Diaspora and Modernity: The Postethnic Ethos in Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children*

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Modernity and diaspora have different genealogies, but their ideological, social, and cultural trajectories often converge in significant ways. The social and economic progress that is fundamental to the project of modernity shares the same impetus behind the cross-national mobility characterizing diaspora. Whether they belong in, to use Arjun Appadurai's terms, "diasporas of hope, diasporas of terror, [or] diasporas of despair" (6), diasporic subjects are impelled to move away from their communities and families by the desire—indeed the need—to improve their living conditions, and help ameliorate the conditions of those staying at home. But the dream of progress at the heart of diaspora does not necessarily emerge from the same philosophical and value systems informing modernity. Diasporic movements are inflected by their distinct geopolitical particularities. Nevertheless, because most diasporic movements see the West as their destination, and because the circumstances that necessitate migration may share a complex relationship with the West's colonial, political, and economic impact on the mother nation-states, the emancipatory agenda of modernity is often inscribed in the aspirations typifying diaspora. The Enlightenment's universal principles that determined the course of Western progress translated modernity into a project of, what we may call today, transnational aspirations and objectives. Since its inception, then, modernity has been synonymous with modernization at cross-national levels, a project that saw hegemonic practices and the export of political systems and technological advancements imbricated in each other. This is precisely

what Dorothy L. Hodgson has in mind when she states "the *project* of Modernity was also a *mission*" (3).

As Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar writes, modernity "has traveled from the West to the rest of the world not only in terms of cultural forms, social practices, and institutional arrangements, but also as a form of discourse that interrogates the present" (14). The mobility ingrained in modernity offers a rationalization of imperial expansionism and colonization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but also reveals the structural similarities modernity shares with diaspora. Even though, normally, modernity operates as the antecedent of diaspora, diasporic mobility itself contributes to the modernization of nation-states that produce diasporas, and does so by generating modernities that are site-specific. Thus, while modernity is "born in and of the West" (Gaonkar 1), some of its premises are not exclusively specific to the West. If one of the characteristics of modernity includes "questioning the present" (Gaonkar 13), it would be foolhardy to assume that such a fundamental human trait is solely a Western phenomenon. Even non-Western nations that privilege tradition, as is the case today with some Islamic states, do so by following their own understanding of why the present needs to be changed. It would be reductive, as Barbara M. Cooper suggests,

> to see Muslim subjectivities of the contemporary moment as being primarily or initially emanations of or reactions to the Western secular subject . . . We must ask ourselves whether there are modernities outside the reflexive/reactive 'alternatives' to the West, modernities that emerge out of global phenomena and postcolonial histories but that engage different kinds of understandings of wealth, personhood, and the public sphere than are commonly taken for granted in much work on modernity and globalization. (94)

Gaonkar's dual model of modernity that distinguishes between "societal modernization and cultural modernity" (1) offers a corrective to the critical solipsism of absorbing all manifestations of modernity into its Western origins. Gaonkar's cultural approach "holds that modernity always unfolds within a specific cultural or civilizational context and that different starting points for the transition to modernity lead to different outcomes . . . and produce alternate modernities at different national and

cultural sites. In short, modernity is not one, but many" (17). The interrelationship I am proposing here between modernity and diaspora promises to generate a more nuanced awareness of how these two concepts intersect and influence each other. This is important especially in light of the fact that most Canadian studies of the construction of diasporic subjectivities or the representation of ethnicity tend to overlook the ways in which diaspora and modernity are discursively related. By failing to take notice, on one hand, of the rigorous scrutiny modernity has undergone in the last half of the twentieth century, especially in view of its homogenizing impulses, and, on the other, of how modernity is inscribed in the re-formation of the Canadian nation as a multicultural state, they remain complicit with some of modernity's internal contradictions. They exemplify what Paul Gilroy calls "occidental modernity" (43), the desire to see diasporic subjects participate in the emancipatory transformations modernity entails without, however, paying heed to the appropriating and hegemonic implications of these processes. Reading, then, diaspora through modernity, and vice-versa, has the potential of revealing aspects of diasporic texts hitherto unnoticed, while at the same time raising fruitful methodological questions.

Despite the many productive debates in Canada about postcolonial and diasporic subjectivities, and many critics' attempts to disaffiliate themselves from the liberalism—a manifestation of modernity—that informs such constructs as the policy of multiculturalism, there is a noticeable trend characterizing certain studies of diasporic literature.[1] This trend, akin to what Bruce Robbins calls "epistemological progress" (62), is manifested through the critical interest in exposing what Nancy Hartsock calls "the falseness of the view from the top," and subsequently embracing "an account of the world as seen from the margins" (171). But such a method of reading narratives about diasporic experience, or accounts—fictional or not—of ethnicization and racialization does not necessarily promise to release our critical perspective from the effects of knowledges

[1] My point here concerns the discursiveness of this kind of critical discourse, hence my not providing examples of particular critics.

subjugated to the problematic ideologies of the Enlightenment legacy. If anything, it assumes, as Robbins argues, "a norm or *telos* of marginality in relation to which the abandonment of 'the view from the top' can and will appear as an improvement," an instance of modernization. "This disguised progressiveness," Robbins goes on to say, "lurks in every account that purports to come from the margins and in every imperative that enjoins us to speak (or measure our distance) from them." The problem here is the assumption that "one day" this "'view from the top' can be recatalogued as a relic of the past, a casualty of some actual or potential version of progress" (Robbins 62).

It is precisely this process—no matter how well intentioned—of translating conditions of marginality into emancipated positions without scrutinizing what this emancipation involves that reveals the complicity characterizing certain critical acts. The critical trend I am talking about is inclined to employ a linear thinking akin to the same teleology that characterizes the narrative of modernization, thus setting out to recuperate otherness and rehabilitate the nation.[2] Its method, complicit as it is with the goals of the Enlightenment tradition, is reconciliatory. In that, it supports the emergence of liberalist discourses such as those of "the politics of recognition" proposed by Charles Taylor, or of what we might call the politics of disaffiliation advanced by Neil Bissoondath in *The Cult of Multiculturalism*, a text premised on the assumption that Canada has entered a stage of postethnicity.[3] As Roy Miki says, Bissoondath "masquerades . . . as a supposedly beyond race and ethnicity perceiver" (127). The problem with postethnicity lies not in the diasporic subject's desire to imagine a future in Canada free of racialization and discriminatory experiences, but in the assumption that this desire has materialized, thus implying that we inhabit a space and time already "beyond" race and ethnicity.

[2] I discuss the critical tendency to recuperate the nation at greater length in "Faking It: Fred Wah and the Postcolonial Imaginary." *Etudes Canadiennes* 54 (2003): 115-32.

[3] The argument for postethnicity, though certainly not similar to postcoloniality, raises questions similar to those addressed, for example, in *Is Canada Postcolonial? Unsettling Canadian Literature*, ed. Laura Moss (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2003).

Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children* is a text that performs modernity as an ambivalent and troubling sign, especially in terms of its contingent relationship to diaspora. The ambivalence in this text is generated at once by the markers of modernity that constitute Chong's narrative and by the strategies she employs to represent herself as a Chinese Canadian whose "daunting" task of composing her family's history is largely intended to make her "feel that those who were in their graves were somehow behind me" (xi). Regardless of its geographic locality, modernity as a process that privileges the development of normative subjectivities by negotiating "the experience of otherness" (Anderson 269) is at the centre of Chong's text. Though we can see the experiences of her family's diasporic movements between China and Canada as emblematic of the migration patterns of many Chinese Americans and Chinese Canadians, Chong is unabashedly clear about not belonging to this diaspora. She writes *The Concubine's Children*, what she calls her "'family project'" (xi), because she wants to lay the specters of the past in peace, to put the hyphen signifying her ethnicity under erasure, so that she can occupy a normative subject position. Articulated in emancipatory terms, this act begs the double question of what such a normative subjectivity signifies and at what expense it is achieved. It is this paradox of creating a narrative about her family's ethnic origins and diasporic experience while simultaneously forestalling a consistent attempt at "'self-regard'" as an Asian Canadian that exemplifies the discursive relationship between modernity and diaspora in this text.

"Self-regard," a concept Freud introduces in his essay "On Narcissism," as Rey Chow explains in her study of ethnic autobiographies, entails displaying a healthy kind of "narcissism" that can assist the ethnic subject achieve "'self-preservation'" in light of the negative construction of its identity by "mainstream society." "Self-regard," then, according to Chow, "in the visual as well as social senses of the term, is the complicated result of the self's negotiations with the observing collective conscience" ("The Secrets" 64). Such negotiations, in Chong's narrative, are already *a fait accomplit*, hence promulgating a postethnic position. The lack of "self-regard" in *The Concubine's Children*, as I hope to show, is not only a result of the mediation Chong's self-representation undergoes through its

interpellation by dominant society; it is also a consequence of the way she treats the different kinds of modernity that inform her family's diasporic trajectory.

Written primarily for the white North American reader,[4] *The Concubine's Children* is a generically hybrid text. A saga about Chong's family roots in China; a biography of her maternal grandmother, May-ying, the concubine of the title; a historiographic account or creative non-fiction narrated, mostly, in the third person; an autobiography since the narrative is framed by Chong's personal voice in the opening and concluding sections—these are some of the genres through which we could read *The Concubine's Children*. But focusing on the text's generic hybridity, however interesting it might be, or interpreting the character of May-ying, as Eleanor Ty does, through Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection (Ty 38-39), does not necessarily disclose the text's ideological complexity, let alone the ambivalences and complicity that mark its narrative. Ty calls the text "historiographic ethnography," and situates its generic hybridity in the postmodern tradition as defined by Linda Hutcheon: "Chong's novel [*sic*]. . . is closer to a 'postmodern' text, in Hutcheon's definition of the term, than it is a straightforward memoir or family history" (38), thus revealing the author's "awareness of the way truths are selectively produced and represented" (39).[5] Drawing attention to the "authenticity," as well as to the manufactured truths, of the documents Chong relies on to tell her story (38), Ty is able to conclude that Chong's "authentic and reassuring encounter with her grandmother (and mother) is . . . what Denise Chong desires" (39). But her reading, privileging as it does some of the text's formal and generic elements at the expense of its ideological contradictions and

[4] Chong does not distinguish between white and non-white, or Chinese and non-Chinese, readers, but the historical glosses she offers clearly indicate that she has a non-Chinese readership in mind.

[5] See my critique of Hutcheon's notion of postmodernism and the way it influences her response to Canadian multiculturalism in *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 2000.

generic hybridity, aligns the text with Hutcheon's well-rehearsed postmodern reading of Canadian literature while overlooking the political implications of Hutcheon's notion of the postmodern.

Moreover, to make the text fit not only the postmodern tradition, but also that of diasporic writing, Ty attributes to Chong "a personal nostalgia" impelled by her "lament [for] the vanished past" (40). Similar to the trope of the return, nostalgia is a recurring motif in diasporic texts. But nostalgia is not to be confused with the desire, however complex, "to get a glimpse of the past" (Chong xiii). Nostalgia implies a longing for something or some place that a subject had a tight relationship, and continues to feel a strong affinity, with. As a manifestation of affect, contrary to Ty's interpretation, nostalgia is absent in Chong's self-representation. Her "collective remembering" (Ty 40) of her family's past allows her to "recuperate . . . her mother's and her grandmother's life stories" (Ty 52), but this "recuperation"—a term Ty employs more than once in her chapter on Chong—is inscribed by the same teleology and progressive thinking of modernity. The act of "recuperating" the past in order to put it "behind" demonstrates that Chong sets out not only to "recuperate" the Chinese "otherness" of her family, but also to rehabilitate the Canadian nation-state. The acculturation and social mobility of the second and third generations of this family in Canada may testify to their tenacity, but they also reflect how effectively certain tenets of modernity are part and parcel of Canadian national pedagogy. Nor does Chong, as Ty concludes, "contend . . . with her own sense of alterity, her divided subjectivity" (52-53). Rather than articulating a hybridized subjectivity, both Chong's narrativization of the past and her self-representation are permeated by the ethos of postethnicity.

In *The Concubine's Children*, postethnicity is constructed by the lack of "self-regard," on the one hand, and by Chong's rhetoric and tropes of self-dissimulation, on the other. Chong both identifies and disidentifies with the lives she records, a process reflected, in part, by the double point of view of her text's narrative. Now she appears in the text as the speaking "I," now she disappears behind the guise of what she calls "an omniscient narrator" (xi). In a similar fashion, at the same time that Chong acknowledges that, while living in Peking with her partner, she is "dogged" by the "feeling" that she "st[oo]d on the same soil" as her mother's Chinese

relatives, she leaves no doubt that "[i]t was not a sense of 'Chineseness' I was after; I had stopped trying to contrive any such feeling following Mother's early advice—'You're a Canadian, not Chinese. Stop trying to feel something'" (262). Her mother's admonition warns Chong against "feeling" nostalgia for a past she knows very little about, but also lays bare what the ethos of postethnicity entails. As David Hollinger, an advocate for postethnicity, writes:

> the postethnic perspective pulls together and defends certain elements of multiculturalism and criticizes others. A postethnic perspective favors voluntary over involuntary affiliations, balances an appreciation for communities of descent with a determination to make room for new communities, and promotes solidarities of wide scope that incorporate people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds. A postethnic perspective resists the grounding of knowledge and moral values in blood and history, but works within the last generation's recognition that many of the ideas and values once taken to be universal are specific to certain cultures. . . . A postethnic perspective builds upon a cosmopolitan element prominent within the multiculturalism movement and cuts against its equally prominent pluralist element. . . . Cosmopolitanism is more wary of traditional enclosures and favors voluntary affiliations. (3)
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> . . . Cosmopolitanism itself is . . . generic. It is an impulse toward worldly breadth associated especially with the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century . . . But postethnicity is the critical renewal of cosmopolitanism in the context of today's greater sensitivity to roots. "Rooted cosmopolitanism" is . . . a label . . . moving in the direction of what I call postethnic. (5)

Seen in the context of postethnicity, Chong's narrative, far from being an attempt at asserting her alterity, reinforces her desire to "affiliate" herself with Canadianness, an affiliation tantamount to releasing her from the historical legacy of Chinese immigration in Canada. The generic hybridity of Chong's text, then, rather that pointing, as Ty, for example, argues, toward the hybridity of Chong's identity, underpins her desire to bracket history. Her declaration that she is "Canadian, not Chinese" is the result of the subtle interpellation process Chong has undergone through national pedagogy. Indeed, as the phrase "early advice" alludes to, it is her mother who mediates this interpellation process, clearly a case of the old adage that

the family is structured like the nation, and vice versa—a paradigmatic instance of how assimilation occurs.[6]

Even when Hing / Winnie encourages her eight-year-old daughter, Denise, to read a Chinese book, she gives her *Moment in Peking* (1939), a novel written by the Americanized Chinese author Lin Yutang (1895-1976). Yutang, who wrote most of his books in English since his main goal was to promote Chinese Culture in the West, casts his female characters as the embodiment of the spirit, as well as the horrendous difficulties, of China's modernization—modernization in terms of both importing Western values into China and modernizing China from within.[7] But the travails and sad endings of the novel's female characters do little to endear China to young Denise. As Chong remembers, "All that seemed beyond the reach of reality. To me, China was what was left *behind* when the boat carrying my grandmother, pregnant with my mother, docked in Vancouver. . . . China was where you'd find yourself if you dug a hole deep enough to come out the other side of the Earth" (242; my emphasis). Clearly, the pedagogy Chong is exposed to, practiced at once in the public sphere and within the family, affirms the privileging of a progressive, teleological logic that the "China" Chong is familiar with fails to embody. According to this logic, the past of Chong's family has no bearing on her present, which, in turn, has no room for China: "China"—as the culture of the Chinese in the diaspora and as the country she visits with her mother—is framed by

[6] In Muriel Kitagawa's *This Is My Own: Letters to Wes and Other Writings on Japanese Canadians, 1941-1948* (1985), it is Kitagawa who, as a mother, rather than the political activist and writer that she was, encourages her children to assimilate.

[7] Educated in English in China, as well as in the U.S., France, and Germany, Yutang was a commercial writer who lived most of his life in the West, especially New York, and spent his last years in Taiwan and Hong Kong. As I am revising this essay, November 2005, *Moment in Peking*, in its 1977 translation by Taiwanese Zhang Zhenyu, is number two on the best seller list in China, right after *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince,* according to The Beijing News. The novel's portrayal of its three female central characters who kill themselves (though not by drowning in a well, as Chong says) sees traditional interpretation of Confucian, and patriarchal, values, as well as the advent of Maoism, as the main impediments to China's modernization.

the "behind" and "beyond" of Chong's representational apparatus. Thus, she can "return" to "China" only "in the form of fetishism" (Chow, *Women* 27).

Chong's assertion of her Canadianness is an antagonistic process, for it involves casting off her Chineseness—precisely what postethnicity calls for. It is also posited as an unambiguous manifestation of agency, of an identity constructed willfully by the subject herself. This process, Hollinger argues, implies an anti-essentialist understanding of the formation of subjectivity. Or, as Jonathan Rée would say, identity is no longer "the element of permanent continuity beneath apparent change" (85). Nevertheless, while the anti-essentialism of postethnic identity is directed against authenticity as is conventionally bound to ethnic origins, it embraces the simulacrum of coherence posited by Canadian national identity, a coherence akin to the ethos of modernity. Postethnicity is offered as proof of the subject's emancipatory gesture of releasing herself from what is perceived to be the double yoke of race and ethnicity. This emancipation reflects, in part, the subject's desire to compensate for the traumas suffered by Chinese Canadians as a result of the history of marginalization and discrimination. Thus, in Chong's text postethnic identity emerges as an alternative to ontologically grounded essentialism, ethnicization, and hybridity. But there is an interesting paradox here: while the postethnic subject exercises a certain voluntarism in moving "beyond" her minority position, she takes on a national identity, Canadian, which is implicitly understood not as an identity encompassing difference but as one that has already domesticated otherness. This domestication of otherness, together with the elements of Orientalist discourse in the text—as Ty acknowledges, there is "an exotic and fascinating element" (43) in Chong's narrativization of her family's past— bolster the kind of modernity at work in *The Concubine's Children*.

As Chong writes:

> What Chinese pastimes we did *adopt* in our home were shaped by western sensibilities. We inherited from the handful of old-timers in Prince George used mah-jongg sets; they became blocks for building roadworks and whole cities for my brothers. I actually *pretended ignorance* of a connection with China when one of my airport chums came calling during another of *Po-po*'s visits. Seeing that my grandmother didn't speak English and that she wasn't white, and

> *forgetting* that we Chongs were also different-looking, Diane asked where she came from. "My grandmother was born in Ladner," I said, retrieving a conveniently remembered detail from my mother's stories about a Canadian birth certificate that my grandmother had used to enter Canada. (247, my emphasis).

This passage shows that Chong's parents expunged their Chinese heritage from their lives, so that Chinese culture was not an integral part of their children's upbringing. There are many instances in diasporic Canadian literature that dramatize the disavowal of cultural origins, even of family members, the upshot of internalizing negative stereotypes about one's diasporic roots, and the desire—more accurately, the need—to fit in.[8] In this context, what is important in the passage above is that Chinese culture is simultaneously relinquished and documented. The ambivalence that emerges from this dialectic discloses the discursive relationship between modernity and diaspora.

Chong's use of the verb "to adopt" in reference to her "Chinese pastimes" suggests a complex process of rejection, translation, and appropriation, a process analogous to how Orientalism operates. Adoption here implies that Chinese culture circulates within the Chong family as an imported object that has already undergone mediation. Orientalized by "western sensibilities," Chinese culture is now a product that has recreational value, an instance of what Chow calls ethnography: "the use of things, characters and narratives not for themselves but for their collective, hallucinatory signification of 'ethnicity'" (*Primitive Passions* 144). The mah-jong sets, used as if they were Lego blocks, are a concrete example of domesticated otherness, of the capaciousness of the Canadian nation-state to "adopt" foreign habits while neutralizing their cultural specificity. Chong does not, then, as Ty suggests, "represent[herself] as an ethnic . . . other" (35). Quite the contrary, this—and other similar scenes in the narrative, or statements like "The visits with *Po-po* served as a reminder that we were Chinese, yet her Chineseness could take us by surprise" (247), and "There were family gatherings in Vancouver, but our lives

[8] See, for example, Frank Paci's novel, *Black Madonna* (1982), and Neil Bissoondath's first novel, *A Casual Brutality* (1988).

bypassed Chinatown. On rare occasions, we tried a new restaurant there" (258)—belie any claim that Chong thinks of herself "as a Chinese in the diaspora" (Ty 43). Instead, Chong installs in her narrative the paradigm of "native" and "other." Aspects of her narrative that question this paradigm, as when Chong draws attention to the marginalization of the early Chinese immigrants in Vancouver, invariably concern "the debris of [her] mother's past" (251). She thus simultaneously stresses the biological ties with the Chinese subjects of her "family project" and keeps her Chineseness at bay. The culture / nature paradigm inscribed in her postethnic position leaves ethnicity, as it is defined by official multiculturalism, unexamined. Thus, postethnicity posits an interesting, albeit vexing, contradiction: a neo-essentialist authenticity—the belated nativism of Canadian identity, the Canadian household as a comfort zone—constructed by a voluntarism that is produced both by the subject herself and by national and familial pedagogies. What makes Chong's self-dissimulation feasible, then, is that it is anchored in modernity's dream of progress, as well as its attendant notion of tradition as "modernity's polar opposite" (Gilroy 188).

Postethnicity, in my interpretation of *The Concubine's Children*, is not synonymous with a disavowal of history. Instead, it evacuates history of its continuity, and underlines modernity's imperative to move, in the name of progress, "beyond," and, consequently, leave "behind," the tradition of China. Chong's employment of history in *The Concubine's Children* is certainly crucial to our understanding of the text's characters and their experiences, but it is how she rehearses and contains this history that is relevant to my reading. We have to read her narrative in the large context of the mass migration movements at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were responsive at once to the labor hands needed as a result of developments in such nations as the United States, Canada, and Australia and to the dire conditions of poorer, "underdeveloped" countries such as those in southern Europe or China. Specifically, it was the Gold Rush and the construction of the railway in the American West that enticed the first large numbers of Chinese to immigrate to the United States.

Similarly, the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, completed in 1885, was one of the most important projects through which Canada materialized its aspirations as a recently established confederation both in relation to its fears about American expansionism in the West and

its own dream of unity, a project which became possible largely through the cheap labor of approximately 7,000 Chinese laborers. Chong, understandably so, recites this history with particular emphasis to the region her grandfather came from, but she translates the socio-economic conditions that gave rise to this migration into a folk tale, albeit one marked by "anti-Chinese feelings" (13), "the Head Tax, and the Exclusion Act" (15): "There were men from the delta of the Pearl River in Kwangtung province, where seafarers were folk heroes. In the eighteenth century, Canton had been the only Chinese port open to foreigners. Ever since the arrival there of foreign traders offering to exchange opium from India for Chinese silk and tea, distant shores had meant adventure" (13). Surely there must have been the occasional Chinese man from Kuangtung who left seeking "adventure,"[9] but the Orientalist allure inscribed in this retelling of diasporic history is certainly disproved by the many histories and narratives that document the immigration of Chinese men to North America. It was poverty and the need to fend for their families' future, not a craving for adventure, which compelled these early immigrants to come to North America.

Chong's maternal great-grandfather emigrated to San Francisco before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 in the US. Like many other Chinese immigrants, he moved back and forth, "three times in all" (14), until the last time he was back, 1888, when "Congress suddenly declared void all Certificates of Return" (15) and thus put an end to "his sojourn abroad" (14). The movement back and forth, which also marks the life of Chan Sam, Chong's grandfather and one of the central figures in her narrative, is typical of the trope of the return that characterizes diaspora. Conventionally, the trope of the return signifies nostalgia, but this seesaw pattern of the diasporic experience of Chinese male immigrants is also consonant with the discursiveness aligning diaspora and modernity, more precisely, with diaspora as a particular configuration of modernity. The tension

[9] Kuangtung, where Canton is, and Shanghai were two places in China that, during the period Chan Sam moved back and forth between China and Canada, saw most of the changes, positive as well as negative, as a result of Chinese modernity and the political movements that advocated different aspects of it. See Alitto, and Leo Ou-fan Lee, "Shanghai Modern: Reflections on Urban Culture in China in the 1930s," in Gaonkar (86-122).

implicit in the pendulum swing between East and West is paradigmatic not only of some aspects of the expansionism of Western modernity, but also, as Guy S. Alitto argues, in *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity*, of the "conservative" character of Chinese "modernization": "Chinese learning for fundamental principles; Western learning for practical application" (6). Though Chan Sam's life exemplifies this particular aspect of Chinese modernity, Chong's rendering of his character dispenses with it. Instead, her representation of Chan Sam is influenced by her overwhelming desire to leave Chinese culture "behind" because of the "primitiveness" she attributes to it—"primitiveness" in Chow's definition of the term, as the result of a "belated fascination" with a culture and with "its datedness and alterity" (*Primitive Passions* 145). The only scene in the book that appears twice—once in the first chapter, and later in the second-last chapter—illustrates the fetishizing character of Chong's representational strategies.

The scene concerns Chong's first visit to Chang Gar Bin, her grandfather's village in Guangdong, and more specifically the guestroom where she and her mother are put up. In the first account of this visit, Chong describes the room as "a storeroom . . . h[olding] an inventory of junk: a tall, rusted metal crib with broken springs, . . . an RCA Victor phonograph" (2). When the scene is repeated, the euphemism she employs to describe the room—"room of honor"—and the additional details she offers further emphasize her Chinese relatives' backwardness. "[T]here was little privacy," she records. "We had to contend with the pig pacing the adjoining kitchen and passageway . . . [m]osquitoes oblivious to the . . . repellent tablet smoldering atop a kerosene lamp on the cement floor, . . . dogs howl[ing] next door, where the neighbor slaughtered the choice of the day for his restaurant" (276). The events that Chong narrates in-between the two versions of this scene—the stories she has discovered in the interim about her family's past—have no apparent impact on her perceptions of her Chinese surroundings. If anything, she is all the more determined to leave China "behind." There is, however, one interesting shift: the crib and the phonograph her grandfather had brought over from Canada, signs of Western progress, and which are described in the beginning of the book as "junk," are now referred to as "relics from Gold Mountain" (282). "Relic" and "junk" are not synonyms. While "relic" implies a

connection to the past—an artifact, a keepsake, an object that, though of no use today, is valued because it has survived the past—"junk" is associated with debris, with second-hand objects, things that may be useless or have little, if any, value. From a Western perspective, a rusty crib is junk, but from the point of view of Chong's Chinese relatives this junk not only has a different value and function, but has also accrued a complex and contradictory set of meanings over the years associated with Chan Sam in the diaspora.

On his two visits back from Gold Mountain to his home village, Chan Sam arrives with enough money and Canadian tools to begin building the biggest and most ostentatious house in Chang Gar Bin. He ships over to China a variety of Western goods, ranging from three large mirrors and big clocks to the Western treats his Canadian-born daughters, who accompany him, along with May-ying, their mother and Chang Sam's concubine, are fond of. Chan Sam's attachment to certain Western goods is not a sign that he has become completely westernized. Rather, he embodies the ambivalences and contradictions characterizing Chinese modernity at the time. While he resumes his work as farmer, thus participating in the agrarian life of rural China, Chan Sam also introduces notions of industrialized modernity, creating much-needed work opportunities for the village's farmers in the wintertime. He does not reject the old filiative order sustained by traditional life in China. Instead, he employs Western technology as a tool that mediates his desire to both uphold traditional values and keep apace with the modernization of China.[10] It is precisely this—his practicing a modernity that is not intended to snub traditional Chinese values, in many ways the epitome of Chinese modernity—that prompts the villagers to "congratulate each other that" their community "could boast one husband and father who had kept his head above water" (77). "Not only would his house be the first built by a peasant of their generation . . . but it would bring Chang Gar Bin renown among the surrounding villages" (78). The house never gets finished, and Chan Sam's Chinese family barely makes it through the years of political turbulence

[10] Chan Sam's character deserves a much more detailed reading in relation to Chinese modernity and diaspora, as does, too, the character of May-ying, but a longer treatment of these characters is beyond the scope of a single essay.

that follow. Nevertheless, given the cultural economy of the community, Western technology is appropriated and valued from a traditional Chinese perspective. So when Chan Sam's daughters are seen playing with "their overseas toys," they are called "*Faan-gwei-neu*," meaning "foreign girl." This foreignness, though, is not necessarily seen as a contaminating influence but as a "compliment" (86).

In China, the sign of the foreign must be seen in both discursive and historical terms, for it shifts meaning and value depending on who imports it, to whom it is attached, and at what historical moment it is appraised. As Alitto writes, when "cultural units were confronted with modernization, they conceived of it as 'foreign,' and thus productive of that tension between 'history' and 'value'" (10). For Chan Sam, the foreign has a positive value. It is what his masculine identity co-opts in order to live up to the patriarchal imperatives of his culture and fulfill his family responsibilities. This same sign, however, is translated into a vile and contaminating influence by Mao's troops when they arrive in the village. Similarly, the foreign comes to signify exclusion and alienation when it is associated with female identity. Thus, to the villagers in Chang Gar Bin and her two daughters living there, May-ying is known as the "foreign woman," an appellation not meant as a compliment in this instance. Yet Chong's narrativization of her Chinese relatives' experiences, though it discloses these historical and gender shifts, insists on seeing the foreign as a stable sign. This is the reason the fruits of the diasporic experience of Chong's grandparents survive in *The Concubine's Children* as a sign of ambivalence at best, cultural impotence at worst. Diaspora, seen in Chang Gar Bin as an enabling experience, a site from which a "pragmatic" (Alitto 123) notion of modernization emanates, functions in Chong's narrative as a sign of the failure to embrace progress. Chong's translation of the foreign as junk, then, employs what Lisa Chow would call a "realist aesthetic" (107), an aesthetic that demonstrates Chong's fetishization of the Western concept of modernity and modernity in China. This points as much to her desire to disassociate herself from Chinese culture as to the ways in which the materiality of history in her text is measured in strictly material terms. If her grandfather emerges from her narrative as a failure—indeed, as a pathetic figure—it is because the trajectory of his life is measured against history understood as a continuous narrative of progress.

This is one of the reasons why Chong's visit to China and interest in the past do not exemplify the nostalgia we have come to expect from certain kinds of ethnic writing but are, instead, marked by the kind of self-contained anxiety associated with postethnicity.

The progressivist impulse of Western modernity as a master narrative that produces the need in diasporic subjects to assimilate, and thus enter a postethnic stage, is apparent in the following passage:

> Mother grew up within the walls of rooming houses, smoke-filled mah-jong parlors and dank alleyways. My siblings and I had country lanes to ride our bicycles on . . . She was punished if she played too much; we were allowed to play to our hearts' content. We had to clear just one early hurdle—neighbors not used to "Orientals" on the block. Taunts chased us to school: "Chinky, Chinky Chinaman, sitting on a fence, making a dollar out of fifteen cents." At recess, children threw stone-laden snowballs in our direction; after school they waited in ambush to knock us off our bicycles. Mother's advice to feign deafness worked, and she and Father made it clear to other parents that they wouldn't put up with abuse. Acceptance and friendship soon followed, and *we ourselves soon forgot that we were any different from our white playmates*. (240, my emphasis)

The racist taunting that she and her siblings experience may have stopped "soon," but "soon" here discloses Chong's ability to "forget" that she is a racialized subject. Her forgetting is yet another effect of the pedagogy I discussed above—once more, a pedagogy practiced by her mother. Resistance to racism can take different forms, including silence, depending on the discursive conditions surrounding it, but, in the context of this text, the advice of Chong's mother to "feign deafness" reflects assimilation-as-submission to the Canadian national imaginary. This is what makes it possible for Chong to employ here a rhetoric of conversion, namely, a rhetoric that declares the end of racism, which she calls euphemistically "just one early hurdle." The representation of racism as an isolated episode; the parental advice to adopt a strategy of deafness; and the quick elimination of the problem—all this serves to uphold whiteness as the normative identity. Chong's "forg[etting]" that she is no "different from" her "white playmates" discloses, in a performative fashion, why her Chineseness is edited out of the sentence. Her attempt, then, to register racism as a

temporary lapse in the dominant white society advocates political quiescence. In *The Concubine's Children*, to borrow Ann Laura Stoler's words, "racism appears at once as a return to the past as it harnesses itself to progressive projects" (90).

As Zygmunt Bauman says, in *Modernity and Ambivalence*, "There are friends and enemies. And there are strangers" (143). Friends and enemies are symmetrically related; strangers represent an awesome threat (145). It is the "friends' narrative domination" (143) that resolves the antagonism between them and their "enemies." In the passage above, Chong perceives herself as an "enemy" who becomes a "friend." What rescues her from the painful realization that she is indeed seen as a "stranger" by her white playmates is the upward mobility that characterizes her mother's experience. It is class, the mother's escape from Chinatown's "dank alleyways," that promises to fulfill Chong's seemingly autonomous desire to put "behind" her, to defer confronting, her self-racialization as the same-as-white. According to Gilroy, modernity is "fragmented along axes constituted by racial conflict and [can] accommodate non-synchronous, heterocultural modes of social life in close proximity." If we examine modernity in relation to diaspora, as Gilroy does in *The Black Atlantic*, then we also see it "punctuated by the processes of acculturation and terror" (197) that come along with most diasporic movements of racialized subjects. The simultaneous existence of emancipatory and containment gestures in modernity points to the extent to which nostalgia for a coherent self is always marked by "unstable and asymmetrical" (Gilroy 198) relations. Many theorists of modernity, from Jurgen Habermas to Fredric Jameson, from Gilroy to Chow, have stressed the complex relations of modernity to time-consciousness. What Jameson calls "deep memory" (154) and Gilroy "a mnemonic function" draws attention to the recurring impulse of modernity, that is, the predilection to make things cohere by directing "the consciousness of [a] group back to significant, nodal points in its common history and social memory" (Gilroy 198). But this function of recollection also entails forgetfulness. This dialectic of forgetting and remembering is precisely what characterizes Chong's narrative. The ideological ambivalences in *The Concubine's Children* are not necessarily the same as the political and cultural incompatibilities diasporic subjects must come to terms with. For Chong, the dialectic of memory and forgetting, one of the tropes of

postethnicity produces Canada as a comfort zone, a site where modernity has already appropriated diaspora.

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