constantes, apuntando así hacia un momento clave en la construcción de la subjetividad asiática-americana y rearticulando las propias nociones de espacio, pertenencia y bagaje cultural para los americanos y canadienses de origen chino. En estas novelas, se da un cruce de fronteras a muchos niveles, creando un complejo de relaciones que ayudan a describir Chinatown como enclave único para una subjetividad en evolución.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Wayson Choy, Fae Myenne Ng, Chinatown, secretos, etnicidad, espacio, escapada, transitividad.

Recent developments in transcultural literary and cultural studies have resulted in a redefinition of the concepts of national identity and culture, and led to engagements with issues of borders, subjectivity, and authenticity. One of the emblematic forms of negotiating these issues is through representations of specific places, the spaces within which these processes are played out. Place in literature, a simultaneous geography of space and imagination, has the potential to represent communal formation and preservation as it highlights the identity that binds its members in a shared sense of purpose and a common sense of belonging. Within Asian American and Asian Canadian literature, representations of the space known as Chinatown offer multilayered insights into the complex workings of immigrant culture and questions of assimilation, ethnic formulation, and subjectivity. This analysis of Chinese American Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* and Chinese Canadian Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* as cross-border representations of Chinatown as a cultural space for the enactment of ethnicity will highlight the manner in which place becomes the site where originary national culture is reconstituted and transmitted. More importantly, because of the location of Chinatown in the Chinese American and Chinese Canadian imaginary, novels by Asian Americans and Asian Canadians produce a radical reframing of the role of location in multiethnic writing, and blend the engagement with these places in writing both in the United States and Canada.

Chinatown protagonizes many important texts within the Asian American and Asian Canadian canon: Louis Chu's *Eat A Bowl of Tea*, Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Frank Chin's *Donald Duk*, and Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Daughter*, among others, privilege the representation of this culture-specific location. Chinatown thus attains a discrete identity of its own, very often acquiring the status of character. Jane Augustine explains that for 20th-century writers who are psychologically as well as socially conscious and alert to the shifting values of this century, the literary representation of the city (or, as in this case, sections thereof) takes on the functions of a human character. The place thus becomes less a topos and more anthropoid —“man-like,” “resembling the human being”— more organic and even seemingly capable of choice (Augustine 74). She further explains that place may acquire the status of character when the protagonists are in physical, mental, or cultural flux: when they are “travelling, in transit, rootless, not fixed in a domestic environment, urban or rural” or “are confused, unformed or weak, out of touch with their prescribed set of values, thus shaky and uncertain in personal identity and consciousness” (Augustine 74). Furthermore, characters in transcultural literature in general often feel the distinctive features of particular places bearing down on them, producing responses that would not have occurred elsewhere. It may be argued that Chinatown as cultural icon and site of recognition, acknowledgement, belonging, and incorporation evolves into a character. The pivotal role of place in the formation of the ethnic character is therefore a primary concern of many of these writers, who also delve into an identification and analysis of the concept of “home.”

The imaginative construction of ethnic space is a general concern for many Asian American and Asian Canadian writers, as a sense of alienation —physical or

cultural— often becomes a creative impulse. A major feature of Asian American and Asian Canadian literature is the concern with either developing or recovering an appropriate identifying relationship between self and place because it is precisely within the parameters of place and its separateness that the process of subjectivity can be conducted. Images of streets, neighborhoods, and cities in Asian American and Asian Canadian literature give figurative presence to wider issues and ideas about the creation of north American culture and societies. The complex processes which have produced the unique form of the American and Canadian cities have become part of the artistic concerns of many immigrant writers who locate the growth and transformation of their place within a specific cultural and historical context. Although for Burton Pike, the city in modern literature “became fragmented and transparent rather than tangible and coherent, a place consisting of bits, pieces and shifting moods; it came to stand under the sign of discontinuity and dissociation rather than community” (72), Asian American and Asian Canadian representations of place most often reflect the opposite struggle for continuity and association within the group. These representations illustrate the cultural mosaics that form contemporary cities in the United States and Canada, stressing the multiplicity of divergent cultural perspectives as well as modes of existence that coexist but do not interpenetrate. This form of narrative of place, therefore, tends to be “both diachronic, in that it recounts a story of change through time, and synchronic in that it sees that story of change as existing and constantly surfacing in the contemporary city” (Preston and Simpson-Housley 7). Descriptions of places thus become histories of their creation and sustenance.

San Francisco’s Chinatown in *Bone* and Vancouver’s Chinatown in *The Jade Peony* encode stories about their origins, its inhabitants, and the broader society in which they are set; the authors inscribe these places as texts, waiting to be read and written or rewritten in literary terms. Chinatown is, importantly, a social image, one which resonates in literature and cultural memory. How the writers formulate home and family, place and heritage, come together in these representations of three siblings of the same family, each one with increasingly complex relationships with her or his family, and with Chinatown itself. An important distinction that will be made regarding the characters’ individual engagements with Chinatown lies in the manner in which they travel through this space and/or live within it. In theory, the Chinatown structure suggests home and family, yet these narratives use multiple voices and experiences to disclose alternative approaches to Chinatown, signaling a critical junction in the workings of both Asian American subjectivity and the organizations of kinship and collectivity within the community. Ng and Choy suggest that we have to reconceptualize the connection between place and subject, expanding the boundaries of this location of origin for many Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians. This renewed notion problematizes the definition of “home,” and in both novels suggests that leaving this place is an imperative. These engagements with Chinatown rearticulate the very concept of space, belonging, heritage for Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians. It is both a seemingly static place that characters must struggle to escape from, while at the same time it produces and is marked by particular forms of travel and transitivity.

Historian Zhou Min accounts for the formation of Chinatown in these terms:

Because of the need for social and cultural support from fellow sojourners and the need to maintain ethnic identity and kinship ties with China, immigrants chose a way of life in Chinatown that reminded them of home. This voluntary self-isolation created a stereotype of unassimilability that in turn reinforced the community's irrelevance to the larger society. (Zhou 40)

This stereotypical image of Chinatown has been, and continues to be, in part a legacy of literary fiction (M.N. Ng, 157-58). K. Scott Wong refers to Chinatown as a residential, business, and cultural space “layered with imagery,” a “contested terrain” in the attempt to define and reinforce notions of American and Chinese culture (3). For early American writers, Chinatown became a site of negation and definition, as conflicting images were used to portray a community that was forever foreign to American sensibilities and completely unacceptable. The images of Chinatown in the late 19th and early 20th century tended to cluster around a number of common themes: “the physical ‘mysteriousness’ of Chinatown, unsanitary living conditions, immoral activities, and the general Otherness of the Chinese themselves, all of which contrasted with familiar idealized images of ‘American’ communities” (K.S. Wong 4). Importantly, as Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians began to inscribe the formation and constitution of Chinatown, representations of this ethnic space became more complex and plural. What Ng and Choy offer us are nuanced inscriptions of a space most often represented, even in Asian American texts, by a series of cultural stereotypes. Specifically, I wish to acknowledge a series of borders that these authors engage between Chinatown and mainstream San Francisco and Vancouver, as well as discuss the manner in which the writers articulate the existence and crossing of these borders, a strategy which highlights Chinatown’s transformative influence. These borders include depictions of the physical boundaries of Chinatown, the existence and preservation of the secrets of Chinatown, and the representation of ethnicity as a frontier. I will also discuss the issue of leaving Chinatown as an imperative in both texts.

This engagement carries profound repercussions on larger issues of self-representation within Asian American identity politics. Sau-Ling Wong argues that in texts with interventional ambitions (of whatever degree of deliberateness and conviction),

Chinatown becomes a particularly contested territory, for the same reality found within its boundaries may be coded in vastly divergent ways depending on who is looking and who is speaking. How Chinatown is represented in a writer’s work is often regarded as a touchstone of his/her artistic credibility. This is especially true of the American-born Anglophone writers of Chinese ancestry for whom the American scene is the sole arena for their creative energies and being ethnic is not a matter of choice. (S. Wong 252)

The word *Chinatown* is laden with socio-historic connotations, and a realm of complex, dynamic valences lies beyond the name. To a sizeable portion of the Chinese population of any given large American city, Chinatown means *habitation*, perma-



ment home, a locus of familiarity, security, and nurturance. To the tourists in quest of exciting but ultimately safe cultural encounters, however, Chinatown means *spectacle*, a diverting, exotic sideshow. The gaze of cultural voyeurs effectively ‘disappears’ the people: every Chinese in sight is reduced to a specimen of Otherness devoid of individuality and interiority (S. Wong 253). To go beyond the exotic, and negotiate the dynamics of this cultural space necessarily involves re-writing the borders of the space, to make readers re-think notions of uncritical binary oppositions and classifications. Ultimately, the writing of these novels reinvest multiple meaning and possibility into a socio-spatially segregated Asian American cultural space.

Sau-ling Wong believes that Ng’s portrayal of Chinatown intimates “a promising, viable mode of rehabilitative representation” (259). Her “contextualized and proportionate representation of Chinatown remembers, affirms, and attempts to preserve the complex integrity of Chinese American life, showing up the tortured binarism of spectacle versus habitation, resistance versus apologia, for the ideological construct that it is” (S. Wong 262). Nonetheless, this is an ideological construct with very clear boundaries within the cities they are set in. Ng firmly situates the Leong family’s history, especially its sites of trauma and survival, in San Francisco’s Chinatown. The specific map of their family history family and the social community references Chinatown and its environs (such as street names, parks, buildings, and stores) as the actual lived spaces in the psychosocial and geopolitical formation of Asian American history (Ho 209). When *Bone* opens, Leila has already moved out to live with her boyfriend Mason. She moves back briefly, to accompany her mother after Ona’s suicide, but she ultimately lives away. Her crossing of the border between San Francisco and Chinatown becomes, for this narrator-protagonist, the occasion for reflection on both spaces, and on the positionality of the members of her family. The characters’ subjectivities evolve as the novel negotiates the relationship between cultural memory, multilayered Chinatown, and the larger San Francisco spatial matrix. Forced to reimagine their physical and cultural place in the world, Ng’s characters “grapple with geographic and cultural displacement and emplacement” (Aldama 85). “Salmon Alley’s always been home” (51), Leila declares. Yet, when the middle sister Ona jumps off her building at the edge of Chinatown, the family members —Mah, Leon, Nina, and Leila— have to reimagine this cultural space and rearticulate their position in it to in a manner of speaking, reinhabit it.

Ng writes the Chinatown geography in detail, and Leila functions within a clearly delineated communal space. Interestingly, San Francisco’s Chinatown is separated from the central part of the city, yet it is a space into which the infrastructure of the mainstream crosses into. Frederick Aldama points out that Ng uses imagery that suggests a “symbolic representation of an ideological spatial apartheid” (90). At several points in the novel, Leila narrates as she drives in or out of Chinatown, consistently stressing the borders she crosses, and the peculiar formation of Chinatown:

So I continued, turning into Waverly Place, the two-block alley famous in the old days as barbers’ row. Leon still calls it Fifteen-Cent Alley, after the old-time price

of a haircut. Now Waverly Place has everything: there's the First Chinese Baptist Church, the Jeng Sen Buddhism Taoism Association, the Bing-Kong Tong Free Masons, the Four Seas Restaurant and the Pot Sticker, several travel agencies and beauty salons, but only one barber shop. (F.M. Ng 7-8)

Later, as she leaves, her thought continues to give each detail in the locality its position in their lives:

Up Broadway I drove fast, made every light: Grant, Stockton, Powell... Just before moving into the shadow that led us out of Chinatown, we passed the Edith Eaton school. I work there. Five days a week I pass this spot. Next to the school is the Nam Ping Yuen, the last of the four housing projects built in Chinatown. *Nam* means south and *ping yuen*—if you want to go into it—is something like 'peaceful gardens.' We call it the Nam. I've heard other names: The Last Ping. The Fourth Ping. For us, the Nam is a bad-luck place, a spooked spot. My middle sister, Ona, jumped off the M floor of the Nam. (F.M. Ng 14)

The borders between Chinatown and outside are made tangible through Leila's trajectory, as she moves fluidly between the spaces. This is a privilege of adulthood, something each of the sisters sought in different ways, an image which contrasts sharply with Leila's memory of rules that restricted her and her sisters' movements as children when they "weren't allowed to leave Chinatown without permission" (F.M. Ng 130). As adults, Leila leaves by moving in with Mason and subsequently marrying him; Nina moves to New York and continues a pattern of flight by becoming a stewardess; and Ona crosses the border between life and death by leaping from the Nam. The spaces carry important semiotic charges. When Leila and Nina meet, the latter rejects the idea of dining in Chinatown: "'The food's good,' she said, 'but the life's hard down there.' [...] I agreed. At Chinatown places, you can only talk about the bare issues. In American restaurants, the atmosphere makes me forget. For my reunion with Nina, I wanted nice light, handsome waiters, service. I wanted to forget about Mah and Leon" (F.M. Ng 26). Interestingly, Leila's stepfather, Leon, also moves between spaces as he repeatedly leaves Chinatown to sail around the world. Yet, he forbids his wife to venture out of the communal space: "You're inside Chinatown; it's safe. You don't know. Outside, it's different" (181). As she drives to tell her mother the news of Ona's death, Leila experiences a moment of alienation from Chinatown's spatial and cultural configuration: "the oddly matched colors: red with green, green with aqua blue, yellow with pink... 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" (144-45). This instance of self-awareness makes Leila conscious of her simultaneously insider and outsider position, and allows her to objectify the gaze of the cultural outsider: she knows that "no matter how close they looked, our inside story is something entirely different" (145). As an insider to Chinatown, Leila acknowledges and simultaneously resists the exoticization of Chinatown and its inhabitants as material for tourist consumption. Subsequently, Leila resists outsider's characterizations of Chinatown through her delineation between outside and in-



side stories. Chinatown inhabitants resist classification and conversion into gossip material for use by outsiders, by maintaining their internal story and self-perception (Sze 66).

As David Leiwei Li points out, for Leila, Chinatown is not a mythologized space punctuated with happy rituals but a place of hardship, a reminder of endless worries and the perpetual rhythms of work (135). Her privileged position gives her potential access to many private, secret Chinatown places: she continually moves in and out of public/private spaces as she retells and translates the story (Aldama 96). Her career as community relations specialist for the Edith Eaton School less discreetly involves the translation of different cultural spaces. She tell us “my job is about being the *bridge* between the classroom teacher and parents” (F.M. Ng 16). Leila accesses inner spaces in order to help families interact with the outside, institutional social structures. Leila understands these inner spaces: “Being inside their cramped apartments depresses me. I’m reminded that we’ve lived like that, too. The sewing machine next to the television, the rice bowls stacked on the table, the rolled-up blankets pushed to one side of the sofa... Cluttered rooms, bare lives” (17). Yet, Leila’s move away from this place nonetheless distances her enough for her to judge their lives as an outsider (Aldama 96).

Wayson Choy also constructs a Chinatown with very clear borders. The narrative structure of his text —three novellas narrated by different siblings in a Chinese Canadian family— blend central symbol in each section to create one overreaching presence: Chinatown itself. The Monkey Man in the first story tells a lesson from history, questions of personal identity and borders of sexual awareness mark the second, and the jade peony as art and as family tradition in the third, fuse to create a composite portrait of Vancouver’s Chinatown in the 1930s and early 1940s. Choy has described this effect as that of an expanding, multi-dimensional image created by the distinct narratives:

The idea of the hologram works here, where you have the three main characters interacting and in the middle of their interaction you create a fourth character which is Chinatown itself. You have three views of it, interacting in the same time period but weaving in and out of the present, past, and future. (Davis 273)

These palimpsestic discourses are highly individual, each section employing a distinct rhetorical strategy, imbuing the narrative with rich mythological and popular culture references, and describing vividly each child’s imaginative world. What unites them, aside from the relationships between the narrators, is Choy’s “keen insight into the way children come to terms with the diversity of everyday life” (Gambone 14). He deftly manipulates the children’s point of view to, very often humorously, present their manner of perceiving their changing world. Choy’s three narrators continuously struggle with an adult Chinese world whose complexities elude them: they try to understand the centrality of secrets in Chinatown living, the intricate family relationships maintained by specific forms of kinship terms or complex respectful forms of address, as well as, in the last story, interethnic relationships.



Each section progressively involves the children in the workings of Chinatown and the larger Canadian world outside its borders. In the first story, the narrator, Liang, meets and befriends one of the Chinatown oldtimers, whom she fantasizes is the legendary Monkey Man. Their relationship involves weekly trips to the cinema, and his encouragement of her dancing like Shirley Temple. At the end of this story, Monkey Man leaves for China, to return old bones that must rest where they belong. Second brother Jung's descriptions of Chinatown are more extensive than Liang's and include Gee Sook's American Cleaners, where the children would go to help the old man, the workings of the Tong Association, and the Hastings Gym. He listens to Chinatown gossip, for example about Old Yuen, whose coat he proudly wears. His idol Frank's enlisting in the Army opens up the space of action. Moreover, the war in China is at the background of the entire cycle. All the children feel, to varying degrees, the consequences of the Japanese invasion of China, and understand why members of the Chinese community save money to support the cause back home. As Poh-Poh explains to Liang:

'Always war in China. First, bandit wars in South China, Communist —*Gung Chang*— wars everywhere, and all those sun-cursed Japanese dogs yapping into North China [...]' [Liang] thought of the newsreels, smoke and bombs: Europe and Germany were at war. Britain was at war. The Chinese were forever at war with the Japanese invaders. War was everywhere but here in Chinatown. 'There's no war in Canada,' I said. 'This is Canada' [...] 'You not Canada, Liang,' [Poh-Poh] said majestically, 'you China. Always war in China.' (Choy 36-37).

The boys and their friends constantly play at war games and First Brother Kiam wants to join the military. In Sek-Lung's story, the tentacles of war will reach Chinatown, uniting both personal and political struggles as Vancouver's "Japtown" is virtually shut down, and anti-Japanese feeling modifies relationships. In this third section the borders of Chinatown are most effectively and definitively crossed by Sek-Lung, the youngest child, whose process of separation from Chinatown includes physical forays outside of its racialized boundaries. The child begins to explore neighborhoods beyond Chinatown, first, accompanying his grandmother on her search for junk and, later, accompanying his babysitter, Meiyung, to visit her Japanese Canadian boyfriend.

The secrets of the Chinatown inhabitants become another effective border that separates the insiders from the mainstream world on the outside. *Bone's* narrative structure itself—a story that tells itself backwards, and that never uncovers the true reason for Ona's suicide—reproduces this preoccupation with secrets. Leila tells us that her parents "were always saying, Don't tell this and don't tell that. Mah was afraid of what people inside Chinatown were saying and Leon was paranoid about everything outside Chinatown. We graduated from keeping their secrets to keeping our own" (F.M. Ng 118-19). Interestingly, the question of gossip in the novel has been dealt with in critical writing—an issue that appears contradictory to the obsession with silence. But, as Julie Sze writes: "Gossip constitutes an explosive verbal reaction against community, familial and individual silence... a 'learned'



behavior” (61). The fact that Mah and Leon taught silence to their children profoundly affects Ona who “got used to keeping everything inside, to holding the seeds of herself secret from us” (19) and could “keep a secret better than anyone” (118). But the oldtimers’ silence was a strategy for survival; Ona’s silence is personally internalized and destructive. From this point of view, Ona’s silence emblemizes the most radical consequences of Chinatown’s communal silence. This insight explains part of the estrangement of the sisters, and why no one could truly understand the cause of Ona’s desperation.

Part of Ng’s discursive strategy involves the complex process of recovering the stories of Chinatown life. Central to this is the Leong family history that is being constructed, experienced, and mediated in the continually changing formations of Chinatown community, especially in its engagements with institutions in American society (Ho 210). Significantly, much of this family history is buried in contradictory papers and versions of events. Leon, as a paper son, “was always getting his real and paper birthdates mixed up, he’s never given the same birthdate twice. Oldtimer logic: If you don’t tell the truth, you’ll never get caught in a lie. What Leon didn’t know, he made up. Forty years of making it up has to backfire sometime” (F.M. Ng 55). The Chinatown histories of illegal immigration complicated relations with the official world of bureaucracy, as the Chinese oldtimers tried to maintain their stories. And Leila knows that this obsession with secrets reverberates in her, as she articulates while looking through Leon’s suitcase of often contradicting documents: “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 is those memories, and I want to remember them all” (61).

The children in *The Jade Peony* also learn early on that Chinatown is laden with secrets, that truths about persons are hidden within complex papers and behind numerous linguistic variations understood only by people with common old world village beginnings. Moreover, as a Canadian-born children, they are viewed as different from the real Chinese, dangerous because they are at one remove from traditional China. Once, when Liang overhears her elders talk about Wong Bak’s legal documents, she realizes that her presence causes them to halt their conversation:

No one would say anything more: a child with a Big Mouth stood beside the oak table. Big Eyes. Big Ears. Big Careless Mouth. A Mouth that went to English school and spoke English words. Too many English words [...] I knew that every brick in Chinatown’s three- and five-storey clan buildings lay like the Great Wall against anyone knowing everything. The *lao wab-kiu* —the old-timers who came overseas from Old China— hid their actual life histories within those fortress walls. Only paper histories remained, histories blended with talk-story. (Choy 50)

As a child, she cannot capture the nuances of these secrets, nor can she understand the reason for them. Their existence becomes part of the mysteries surrounding the elders’ lives and relationships, until the time when she will experience one of its consequences directly. As the Chinatown world is full of the secrets hidden in the



“paper stories” for the immigrant officials, and in the complex family relationships, the children also keep their own secrets —Jung hiding his feelings for Frank Yuen, Sek-Lung concealing the truth about Meiying’s relationship with Kazuo, which violates the codes of both the Old and New Worlds. Jung’s anguish at the homosexual feelings Frank arouses, coupled with the pain at his hero’s leaving, makes his story a particularly poignant one. Jung’s life, as different from those of his siblings, appears predestined to be laden with sorrow. He understands that, like the Chinatown people, he too has a secret to keep. In a telling reflection, he comments:

Kiam told me *Hahm-sui-fauh* [Salt Water City] was the Chinese name for Vancouver because it was a city built beside the salt water of the Pacific Ocean. Until Kiam told me, I thought it was where all the salt tears came to make up the ocean, just as my mother told me in one of her stories about her own father’s coming to Vancouver. And then I told myself, this is the way the world is. (Choy 90)

Sek-Lung’s humorously naïve story introduces the reader to a highly imaginative child who will undergo the most complex process of cultural adaptation. Growing up in an increasingly Canadianized household, he cannot understand the family’s rules and the Chinatown secrets, and is confused by the complex kinship terms they are expected to use. Most importantly, Sekky must face the greatest test of ethnic loyalty: he is the only witness to his Chinese Canadian babysitter Meiying’s relationship with a Japanese Canadian, and must decide whether or not to keep their dangerous secret.

As Thomas Kim points out, *Bone* is not about “authentic” Chinese or Chinese-American identity; it is not about recuperating one’s “lost” roots, heritage, or culture. The novel reveals how identity, and especially ethnic American identity,

is a negotiation of terms and significations, in which “authenticity,” “heritage,” and culture itself are produced and re-articulated. The various encounters with state, religious, and other institutions meant to regulate one’s status and confer legitimacy, as depicted in the novel, encourage a re-thinking of the self, and how individuals are delimited or defined by discourse(s). (Kim 53-54)

This argument may be extended to engage ethnicity as the third of Chinatown’s borders. Just as the characters must negotiate terms and discourses that form subjectivity, they must deal with how these discourses establish their location. Chineseness is redefined in the novel on several levels. Leila’s position as a cultural liaison, therefore, becomes a loaded symbol of the possibility of travelling ethnicity as it obliges her to engage this reality daily: her encounters with immigrant poverty and cultural inadaptability contrast sharply with her own easy negotiation of the spaces she occupies. Leila can be critical of the two cultures she travels easily between, yet she somehow seems to occupy a liminal space, precisely because of her ethnicity. At one point, Leila and Mason go to a suburb of Redwood City to deliver a Mercedes to Mason’s cousin Dale. The misunderstanding that ensues when Dale tries to pay Mason for the job he did highlights the diversity of the Chinese American community. David Li believes that, through this scene, Ng intends to subvert



the illusion of an insular Chinatown with a unitary heritage and unitary memory; the encounter of the Chinatown folk and their non-Chinatown kinsmen is her way of showing not just the geographic dispersal of Asian Americans but also what such residential variance suggests about social position and individual dispositions (138). Ethnicity therefore becomes both a cultural basis for a communal structure that ensures conformity and unity, yet differing modes of behavior challenge the limits of this conformity and unity, opening up borders for the evolution of Chinese American subjectivity.

In *The Jade Peony*, Christopher Lee suggests, Sekky becomes the paradigm of the child in the process of being formed by the discourse of ethnicity: “following Althusser, we may say that he is defined as a subject by various Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) which propagate notions of Chineseness, such as Chinese school, his family, his location in the ethnicized space of Chinatown, Chinese and English media, and so on” (Lee 19). The boy notes that “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” (Choy 135). His problems with misnaming his relatives challenge the hierarchical nature of the family, and, more importantly, pose him as a threat that might reveal secrets. As Lee explains:

In a community where family ties are considered of great importance, the family itself is a heavily ethnicized space. Indeed, it is within the family that Sekky encounters Chineseness as a lived reality, as ethnicity is made a daily reality through contact with his elders. Misonaming is therefore an act that suggests a potentially rebellious refusal to submit to the community’s social standards. Willingly or not, Sekky casts himself as a dissenting subject who needs to be disciplined and molded until he partakes (and consents) fully in the discourse of Chineseness. (Lee 20)

At different points in the narrative, Sekky comes face to face with the ostensible contradiction of his two cultures. The boundaries Liang and Jung had to negotiate were those between fantasy and reality, childhood games and adult responsibilities and decisions. Sekky must deal with complex cultural choices of those who, like himself, have, according to Grandmama, “different roots, different flowers [...] Different brains” (Choy 134). Liang sees no problem with becoming Shirley Temple, even if the roses on her shoes are fashioned the Chinese way; Jung knows he can be a boxer like Joe Lewis. But Sekky cannot as easily be Canadian. He lives in the no-man’s land whose boundaries are two conflicting racial and cultural realities: Chinatown and Canada. Not having had direct experience of China and having been raised at a period of increasing nationalist feeling, the child naturally favors Canada and speaking in English: “English words seemed more forthright to me, blunt, like road signs. Chinese words were awkward and messy, like quicksand. I preferred English, but there were no English words to match the Chinese perplexities” (134). Listening to his Father and Mrs. Lim speaking, he comments, “The two followed that up with a deadly round of Chinese sayings, in a classical drumbeat rhythm too ancient for my *mo no* ears. I heard hissing snakes and growling lions” (200). None-



theless, he is conscious that his racial markings will define his place in society and complicate the process of belonging:

But even if I was born in Canada, 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 not that,” neither Chinese not Canadian, both without understanding the boundaries, born *mo no* —no brain. (Choy 135)

More importantly, he is aware that the secrets of Chinatown are endangered because of his generation, because “born-in-Canada children, like myself, *could* betray one. For we were *mo no* children. Children with no Old China history in our brains” (Choy 135).

Sekky observes the intricate relationship between those inside Chinatown and the world outside. When a postman delivers a package to their house and asks Stepmother to sign the receipt, he notes that she “could have written her name in Chinese ideograms, but the man only wanted an *X*. It was the first time I saw Stepmother write anything in English. *X*” (Choy 141). Significantly, he will be a firsthand witness to an important ethnic transgression, as he witnesses the growing anti-Japanese hostility after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and his babysitter’s defiance of racial hatred in favor of love. The first time Meiying takes him with her to see Kazuo, the boy is shocked when he realizes what is happening:

I knew, of course. Meiying was involved in something shameful, something treasonable. Everyone knew the unspoken law: *Never betray your own kind*. Meiying was Chinese, like me; we were our own kind [...] She was a *traitor*. Her boyfriend was a Jap, a monster, one of the enemy waiting in the dark to destroy all of us [...] *I, Sek-Lung, could turn her in*. (Choy 214)

His childlike view of the affair does not allow him to grasp all its implications, and the story ends tragically, with Meiying’s death after a self-induced abortion. “Aren’t we all at war?” Meiying once asked Sekky and his friends while teaching them to play war games, telling them that an alliance meant fighting “against a common enemy” (Choy 226). Her involvement with a Japanese Canadian modifies Sekky’s views of the racial hatred promoted in those years. After her death, he will also understand his own mother more, her youthful dreams and her suffering under the Old One’s rule. Yet, in a gesture of reconciliation, he hands his mother the jade peony, as a sign of her new power and position in the family, and his recognition, as her son, of her rightful place which neither his grandmother nor her husband had given her.

Through Sekky, Choy interrogates both Chinese and Canadian identities, and alerts us to the presence of Chinatown as a liminal discursive space. A complete identification with either is impossible for Sekky and his siblings, and Choy suggests that being Chinese Canadian is about negotiating cultures in ways that may privilege one over the other at any given point. At the same time, such an identity

continues to challenge the boundaries of Canadian culture and Chineseness itself (Lee 25). Meiying and Sekky also confront the terms of Chineseness and prescribed loyalties through her relationship with Kazuo and his complicity in their meetings. For instance, her interest in the notion of alliances complicates his vision, which is based—at least at first—on an uncritical defence of the home, Chinatown, and its interests. Lee points out that Meiying’s understanding of the word “emphasizes equality and individual agency within collective action” (29). Yet this character will not be able to escape the smothering influence of Chinatown families and wartime animosity within multicultural Vancouver.

As the question of ethnicity becomes increasingly complex for the characters, the possibility or need for escape begins to formulate itself. The protagonists of both novels travel within and away from that space, and transform the meaning of home and heritage in the process. Interestingly, in the representation of Chinatown, the characters infuse the space of home with desire for flight, in many forms. Leon travels the world on ships, as Nina does on planes; Leila makes her home away, but looks back continually; Monkey Man takes the physical remains of the tragedies of Chinese Canadian history back to China; Sekky abandons the old ways, as his sphere of action widens; and Ona leaps to a death that is the total separation from locality. In these representations of Chinatown, a useful distinction between space and place allow us to inquire into the nature of these characters’ positionality with regard to the place they occupy. Cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan defines how space and place generally function in these terms:

What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. Architects talk about the spatial qualities of place; they can equally well speak of the locational (place) qualities of space. The ideas “space” and “place” require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa. Furthermore, if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. (Tuan 6)

If space is formulated as allowing movement, and place is understood as a pause, then the Chinatown residents are impelled to travel. In *Bone*, movement away from Chinatown, which is consistently represented as a site for repression, becomes imperative: “Another word came: Escape. What Leon searched for, what Ona needed” (F.M. Ng 150). Yet we must distinguish between a physical removal from the place and a psychological separation. Leila, though she moves away, continually looks “backdaire,” (194) understanding that she can leave it and remember it at the same time. This character comprehends that her family history is one that simultaneously binds and burdens, which must be remembered yet left behind. The imperative of familial cohesion demands its repetition, as Leila affirms when she clings to Leon’s “suitcase of lies,” as the memories she has that she will strive to remember (61). At the same time, the individual instinct for survival begs that it be let go: “the blame, The pressing fear. I wanted a ritual that forgave. I wanted a ritual to forget” (54). Leila’s farewell to Chinatown is therefore not simply a poststructuralist



escape to a world that transcends history and materiality, but a necessary leave-taking, another migration, another exile, compelled by circumstance and by choice: “*The heart never travels*. I believe in holding still. I believe that the secrets we hold in our hearts are our anchors, that even the unspoken between us is a measure of our every promise to the living and the dead” (193) (Li 137-38). Nina is the daughter who most successfully removes herself psychologically, who “didn’t want to come back to San Francisco. She took a job taking tours to China even though she’d never been to China” (25-26). Ona, though she has the potential to leave Chinatown, does not *imagine* “a way out” (173). Aldama notes that Ona, though employed physically outside Chinatown, is a waitress in an equally restrictive patriarchal artificially recreated “Old-World” Polynesian restaurant. She remains socio-spatially and imaginatively restricted and, because she cannot create an imaginative space on the border between the inside and the outside, she escapes altogether by jumping from a quintessential modern building with its suppression of diversity and imposition of uniformity (Aldama 93).

In *The Jade Peony*, the process of Sek-Lung’s separation from Chinatown is formulated in terms of a growing attachment to mainstream Canadian culture and a progressive detachment from the ways of old China. Ironically, even though Sekky is the only one who sees his Grandmama after her death, and hears her repeating “*Old way, best way*” (Choy 162), he is the family member who most radically abandons the old ways—he does not speak Chinese, he is the only sibling with a Canadianized version of his name, war games move him more than Chinese legends do, the central influence in his life begins to be his Canadian schoolteacher, he does not betray Meiyong’s trust and her death after a botched abortion will oblige Sekky to reconsider the nature of alliances. In the final act of effrontery to his Grandmama’s decree (which can also be read as the old way of Chinatown way), begins to call Stepmother by her rightful name, “Mother.”

The children’s crossing of boundaries—imaginative for Liang, sexual for Jung, and spiritual for Sekky—find a geographical constituent in Choy’s mapping of Chinatown. His understanding of Vancouver geography allows him to find its seams and to create previously unimagined meeting spaces, specifically the border between the Chinese part and what Sekky calls “Japtown.” The meeting spaces are increasingly pluralistic, yet ending *The Jade Peony* with Meiyong’s death foregrounds the risks and difficulties involved in crossing the borders that mark locations and identities (Beauregard 163). In this manner, Choy constructs a coherent Chinatown that reflects the time. He produces literary architecture through his narrative, by making each character—children separated by age and relationship to the place of their beginning—contribute to the unfolding of the final picture. The technique he uses, the blending three voices, corresponds to what Lien Chao calls “the technique of dialogue” which contemporary Chinese Canadian writers, in various forms, have used to revive the lived experiences of early Chinese immigrants. This is Choy’s manner of dealing with “the lack of written records about Chinese immigrants and their descendants in Canadian archives, except for racial stereotypes generated by mainstream media and the immigrant documents, by instigating their own search for historical documents and recording fragments of memories from the communi-

ty's oral tradition" (Chao 25). As Chao explains, dialogue with the community ancestors becomes an indispensable research process and the contemporary speaker is reconnected with the ancestor's memory and with his or her lived experience. In some cases, the narrative is born from the remembrance of the ancestor, such as Poh-Poh in *The Jade Peony*, as the narrators search through the collective memory or family genealogy. This form of dialogue positions the contemporary Chinese Canadian writers in the historical space to redress the biases of Canadian history and to reclaim their community history (Chao 25).

Interestingly, Choy, as Ng does to a certain extent, takes the dialogue a step further to recreate a specific place. Through the perspective of his child narrators, he describes the blending of the old and the new that made up Chinatown in the 30s and 40s, and describes its inevitable opening up to the larger world of Vancouver. As Chao argues, different writers have used diverse narrative techniques to

connect community and individuals into one historical reality in which "the collective self" emerges as a double identity construct for the Chinese Canadians. "The collective self" also indicates that the historical silence and invisibility of the community still affects contemporary generations: they cannot gain a more respectable identity in today's society unless their collective history is recognized as part of Canadian experience. (Chao 93)

Choy's technique posits a renewed manner of foregrounding a previously concealed history and living. Both Ng and Choy therefore blend individual voices of narrating characters to expand the cultural significance of their stories and build multi-dimensional images of Chinese American and Chinese Canadian identity within and beyond a Chinatown setting. The plural interworkings of history and imagination, personal contingencies and cultural choices results in a complex representation of a cultural space in the process of modification and transformation.



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