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Discussions of Diaspora: Cultural Production and Identity in Contemporary Chinese Canadian Literature

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Title:

Discussions of Diaspora: Cultural Production and Identity in Contemporary Chinese Canadian Literature

Abstract:

This thesis explores modes of cultural production and identity in three Chinese Canadian works of fiction: *Disappearing Moon Café*, *The End of East*, and *The Better Mother*. This research discusses the position of Chinese Canadian literature in relation to the institutional framework of Asian Canadian Studies. Within current academic circles, there exists varied discussions on the many aspects of Asian Canadians, this thesis seeks to explore the position of literature written by and about Chinese Canadians within the larger framework of Canadian literature and its representations of culture, identity and ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown's. More specifically, this research explores literary representations of Vancouver's Chinatown and its links to time, place, cultural identity and sense of family. In doing so, this research aims to add to current discussions of Chinese Canadian literature and theory, while attempting to situate the genre itself among the many other minority genres within Canadian literature.

Keywords:

Canadian Literature; Chinese Canadian; Diaspora; Cultural Identity; Asian North American Studies; Cultural Theory; Female Authors, Comparative Literature, Vancouver

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandparents – Wing Tung (Sam) and Fee Art Wong

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Discussing Diaspora: An Introduction

The late 1980s and 1990s were a time when anti-racist activism was growing in popularity, with demands from a variety of marginalized and neglected groups calling for recognition and redress from the federal government and society at large. These groups included a large number of Canadians with Asian heritage and ancestry. What started out as a movement for inclusion and acknowledgement quickly grew to artistic and theoretical movements alike. As a literary field, Asian Canadian has existed informally since the early 1980s. Authors and academics such as Roy Miki, Roy Kiyooka, SKY Lee, Fred Wah, Larissa Lai and Wayson Choy are examples of Asian Canadians who began writing and publishing throughout the 1980s (and continue to up to the present moment) as a way to claim a place for minority writers such as Asian Canadians within the Canadian Literature scene. Some of this work was creative, producing poetry, short stories, screenplays and other media; while another branch of more theoretical and critical work was also beginning to take shape within academic institutions, calling into question the positionality and very definition of what it meant to be 'Asian Canadian.' Much of the critical work on the topic of Asian Canadian would eventually shape the emerging academic field of Asian Canadian studies. Over the past thirty-five years or so, the study of Asian Canadians has emerged to cover not only the body of literary texts, but also the history of Asian immigration to Canada, Asian's living and working in Canada, as well as the institutional and governmental obstacles many of these groups had to overcome (the Chinese Head Tax and Immigration Act of 1923 for the

Chinese and the internment of Japanese Canadians by the federal government in 1941 for the Japanese). Furthermore, studies and discussions on transnationalism and the relationship of Asian diaspora's in Canada to those in the larger, global diaspora have begun to appear in academic fields.

Much of the literature written by Chinese Canadian authors since the emergence of the field of Asian Canadian literature has dealt with themes of isolation, racism, nostalgia, identity and reunification with family members. Many of these narratives grapple with the issue of the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, which restricted immigration from Asia by excluding any further immigrants from China, effectively separating men working as labourers in Canada from their families living in China. Historically, these families were only reunited (if at all) once restrictions on Chinese immigration were lifted in 1947. Having been separated for almost an entire generation, fractures and ruptures emerged within the recently reunited families, both in terms of personal and cultural identity as well as cultural values. In the non-linear, multi-protagonist narratives that are popular within Chinese Canadian literature, these differences in values and identities are often a main point of discussion.

With varied discussions on the many aspects of Asian Canadians, this thesis explores the position of literature written by and about Asian Canadians within the larger framework or umbrella of Canadian literature and its representations of culture, identity and ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown's. More specifically, this research explores literary representations of Vancouver's Chinatown and its links to time and place, cultural identity and sense of family. As part of this project, it is

important to keep in mind the position from where the authors are writing. That is, Roy Miki reminds us in his collection of essays, *Broken Entries: Race, Subjectivity, Writing*, where he questions the positionality of Asian Canadian writers, "In short, writers of colour, as minority writers in Canada cannot escape the basic questions about the writing act: for whom do you write? for the majority? or for the localized perspectives?" (118). These are but a few questions that guide my research and that I explore in further detail. Miki and perhaps his contemporary Larissa Lai are the foremost authorities on the topic of Asian Canadian authorship and its position within Canadian Literature studies at the moment. Other questions guiding this thesis include: How are ethnic and cultural enclaves such as Chinatown represented in (Asian) Canadian literature? How is cultural identity negotiated and represented in Asian Canadian narratives? What is the role of family and what are its connections to identity and Chinatown? What are the intersections and overlap of an Asian Canadian identity with other marginalized groups and identities such as the LGBT community and the aboriginal community?

The theoretical and scholarly sources this thesis draws from will be discussed shortly and in greater detail in the literature review. The literary texts that are discussed in depth also form the organizational basis of the thesis. The first chapter of the thesis analyzes the literary representation of Chinatown in SKY Lee's novel, *Disappearing Moon Café*. Drawing on theorists such as Lisa Lowe, this chapter explores how Lee's narrative disrupts accepted conventions of Chinatown as a cohesive and unified space and seeks to explore many of the class and gender differences within Chinatown's population. Furthermore, Lee's novel calls into

question the relationship at work between the Chinese and Aboriginal communities in and around Vancouver. The idea of race mixing during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also comes into question along with notions of incest due to the extremely limited Chinese population at the time.

The second chapter of this thesis explores Jen Sook Fong Lee's first novel, *The End of East* and how the novel contests Chinatown as a diasporic space while discussing how it develops over time and space. Initially represented as a place to segregate the Chinese population living in Vancouver, Chinatown in *The End of East* transforms as a space for return, and to reconcile one's personal identity. Lee's novel also goes to great lengths to explore familial relationships and their ties to cultural identity.

The third and final text examined is Jen Sook Fong Lee's second novel, *The Better Mother*, for its intersecting themes of cultural identity and sexual identity. While Chinatown is not the main point of discussion in this novel, the ruptures and intersections of family and culture are. Chinatown also acts as the backdrop for most of the novel and does play a key role in the narrative in terms of location and contested spaces. The focus of Lee's second novel is the discussion of marginalized people and places. Many of these groups intersect in the novel, as do the themes in characters themselves. The novel's two protagonists are a homosexual Chinese Canadian and his mother figure – a Caucasian burlesque dancer and stripper known for her routine at a Chinatown club. The narrative investigates the relationship between historically marginalized communities such as Chinatown, the LGBTQ community and the local burlesque scene. Lee works to bring these groups up from

the underground by discussing the ways in which they intersect, overlap and compete.

Literature Review

As a term associated with one's cultural identity, Asian Canadian has existed more or less since the late 1980s (Miki 94). Around this time, a body of literature began to emerge that would later be known as Asian Canadian literature. This body of literature, rich in its themes of movement, nostalgia and identity, many Asian Canadian authors explored non-linear, multi generational narratives in their novels. An academic field has since emerged, dedicated to preserving and analyzing all facets of Asian Canadian culture from: early migrations and the establishment of communities such as Chinatown and Japantown; historical consequences such as the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War and the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923 (banning further Chinese Immigration to Canada) within Asian Canadian communities; and the body of literature and poetry that has emerged. I will review sources that discuss Chinese Canadian identity and address issues of the Chinese diaspora in Canada. More specifically, I am interested in exploring the parameters of Chinese Canadian literature and what constitutes Chinese Canadian literature.

Roy Miki's collection of essays, *In Flux: Transnational Shifts in Asian Canadian Writing* (2011), investigates shifting currents, cultural practices, globalization and citizenship in Canada and how these relate to Asian Canadians and Canada's body of

national literature. More specifically, Miki explores the relationship between and indeed the intersection of Asian Canadian writing and literature, Canadian literature and theories of post-colonialism. In his chapter, "Can Asian Adian: Reading some signs of Asian Canadian," Miki provides close readings of three canonical texts by Asian Canadian writers: *Chorus of Mushrooms* by Hiromi Goto; *The Concubine's Children* by Denise Chong; and finally, *Diamond Grill* by Fred Wah, and identifies many of the issues discussed in the majority of Asian Canadian writing. In this chapter, Miki draws on Judith Butler's domain of "the sayable" from her book, *Excitable Speech*, in order to clarify Asian Canadian studies as a legitimate academic field. According to Miki, Asian Canadian studies, "functions as a process through which an entity such as Asian Canadian takes on a social and cultural identity and accrues value as a discursive category, in other words, a sphere of knowledge" (Miki 92-93). Miki is quick to point out, however, that, "The danger resides in the conclusion that such an identity has a stable point of reference and is not the outcome of the constitutive process and thus a representation that is always subject to change and negotiation" (Miki 93). That is, the very definition of Asian Canadian (and thus its body of literature and corresponding academic field) is constantly in flux, never stable, and constantly subject to negotiation.

Larissa Lai's 2014 book, *Slanting I, Imagining We: Asian Canadian Literary Production in the 1980s and 1990s* contextualizes the history of Asian Canadian literature and provides an in depth analysis into the ruptures and schisms within the term itself. In her book Lai argues that the term "Asian Canadian" can be produced in different ways but always in relation to another term. Here, Lai argues

that Asian Canadian is most often produced in relation (and retaliation) to whiteness, although terms such as: queerness, feminism, indigeneity, African American and Asian American are also possible. It is possible for these terms to intersect, overlap and indeed develop alongside one another, although Lai provides examples of how these terms may at times also contradict one another and compete with each other for power and dominance. For this reason, Lai sees “Asian Canadian” as a ruptured and unstable concept.

Trans.Can.Lit: Resituating the Study of Canadian Literature (2007) is an anthology of essays that explores the shifting theoretical framework of Canadian literary studies. Having become a research specialization in universities around the mid to late 1960s, Canadian literature has seen dramatic shifts in its theoretical debates, due in part to the rise of diasporic and immigrant literatures and theories being included within the scope of Canadian literature rather than outside it. Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism in the 1970s also had significant impact on the way Canadian literature was read and defined. A shifting social and political landscape meant that Canada’s body of national literature was also developing and transforming. Part of this transformation, as many of the authors in this anthology argue, included a new space for diasporic or immigrant literatures such as Chinese Canadian writing.

In terms of historical background of the Chinese community in Canada and Vancouver’s Chinatown, Wing Chung Ng provides a comprehensive examination of the Chinese community in Vancouver throughout the second half of the twentieth century in his book, *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-80: The Pursuit of Identity and*

Power (1999). Ng takes focus particularly on the wave of immigration during the post-war period, a group whom he calls the *tusheng* (it is worth noting that the term *tusheng* may also refer to locally born Chinese, so they are not strictly speaking immigrants), and examines the culture clash they faced both with the Anglo-Canadian population upon arriving in Vancouver as well as the older generation of Chinese immigrants and the Chinatown community. Although Ng's research on the history of the Chinese in Vancouver falls short in terms of making any commentary on the fields of Chinese Canadian literature or theory that was emerging within the timeframe of his research. Ng's work though, is nonetheless useful in constructing a historical timeline for this project as well as providing historical context for the relevance of such a thesis.

Kay J. Anderson's historical analysis of Vancouver's Chinatown in her book, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (1991) also provides an historical context of Vancouver's Chinatown and its community from 1875-1980. Anderson takes her analysis of the Chinese community's relations with Anglo-Canadian society a bit further than Ng (in part due to her longer time scope) and provides commentary on social and cultural history of Chinatown. Anderson also notes how Chinatown, originally meant to contain and isolate Chinese migrant workers in Canada during the late nineteenth century has transformed into a place known more as an "ethnic neighbourhood."

Perhaps the only field research dedicated to the stories of Chinese Canadian women at this time is Vivienne Poy's book, *Passage to Promise Land: Voices of Chinese Immigrant Women to Canada* (2013). An extension of her doctoral work,

Poy's book traces women's immigration from China to Canada. Due to legislative restrictions on Chinese immigration to Canada throughout the first half of the twentieth century, not as many women successfully immigrated to Canada as men and boys. Poy's research then, is a welcome insight into an often-neglected aspect of Chinese Canadian history. Poy's research spans many generations of female immigration to Canada – her interviewees arrived in Canada anywhere from the 1940s until the early 1990s; her subjects immigrated for a number of reasons and they come from various social, class and educational backgrounds. In other words, Poy has a varied and wide-ranging research group, making sure to represent the various immigrant experiences in Canada from international student, businesswoman and housewife. What Poy's research falls short of though, is a discussion of the consequences or unsuccessful immigrations to Canada. All of the women she interviewed have led successful even if quiet lives in Canada. Her research does not investigate any of the women who chose to return to China or immigrate elsewhere upon an unsuccessful stay in Canada. Nor does she shed light on Chinese refugee women. That is, all of the women interviewed in her book were immigrants- they came to Canada by choice for a number of reasons and voluntarily left China at different points in their lives. While her research certainly gives a voice to an otherwise neglected and often ignored part of Chinese Canadian history, it is a very specific group of women she is giving a voice to – those who succeeded in Canada.

In terms of literary analysis of Chinese Canadian writing written by women, Bennett Yu-Hsiang Fu provides a useful analysis of women's subjectivity and textual

production in his book, *Transgressive Transcripts: Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Chinese Canadian Women's Writing*. While Poy sets to work to interview Chinese immigrant women and shed light on their successes in Canada, Fu provides an analysis of literary works written by (and mostly about) Chinese Canadian women. Fu's book analyzes four contemporary female Asian Canadian writers, which also serves as the organizational structure for the main chapters. Of particular importance to this thesis is the first chapter, "Spatial Transcript: SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*," where the author analyzes Lee's narrative structure and its four female protagonists. Fu goes on to present his argument for the way in which the performance of female bodies is correlated to the space in which they are performing. That is, within the context of Lee's novel, Fu maintains that the four female protagonists represent hyphenated and diasporic spaces they are living within, mainly Vancouver's Chinatown. Fu's research brings together scholarly fields of feminist theory, gender and sexuality studies, and Asian North American studies. *Transgressive Transcripts* is worth careful consideration especially as it relates to the analysis of textual production of female voices within Chinese Canadian literature. One of the few projects dedicated entirely to female authorship and female literary voices, Fu's project sheds light on an emerging research topic within Asian Canadian literature by turning to the intersectionality of feminist theory, gender studies and Asian Canadian literature.

While discussing the history of the Chinese in Canada, it would be extremely difficult to do so without first looking at a brief (social) history of China and the reasons for such a migration to Canada. It is also worth looking at the global Chinese

diaspora in order to gain a better understanding of the current diaspora within Canada and Vancouver. The anthology, *Diasporic Chineseness After the Rise of China: Communities and Cultural Production* (2013), edited by Julia Kuehn, Kam Louie, and David M. Pomfret, provides insight into the global Chinese diaspora as well as a Chinese identity, or 'Chineseness.' The book challenges one single or global Chinese identity and argues for a multiplicity of identities based on where in the diaspora one is from; social, class, gender, generational and educational circumstances. Much like the Chinese Canadian identity, the anthology argues that Chineseness is also an identity in flux and never stagnant.

Likewise, Lisa Lowe argues for a fluid cultural identity for Asians living in the American diaspora in her chapter, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian-American Difference" from the anthology, *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* (2008). Lowe presents "vertical" and "horizontal" axis in determining one's cultural representation and cultural identity. Rather than seeing cultural identity as fixed to one's generation or place of birth (the vertical axis), Lowe argues for a more fluid take on cultural representation, one that acknowledges gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, class and education. This is particularly relevant in the case of Chinese immigration to Canada throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and modes of cultural production. With more waves of Asian immigration to Vancouver, and new generations of Chinese Canadians, factors such as: ethnicity, gender, class and educational background become increasingly important factors in shaping one's cultural identity. Cultural identity as it relates to Chinese Canadians,

then, is not so much about broad categories and identity markers, but rather individual modes of cultural production.

As it relates to the intersection of queer theory and Asian diasporic identity, David L. Eng provides a detailed analysis of masculinity within the context of the Asian American diaspora in his book, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*. Relying heavily on psychoanalysis to further his arguments, Eng's research brings together the fields of Asian American studies and Queer theory in order to explore notions of masculinity and how both race and gender are interpreted within the Asian American diaspora. Here, his book argues that sexuality, race, and masculinity are all necessarily intertwined. That is, none of them are mutually exclusive as it relates to the Asian American (male) body. While Eng's work is absolutely necessary in terms of discussing the roles of gender and sexuality within a diasporic community, his research does fall short of extending itself to the Asian Canadian diasporic model. Although Eng's work is grounded firmly within the context of Asian American examples, his research is nonetheless valuable when exploring Chinese Canadian literary texts such as Jen Sook Fong Lee's, *The Better Mother*. Eng's analysis of sexuality and race as mutually constitutive and inherently intersected within an Asian diaspora provides a useful jumping off point from which to explore Lee's, *The Better Mother*.

These sources are valuable when exploring themes of cultural production, history of time and place and the field of Chinese Canadian studies. All of these themes and issues are represented in literary works such as SKY Lee's fictional narrative, *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990). While the critical works form the basis of

my research, novels such as Lee's form the basis of my analysis. Lee's novel uses a multi-protagonist and multi-generational narrative to demonstrate consequences of immigration as well as to disrupt notions of what Chinatown is as an ethnic enclave. Furthermore, Lee's novel explores how different generations each explore themes of race, culture, love and isolation within (but sometimes outside) the limits of Vancouver's Chinatown. Lee incorporates historical events such as the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923 to further demonstrate the effects legislation had on everyday Chinese Canadians. By writing a multi-generational narrative, Lee harkens to both Miki's point of an Asian Canadian cultural identity as constantly in negotiation while simultaneously demonstrating Lowe's axis of cultural production in action. Furthermore, Lee focuses primarily on the lives of women. That is, the protagonists are female while their male family members play secondary or tertiary roles in the narrative. For these reasons, I include Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* as a text for analysis.

Also using a multi-generational narrative with a female protagonist, Jen Sook Fong Lee's novel, *The End of East* (2007), explores the lingering effects and consequences of immigration and movement. Here, however, Chinatown is a place to come back to rather than a place to get away from as it is in the former Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*. There are many similarities between the two novels such as their use of multi-generational protagonists and the backdrop of Vancouver's Chinatown. Both novels implore family ties and secrets in order to come to terms with each generation's cultural identity. I include Jen Sook Fong Lee's *The End of East* not necessarily to be compared or contrasted with SKY Lee's *Disappearing*

Moon Café, but rather to read alongside it. To compare and contrast the two narratives would be an injustice to both works as they are both a rich source of discussing one's cultural identity.

Finally, I turn to Jen Sook Fong Lee's 2011 novel, *The Better Mother*. While also using a multi-generational narrative, *The Better Mother* goes further in its exploration of identity and cultural production, especially as it relates to those on the peripheries of culture and society. The novel's protagonist, Danny, is a gay Chinese Canadian living outside Chinatown during the city's AIDS epidemic in the mid-1980s. Danny is faced with having to negotiate his identity as a gay man in the 1980s with that of his status as a Chinese Canadian in Vancouver. *The Better Mother* works to disrupt notions of cultural identity being associated simply with race or ethnicity. Rather, with the addition of sexual orientation to the protagonist's identity, Jen Sook Fong Lee pushes the reader to think past accepted cultural norms while still calling into question family secrets and dynamics.

It is the combination of literary fiction and scholarly works that form the foundation of my thesis. As has been discussed in this literature review, research has been done on life in Vancouver's Chinatown throughout the late nineteenth to early twenty-first centuries, and much has been discussed in terms of one's cultural identity. Works of fiction also exist that explore themes of migration and familial consequences within the context of the Chinese Canadian experience. What remains to be studied, however, is the relationship between this literature and the existing body of research on Chinese Canadian cultural identity. This thesis, then, intends to explore the relationship between literary works of fiction and Chinese Canadian

identity. Further questions guiding this research than previously mentioned include: What makes a literary work Chinese Canadian? In a growing and globalizing world, how is Chinese Canadian defined? How has a genre such as Chinese Canadian literature emerged beyond the scope of Canadian literature? Is Chinese Canadian writing still Canadian literature?

Chinese-and-or-Canadian, SKY Lee's, *Disappearing Moon Café*

SKY Lee's 1991 novel, *Disappearing Moon Café* does much more than trace the lives of four generations of a Chinese-Canadian family, rather, Lee's novel highlights the many ways in which culture and identity are inextricably intertwined. *Disappearing Moon Café* is also an example of how a literary work of fiction may discuss and even disrupt accepted notions of enclaves such as Chinatown. A community within a community, Chinatown's may be misinterpreted as cohesive and unified neighborhoods with its members protecting one another from the harsh realities of exclusion and isolation. Lee's narrative, however, reveals the many ways in which Chinatown works as a fractured and broken society, with a social and cultural disconnect between the older generation of bachelor society immigrants and the newer generations of locally born Chinese Canadians, the new waves of Chinese immigrants to Canada. It is not just generational differences that emerge among the Chinese population however; class, gender, educational and racial differences begin to emerge among the characters in Lee's novel. By dividing her characters along both generational and class lines, Lee ultimately demonstrates the diversity and difference within the borders of Vancouver's Chinatown. Furthermore, Lee's use of female protagonists further disrupts the gendered and sexualized differences among Chinatown's population. By emphasizing the lives and stories of female family members living and working within Chinatown, Lee discusses the varied social, class, cultural, and generational differences within Vancouver Chinatown's population.

Horizontal Axis of Culture

I turn now to Lisa Lowe's essay, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian-American Differences," to demonstrate some of the problematic features of a fixed cultural identity, or more specifically, the Asian-North-American identity. In her essay, Lowe evokes terms such as hybridity and multiplicity to suggest that a given diasporic group should not necessarily be thought of as a collective whole (135). Rather, as Lowe argues, distinctions exist along class, gender, cultural, and sexual lines that do not always intersect within the given community. In her examples, Lowe refers mainly to the Asian-American or Chinese-American experience, but in this instance, Lowe's ideas may extend to an Asian-Canadian or an even broader Asian-North-American experience. While there certainly exist many historical differences between the Chinese Canadian and Chinese-American communities, and it is not the intent of the author to simply lump the two groups into one category for the sake of ease, there are also many shared experiences between these two distinct groups such as issues of hybridity and multiplicity within one's own cultural group. For this reason, I wish to extend Lowe's examples to the Asian-Canadian diasporic experience.

Lowe states that by interpreting Asian-American culture exclusively in terms of the master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation actually, "essentializes Asian-American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians" (135).

This is to say by considering Asian diasporic culture in terms of family and generational terms, we ignore subtle differences within these categories such as gendered experience, class distinctions and in some cases religious diversity among families. As we will come to see, many of the characters in SKY Lee's novel demonstrate the degree to which members of the same family differ in terms of education, class, cultural identity and social distinction.

Lowe goes on to assert that, "The reduction of cultural politics of racialized ethnic groups, like Asian-Americans, to first-generation/second-generation struggles displaces social differences into a privatized familial opposition" (135). And that, "Such reductions contribute to the aestheticizing commodification of Asian-American *Cultural* differences, while denying the immigrant histories of material exclusion and differentiation..." (Lowe 135, Lowe's italics). To deny histories of exclusion, then, is merely an attempt to combine a heterogeneous group such as the Asian-American or even Chinese-Canadian diaspora into a homogenous category of people, culture and space. Within the heterogeneous group, then, there must exist different categories of cultural identity and distinct modes of production. Rather than using a simple generational and linear timeline to distinguish differences among a diaspora, static and non-linear markers are needed to acknowledge these emerging modes of production.

Lowe goes on in her essay to present her argument of 'vertical' and 'horizontal' modes of cultural representation. That is, the 'vertical mode' of cultural representation consists of the traditional generational differences between the immigrant parents, first-generation children and subsequent second- and third-

generation children. This mode would incorporate a linear-generational timeline. The 'horizontal mode' consists of the cultural, class, gender, sexual, and racialized-ethnic differences among Asian-Americans, and for the sake of this thesis, the Asian-North-American diaspora.

Much of what Lowe discusses throughout her essay is particularly present in SKY Lee's novel, *Disappearing Moon Café*. Although Lee employs a multi-generational narrative that uses multiple protagonists, akin to Lowe's 'vertical mode' of inter-generational struggles and misunderstandings, Lowe's 'horizontal mode' of cultural representation is also present throughout *Disappearing Moon Café*, especially as it relates to class and gender. The family restaurant and titled café is run by the prominent Wong family in Vancouver's Chinatown. Set throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, class differences among the Chinese minority in Vancouver are particularly prominent in the scenes that take place in the early twentieth century. Lee sets up a class binary by having the white-collar business family – the Wong's – run a restaurant in the heart of Chinatown. The restaurant employs various Chinese-born men and boys from around Chinatown creating a class distinction within an already gendered and racialized space. The only exception to the gendered space of the restaurant is the female waitress, Song Ang, who ultimately remains poor and underprivileged throughout the novel.

As a character, Song Ang is described as a, "pitiful thing – just a sore bag who didn't seem to have enough gumption or sagacity to manipulate a better life for herself" (92). Initially working as extra help for the Wong family, sweeping the

floors of the restaurant kitchen, Song Ang is eventually promoted to waitress; a job described as:

more money, with tips, although she must have realized that in this sexually suspicious street of village-bred men, a waitress meant no better than a prostitute. A lone woman serving tables of dirty-minded men who righteously looked down upon her was an ironic twist for a descendant of the Hakka people who, no matter how poor, never sold their girls into prostitution or slavery (94).

The irony is further extended when Song Ang becomes what can only be called a prostitute for the Café owner's son, Choy Fuk. Furthermore, there is a sharp cultural distinction made among the Chinese people living in Vancouver's Chinatown – the waitress, a descendent from the Hakka people and the 'village-bred men' most likely Han descendants. The Hakka (often translated as 'guest families' in Chinese), are a subgroup of the larger Han Chinese ethnicity. The waitress' distinction as a Hakka Chinese (and not Han Chinese) is worth noting since the men in Chinatown looked down on her not only for her occupation as a waitress, but also her ties to a subgroup of their own Han ethnicity. While many of the men in Chinatown looked down at Song Ang for her status as a waitress/prostitute and a Hakka person, it was historically the Hakka people that never sold their women into slavery or other dubious forms of employment.

Since Choy Fuk is unable to conceive a child, more specifically a male heir with his own wife, his manipulative mother, Mui Lan, devises a plot to have her son impregnate the waitress in secret and raise the resulting child as if it were a legitimate offspring, "there are no chinese women who are suitable for marriage... What few there are, are no good; but perhaps with the right connections and a sizeable sum of money, we can pay off a clean enough woman to have a child for

us...And no one but the four of us will be the wiser!" (Lee 83). Although a manipulative and unconventional ploy, Mui Lan's logic for hiring someone to ensure that the Wong bloodline continues with a male heir in Canada is not exactly unrealistic in terms of historical context. By 1924 (when this portion of the story takes place) the Chinese Immigration Act had already been in effect for a year, banning immigration from China to Canada (except under extremely special circumstances). With Fong Mei unable to conceive a child, the only other option for the Wong family to secure their bloodline would have been through a woman who was already in the country. Thus, Song Ang becomes an acceptable and indeed, desirable option for the Wong's. Furthermore, Song Ang's status as employee at the restaurant reaffirms the social and class distinctions between her and the Wong family. Mui Lan is careful not to disrupt this employer-employee relationship as any child born to Song Ang would be raised by Fong Mei and Choy Fuk as their own, thus avoiding any potential for Song Ang's status to be elevated to a mother or matron of any kind.

The following description of Song Ang and the logic behind such a dysfunctional scheme speaks perfectly to notions of class differences and hierarchical standards within a diasporic community, "To Mui Lan, the waitress must have been of course the perfect choice; she was 'clean enough' and cheap and easily available. More importantly, the woman would keep her mouth shut" (Lee 93). Lee's use of scare quotes alluding to the idea that the waitress could for some reason have been hygienically or morally unclean lend themselves further to perceived class distinctions within the Vancouver Chinatown community. The fact

that she was cheap would mean she was available for hire and thus, under control of the prominent Wong family (she was already legitimately working for them in their restaurant). A bit later in the story, we are given more information as to why this waitress was actually wanted for such a dysfunctional job, “Fong Mei found out that she had come over on the same boat with Mui Lan and Choy Fuk, thirteen years ago. And Mui Lan had helped her out a lot. No wonder Mui Lan trusted her so much; she must have thought that the waitress owed her something!” (Lee 93). Debt and kinship are incited here in order to highlight hierarchical and social standing within the family as well as their restaurant. Inciting more than just familial ties and kinship networks though, Lee subverts standard notions of diaspora and cultural identity by noting class distinctions within the Chinese-Canadian community as well as highlighting gendered experiences and the exploitation of the café’s destitute female employee. That is, although the characters originate from the same country and most likely the same geographical region in China – even arriving in Canada at the same time and on the same boat - they are not altogether social equals or even identify with the same class distinction upon arriving in Canada. This further alludes to there being distinct differences among the Chinese population living in (and immigrating from) China. That these characters would be on the same boat when coming to Canada is worth noting – Mui Lan and Choi Fuk are on their way to being reunited with their husband and father, while Song Ang has been sent alone and without any family waiting for her in Canada. In this instance, it is not so much wealth, class or kinship that allows for a successful passage to Canada, but rather successful networking and opportunity to purchase passage on one of the boats. As

a single female, Song Ang would be particularly vulnerable on the boat and once in Canada (regardless of her class). By having Song Ang depend on the support of Mui Lan and her family's resources, Lee demonstrates a multiplicity within the Chinese diaspora itself, namely that it is resourcefulness and not merely class or wealth that depend on one's transcultural success.

Mui Lan's plan is eventually put into action, although its effectiveness is up for debate – Song Ang eventually gives birth to a boy, Keeman, but it is unclear who the boy's biological father is due to the waitresses simultaneous relationship with a Chinese philanderer, known only as Woo. Furthermore, it took much longer than originally planned for Song Ang to become pregnant. What Song Ang and Choy Fuk's relationship does demonstrate, though, is the strength of Chinatown's population and society to both take one in and also push one out. Having originally been a secret affair, to spare the Wong's their reputation, the secrecy is sacrificed with Choy Fuk's constant bragging, "He did not notice the contempt of others swarming over him like mosquitos. The waitress noticed immediately, and she retreated out of Chinatown, out of their target range, not only for herself but also in the hope of saving Mui Lan from embarrassment" (139). The embarrassment Song Ang retreats from is that which stems from the ridiculous plot of attempting to conceive a grandson through the waitress. The contempt for Choy Fuk stems not only for his bragging about having a wife and a mistress, but rather the fact that his entire family resides in Vancouver while the rest of the community, very much a bachelor community, remains fractured and somewhat mutilated with the men living in Canada and their wives and children back in China, unable to reunite in Canada due

to the Chinese Immigration Act. With his bragging comes contempt from his friends and the larger community. When enough time has passed and the waitress has not conceived a child, this contempt turns to ridicule and Choy Fuk and the Wong family become somewhat of a laughing stock in their small community, "This whole affair was after all his mother's idea. When she had first approached him, he couldn't believe his good fortune – a wife and a whore! However, now that he was fast on his way to becoming the biggest laugh in Chinatown..." (Lee 135). Choy Fuk's fall from grace in Chinatown is somewhat his own doing. It is, after all, his own bragging that reveals what was really happening within the Wong family, "But once Choy Fuk dropped a few too many innuendos, he had set himself up for others to speculate upon. Then, of course, the mystery was easily unraveled; Choy Fuk enjoyed his notoriety too much to stop swaggering" (139). Song Ang voluntarily withdraws from the grasps of Chinatown before the gossip and speculation of their affair could go too far, but it is not until he has actually become a spectacle in Chinatown that Choy Fuk realizes the social structures of Chinatown and the power associated with it. It is the waitress, a supposedly uneducated and lowly woman that is the first to realize and acknowledge why the plan backfired, as she explains to her lover, "You shouldn't have opened your mouth in Chinatown... You've made things difficult for me, yourself, and especially your mother. I hope she never finds out why I really left. No matter what, Mui Lan's always been good to me" (138). Song Ang is able to save most of her reputation through voluntary exile from Chinatown. Her reputation, though, is contingent on her leaving and thus demonstrates the fickle nature of a close-knit community. On the one hand, the extramarital affairs of one of

Chinatown's most prominent family's is tolerated out of respect for their position in the community. Upon abuse of that position and Choy Fuk's constant bragging, however, the community reduces him and his family to nothing more than a laughing stock while the waitress is able to somewhat maintain her reputation as a working-class woman. The pre-arranged affair between Song Ang and Choy Fuk, along with its aftermath, is akin to Lowe's point of horizontal modes of culture. That is, Choy Fuk and Song Ang are separated by social class and position within Chinatown's society, this may change and status may be revoked as it was for Choy Fuk (and by extension his family).

Lee's use of Aboriginal characters is also effective in demonstrating racialized-ethnic divides within modes of cultural production. Kelora Chen is an interesting character in that she has an Aboriginal mother and a Chinese father. She is only mentioned a few times throughout the novel and all we know about her is that she had a liaison with the Wong family's Patriarch, Gwei Chang, at the beginning of the novel while he is working as a bone collector – collecting the bones of the deceased Chinese migrant labourers and sending them back to China for proper burial rites – on the railway of the West Coast. Later on, we find out that the patriarch, Wong Gwei Chang, abandons Kelora to return to China to marry a proper Chinese woman, Mui Lan (the aforementioned manipulative mother), only to return to Vancouver and open the Disappearing Moon Café in Chinatown. Although he never sees Kelora again, she remains a haunting memory for Gwei Chang. The liaison, however, does produce a son, Ting An, who is also of mixed racial and cultural background. While he is only ever referred to as 'the orphan' it is implicitly

stated throughout the narrative that he is actually the son of Gwei Chang and thus half-brother to Choy Fuk. Only towards the end of the novel, when Ting An confronts the family Patriarch (and his biological father) is there any acknowledgement of Ting An's mixed ancestry. By incorporating characters of racially and culturally mixed lineage into the narrative, characters such as Kelora and her son Ting An (and Ting An's Chinese-Aboriginal-French-Canadian son, Morgan), serve to further complicate already complex modes of cultural production and transculturalism. They are, at the same time, aboriginal, settler and migrant and serve as hybrid objects without a single or concise identity. These characters further serve to disrupt notions of cultural identity due to their racial mixing and dubious lineages. In other words, characters such as Kelora and Ting An remain on the peripheries of cultural identity, unacknowledged by either sides of their families. Ting An's status as orphan further propels his identity into the periphery as no facet of his identity is recognized or even acknowledged until the end of the narrative. Add to this the (potential) elements of incest within the Wong family cultural identity, its validity and authenticity are further disrupted within an ethnic and racialized division.

Lee's use of incest is worth briefly discussing, especially as it relates to the demands to secure the Wong family bloodline. Unsatisfied with her marriage to Choy Fuk, Fong Mei begins an affair with her husband's half-brother, Ting An (the orphan). As one critic explains, Ting An is positioned within the incestuous plotline: "their illegitimate son, Ting An, also transgresses against the norm by begetting 'impure' offspring with a French Canadian woman and with Fong Mei, who cannot produce legitimate descendants with the infertile Wong Choy Fuk" (Fu 40).

Elements of incest are brought into the narrative as paternity of the next generation remains unclear throughout most of the novel – Fong Mei’s three children (Beatrice, John and Suzie) could have been fathered by Ting An or Choy Fuk (the family chart at the beginning of the novel states Ting An fathered all three children).

Furthermore, Song Ang’s son, Keeman, could have been fathered by either Choy Fuk or the philanderer known as Woo. Elements of incest are further complicated when Beatrice and Keeman begin a relationship (although they are not related, the potential was there for them to have both been fathered by Choy Fuk). The relationship between Beatrice’s sister, Suzie, and Ting An’s legitimate son, Morgan, is however, incestuous. Both Morgan and Suzie were fathered by Ting An, and their child – who dies shortly after birth – is the product of that incestuous relationship. Ting An’s wife (and Morgan’s mother), a French-Canadian woman, further disrupts and challenges the racial tensions within the novel. Already a of mixed Chinese-Aboriginal ancestry, Ting An further dilutes the coveted Wong family bloodline by introducing a French-Canadian woman into the bloodline. The resulting offspring, Morgan, who is Chinese-Aboriginal-French-Canadian, is thus symbolic of the interracial relationships throughout the narrative. Bennet Fu describes Ting An’s relationship with a French-Canadian woman as, “The metaphorical contamination [that] spreads to the collective bodies of the intricate Chinese-Caucasian, Chinese-Chinese, and Chinese-Indian relationships. In early Vancouver’s colonial discourse, an interracial relationship, especially between a Chinese man and a white woman, was seen as the most threatening violation of all” (Fu 40). Here, Fu sheds light not only on the complicated nature of the Wong family bloodline and its racial mixing,

but rather, he brings the idea of miscegenation and larger themes of racial hierarchy and post-colonial racial discourse to the forefront of discussion. It is not just about keeping a family bloodline pure and uncontaminated, but rather about the social repercussions and consequences racial mixing presents in early twentieth century Canada. Add to that, the narrative elements of incest, and ideas of lineage and family history become even more murky and complicated. What Fu describes as the 'metaphorical contamination' of inter-racial relationships comes through in both the inter-racial and incestuous relationships in *Disappearing Moon Café*. In other words, relationships between a Chinese man and an Aboriginal woman (Gwok Fai and Shi'atko; Gwei Chang and Kelora Chen), or a Chinese man and a white woman (Ting An and the French Canadian woman) pose a threat to the social order and racial hierarchy of 1920s Vancouver. Perhaps it is not so much the initial inter-racial relationship that poses the greatest threat, but rather, the resulting offspring – in this case, Ting An and Morgan. Both characters are the result of racial-mixing and occupy liminal racial and cultural places. Neither character fits into one single racial or cultural category; nor can they belong to an established bloodline due to their mixed lineage. In the end, the Wong bloodline is made even murkier by both the incestual relationships as well as the racial and cultural mixing of Gwei Chang and Ting An's relationships.

Transculturalism is a fitting notion to address when it comes to Lee's characters. Donald Cuccioletta describes transculturalism as, "the synthesis of two phases [or cultures] occurring simultaneously. This reinventing of new common culture is therefore based on the meeting and intermingling of different peoples and

cultures. In other words, one's identity is not singular but multiple" (8). By this description, then, it is the racialized ethnic characters in Lee's novel, specifically those identifying with multiple racial and cultural backgrounds that serve the very definition of transculturalism. Kelora and Ting An are the more obvious characters in terms of a transcultural identity, but this may also extend to the entire Wong family. Having been transplanted from China to Vancouver, each character possesses the synthesis of two cultures coming together. They are simultaneously Chinese and Canadian, yet not quite Chinese-Canadian as the next generation will be. Mui Lan arguably invents new culture codes to provide her son with the opportunity to produce a son through circumstances which would be unconventional to both Chinese and Canadian cultural codes. It is also the coming together of different class, gender, racial and educational backgrounds within a community that allows for a transnational identity to emerge. After all, as Lee has demonstrated, the Chinatown community in her narrative is comprised of a spectrum of social class, educational background and gender differences.

Generational Identity

With the repeal of the Chinese Immigration Act in 1947, ending institutional exclusion of Chinese immigration to Canada, many from the bachelor societies of Canadian Chinatown's were able to bring families and relatives over to Canada. As such, there was a new generation of Chinese immigrants along with an emerging generation of Canadian-born ethnic Chinese children. In his book, *The Chinese in*

Vancouver, 1945-1980, Wing Chung Ng discusses the concept of the *tusheng*, a group of immigrants and locally born Chinese children that emerged during the post-Second-World-War years. These children shared familial and kinship ties, but would eventually come to be distant from their immigrant parents who maintained networks and other ties to the homeland. *Disappearing Moon Café* provides compelling insight into generational differences in terms of identity and culture. Each generation is distinct not only across its class and social lines, but also its cultural lines. This may be seen perhaps most obviously in Fong Mei's relationship with her daughter, Beatrice. Fong Mei is, of course, the legitimate wife of Choy Fuk. Beatrice is their daughter, although her parentage is also called into question with Fong Mei's longstanding affair with her husband's illegitimate half-brother, Ting An. Regardless of paternity, Fong Mei's relationship with her daughter is at best stressed. Having immigrated to Canada as a bride for Choy Fuk, Fong Mei leads a lonely and isolated life as one of the very few Chinese women in Chinatown, while only a generation later, her daughter grows up with several children around her age, "One generation between mother and daughter and already how far apart their goals and sentiments. They shared a common experience, but while Fong Mei hated this country, which had done nothing but disqualify her, Beatrice had grown up thoroughly small-town canadian" (Lee 220). Here, the disconnect between mother and daughter is as much cultural as it is generational. As a locally born Chinese having grown up in Chinatown, Beatrice represents what Ng calls "the *tusheng* generation" in so much that the only Chinese people she necessarily shares networks with are her parents. Beatrice's own networks of friends and allies were

other locally born Chinese-Canadians. Add to this a generational gap between mother and daughter and a larger disconnect emerges creating a completely new cultural identity altogether for the younger generation. Part of this generational disconnect arose out of the older generation's emphasis on retaining the old values and traditions from China even after being in Canada for so long. As Ng asserts, "It was said that by holding on to this culture of their homeland, ethnic Chinese could overcome the problem of foreign residence and maintain cultural authenticity" (Ng 89). For Fong Mei, then, Canada would always be a foreign residence and never a home, and she would need to maintain cultural authenticity, whereas for Beatrice, Chinatown's society was cultural authenticity. Beatrice in effect did not need to hold ties to China, as she had no direct ties to it in the first place. The cultural authenticity Ng mentions, is of course challenged by the emerging and growing generation of post-war immigrants and Canadian-born Chinese children. The cultural authenticity that is being challenged by the younger generation could be anything to the older generations' emphasis on kinship and clanship networks to Confucian thought or patriarchal authority (Ng 89). With a new generation of Chinese Canadians also came a shifting view of the Chinese in Canada altogether. That is, after acknowledging the efforts of Chinese Canadians to the military throughout the Second World War, the position of Canadian society began to soften to one of tolerance rather than the previous one of exclusion and isolation. Lee demonstrates this idea in her narrative as Keeman returns from war and comes straight back to Chinatown. With these changes in attitude, however, came changes in cultural identity and values. As Ng reminds us, "...it evolved in full view of the older settlers

and the new immigrants through interacting with their respective cultural assumptions and propositions. Their criticisms of one another, rejoinders and counterattacks were landmarks in the cultural trajectory of *tusheng* identity” (Ng 51). Keeman and Beatrice’s generation also demonstrates the shifting nature of Chinatown. Once a space to contain and even quarantine the Chinese population in large cities across Canada, Chinatown, more specifically Vancouver’s Chinatown, has become a place of comfort and safety for many of the *tusheng* generation. As the narrator states about Beatrice, “You can take the girl out of Chinatown, but you can’t take the Chinatown out of the girl” (Lee 221). Indeed while her mother felt isolated within the limits of Chinatown and rejected by its society, Beatrice forms her cultural identity within its limits, harkening back to Lowe’s point of cultural production and identity dependent on more than just generation, but also class, race, and gendered differences.

Perhaps the disconnect from society outside of Chinatown for characters such as Keeman and Beatrice was indeed in part due to the racial prejudices still intact at the time. Although softened since the end of the Second World War, many Chinese Canadians (especially those dwelling within Chinatown) were still looked upon with suspicion from outsiders, “Racial prejudice helped disconnect Beatrice from the larger community outside of Chinatown... Everyone had a hand at drawing circles around Beatrice and telling her to stay in” (Lee 221). It is not only the desire to stay within the Chinatown community that came from the prejudice of outsiders, but also for protection against one’s own family. The potential incestuous relationship’s between Beatrice’s and Keeman’s families further drives their need

for loyalty and protection toward one another, “Friends growing up in Chinatown were allies, necessary for survival; for those times they ventured out of ‘their place,’ and came back fractured. They nursed each other, offered each other protection; their comminuted humiliation not easily forgotten...” (221). Here, Keeman and Beatrice’s racial differences of growing up Chinese in Canada keep them within their small circle of Chinatown friends. Generational differences between them and their parents’ generation also creates a further separation from within Chinatown society. That is, although characters such as Keeman and Beatrice protect themselves within the borders of Chinatown, they are not without tension and disconnect from the older generations of Chinatown’s society.

Discussing the differences among the *tusheng* and the older generation, Ng makes one more point that I wish to draw upon, “...for their part, the newcomers were not thrilled with the old-timers. Many immigrant youth found the existing ‘Chinatown culture’ pathetic, in need of surgical redefinition and reform” (Ng 89). This is particularly relevant to those arriving as family members of the bachelor society in the post-war years after the restriction of Chinese immigration was lifted in 1947. After all, although both of them are Canadian born, Keeman and Beatrice end up raising their daughter, Kae, outside of Chinatown. The fourth generation of the Wong family in Canada, Kae is the first to be raised outside of Chinatown. Having grown frustrated with their own family’s saga and the constant threat of incestuous relationships looming over them, Keeman and Beatrice stay loyal and protect one another from outside of Chinatown. Not unlike the waitress who voluntarily exiles

herself and withdrawals from Chinatown in order to save her and Mui Lan's reputation, so too do Beatrice and Keeman eventually withdraw from Chinatown.

It is also perhaps worth noting the power of one's name and its inherent ties to identity. That is, the first generation of the Wong's to Canada keep their given Chinese names. By the time we reach the third generation, English names begin to be taken up – Keeman, Beatrice, Suzie and Morgan are all first-generation locally born or *tusheng* Canadians with Chinese parents. The exception to this is Ting An who was born in Canada but is only known by a Chinese name. His status as the orphan, however, allows him no direct kinship to any one person or place. It is interesting that that Ting An should keep a Chinese first name while he was born in Canada to a mother of partly Aboriginal ancestry. While characters such as Suzie, Keeman, Beatrice and Morgan continue to live within the limits and borders of Chinatown, they nonetheless adopt seemingly Canadian cultural traits such as English names (or rather, Canadian cultural traits are imposed on them). While they are referred to by their English names throughout the novel, many of the character's traditional Chinese names are also acknowledged. The linguistic back-and-forth of naming is never explicitly explained in the novel, nor is it explained as to who makes these decisions (the character or their parents). Beatrice's full name, for example, is Beatrice Li Ying Wong. Her siblings are Suzanne Bo Syang Wong and John Soon Him Wong; their (half-Chinese) cousin is Morgan Keung Chi Wong. Beatrice and Keeman's daughter however, is Kae Ying Wong, a Chinese name with no English name inserted or added to it. Perhaps the desire to give their child a Chinese name while Beatrice and Keeman went by their English names has more to do with

cultural production and cultural identity. While an English name may suggest assimilation into Canadian cultural practices, a Chinese name may also suggest a desire to resist assimilation while maintaining one's own cultural authenticity. The choice to take on Chinese names, English names, or a combination of both demonstrates the degree to which your name is your identity. Names, after all, are typically fixed and don't typically change over time. Lee disrupts this notion by allowing her characters to go back and forth over time and generations with the use of names. Naming may also be tied to one's cultural production in so much as it shapes one's identity. After all, as one critic states, "...postwar development took place at an interesting time, when clearly competitive models of Chinese culture began to present themselves to ethnic Chinese in Canada... There were always a variety of models, depending on... class, background..." (Ng 89). One of these models could have been the way in which Chinese Canadians chose to name their children. SKY Lee herself blends both her English and Chinese names in her pen name. Lee abbreviates 'Sharon Kung Ying' into SKY to form her pen name. Whether this decision was at the behest of a publisher or her own doing, it is still worth noting as it includes both Chinese and English names, yet creates an entirely original name – SKY.

Female bodies in Chinatown

In a novel that thrusts the female narrative to the forefront, it would seem impractical not to at least address the representation of the female body

(specifically as it relates to Chinatown) in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. In a story that relays the lives of four women across four generations of a Chinatown family, women's bodies are portrayed in various ways for various reasons. They are more than a vehicle for ensuring the next generation of the bloodline – indeed, as the elements of incest have shown, women's bodies take on an independence of their own, both sexually and culturally. From the racialized to the sexualized, women's bodies come to represent the very space they occupy. In other words, "Lee creates a genealogy of female characters who transgress normality; in particular, the female bodies in Lee's novel transverse the hyphenated space by subverting established patriarchal laws to claim their subjectivity" (Fu 29-30). Women then, are a challenge to the status quo of patriarchal order and reclaim any silenced voices through their narratives. Furthermore, women in *Disappearing Moon Café*, re-appropriate space and location in Chinatown after being displaced (Fu 30). That is, Mui Lan and Fong Mei are displaced after immigrating from China and Hong Kong to Canada. Beatrice is displaced in Chinatown and moves further into the city after marrying Keeman. Beatrice's daughter, Kay, is also displaced in Canada and is in a possible state of transition by moving to China after the birth of her son. All four women are geographically displaced at some point in the narrative. Mui Lan and Fong Mei must survive early twentieth century Chinatown as it was a bachelor society at the time. Beatrice grows up in Chinatown during a socially transformative time in the enclave's history, the mid twentieth century. Kay, although she does not grow up within the confines of Chinatown itself, must nonetheless come to terms with her family's murky history in the enclave. The female identities created within the limits

of Chinatown also demonstrate the lack of symbolic silence among the women of the Wong family. That is, each woman, regardless of her position within the family has an identity distinct from the other women – Mui Lan, the shrewd and manipulative business woman who will stop at nothing to secure her son's bloodline; Fong Mei, (also a business-savvy woman) unsatisfied in her marriage turns to her husband's illegitimate half-brother in order to cope with her husband's infertility; Beatrice, the quintessential Chinatown girl who gets out after going against her family's wishes and marries Keeman (at the time suspected of possibly being her half-brother); and finally Kay, the fourth generation Wong who attempts to reconcile her family's history and wishes to return to China.

In other words, Lee's novel attempts to halt any female silences by making its four protagonists female. All four generations of women are represented, the majority of the novel is told from the point of view of one of the four women at any given point in the narrative. *Disappearing Moon Café* gives a voice to the female body and allows for an alternate family genealogy – that of the women's perspective. More than just a vehicle for reproduction, the female body symbolizes a direct challenge to traditional patriarchal clan culture in Chinatown, as well as undermining the idea of the Wong family bloodline. Marriage and female bodies are required in order to secure the next generation of the family bloodline. In a patriarchal and bachelor society, Chinatown (and the male population) becomes dependent upon the few women who inhabit the enclave. In this instance, the women, needed for their abilities to produce heirs may also exercise a certain level of independence due to the limited number of available women in a bachelor

society. Although under the financial and personal control of Mui Lan, the waitress, Song Ang, is a character who undermines her role as child-bearer for the Wong family in so much that she carries on a relationship with a philanderer (and ends up having his child). As a waitress under the control of a dominant family, Song Ang should have otherwise been silenced to her role as waitress/prostitute for the Wong family. In the end, however, Song Ang is able to reclaim a voice of her own by retreating out of Chinatown after her infertile lover, Choy Fuk, brags endlessly of his mother's schemes. By moving to the outskirts of the city, Song Ang asserts her independence and her ability to choose her life for her and her son, Keeman.

In opposition to the male-dominated patriarchal clan culture of twentieth century Vancouver Chinatown, Lee's narrative offers the stories and lives of four generations of the Wong women (the first three having married into the family) and the ways in which their bodies challenge or disrupt notions of clan culture and family bloodlines. Fong Mei's affair with Ting An further undermines the female role as child-bearer and subservient wife as her children are all fathered by her lover and not her legitimate (yet infertile) husband. Furthermore, Fong Mei's affair undermines her subservient position as a child-bearer within a patriarchal family as she takes on a lover while her husband attempts to secure his bloodline through the waitress. In a twist, it is only through Fong Mei's infidelity that the Wong family is able to secure the next generation – Ting An is after all, the illegitimate half-brother of Choy Fuk, and thus a Wong by blood.

Last thoughts

Disappearing Moon Café goes to great lengths to disrupt notions of cultural identity, the immigrant experience and even Chinatown as a lived space. Through a multi-generational narrative, SKY Lee demonstrates the degree to which society may clash along gender, racial, class, educational and generational lines. That is, not all characters from the same class are from the same generation and not all characters from the same generation are of the same social and racial backgrounds. Tight-knit societies, while supportive and protective of one another, as in the case of Keeman and Beatrice, may be just as rejecting and denying, as in the case of Choy Fuk and Mui Lan.

Furthermore, Lee's narrative forces a discussion of the bloodline and undermines ideas of patriarchy and clan culture through incest and inter-racial relationships. Here, both the incest and racial mixing act to challenge established bloodlines and demonstrate the complicated nature of Chinatown families during the early twentieth century. With patriarchy at the forefront of Chinese clan culture, incest and inter-racial relationships both serve to symbolically rupture patriarchal traditions and demonstrate shifting cultures and societies as Lee's Chinatown shifts from the bachelor society of the early twentieth century to a generation of Canadian born Chinese children. Finally, the shift from ethnic and racial enclave as a safe space to an area some *tusheng* seek to escape, Chinatown undergoes a transformation just as powerful as the one its inhabitants and most prominent families undergo.

Vancouver vs. Chinatown: Jen Sook Fong Lee's, *The End of East*

In her first novel *The End of East*, Jen Sook Fong Lee goes to great lengths to demonstrate the fractured nature of Chinatown society and the nuances within it. Much like SKY Lee's, *Disappearing Moon Café*, Jen Sook Fong Lee's novel follows a family narrative in a non-linear timeline with multiple protagonists. *The End of East*, however, digs deeper into the idea of Chinatown as a diasporic space. That is, the three protagonists have individual ties to Vancouver's Chinatown that are tied loosely together by familial history and obligation. Lee's characters demonstrate how time and space affect the ruptures in identity and cultural ties to Chinatown. In other words, Lee's novel offers an alternate rendering of diasporic spaces such as Chinatown, exposing the different and often harsh realities of Chinatown. Characters such as patriarch Seid Quan and his good friend Lim demonstrate the social stratification within a given generation of Chinatown society. Furthermore, Lee explores cultural transformations within a given family over three generations. Lee's story, furthermore, demonstrates how Chinatown acts as an undesirable space in so much as many of its inhabitants (the second generation more specifically) seek to escape from its confines.

Drawing on examples from Lee's novel, this chapter explores Vancouver's literary relationship with Chinatown and the diasporic experience that results from this relationship. Furthermore, this chapter seeks to examine and even disrupt notions of cohesiveness and unity within Chinatown through the relationships Lee creates between her characters. These relationships are not only generational –

differences among the first, second and third generations, but rather between friends, spouses and immigrants of the same generation. Similar to the social and class differences between Choy Fuk and the waitress discussed in the previous chapter, *The End of East* demonstrates similar class differences within Chinatown as demonstrated through the relationship Seid Quan has with his old friend Lim throughout the novel.

Vancouver as Character

I turn now to Stuart Hall and his research on cultural identity. In a paper titled, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, Hall puts forth the idea of breaking down cultural identity in two ways. The first is understood as a collective, shared history among individuals affiliated by race or ethnicity that is considered to be fixed or stable (234). The second is understood as unstable, metamorphic, and even contradictory. It is an identity marked by multiple points of similarities as well as differences. You may notice, not unlike Lisa Lowe, with her vertical-horizontal modes of cultural production, Hall too offers a duality or binary model of explaining cultural identity. In Hall's method, his fixed and stable cultural identity (in terms of one's affiliation with race, ethnicity and shared historical narratives) is somewhat relatable to Lowe's vertical axis of cultural production. This was the mode of cultural production marked by familial and generational experiences. Hall's second way of cultural identity, that which is constantly in flux, marked by multiple points of similarities and differences and

remains unstable is in at least some ways relatable to Lowe's second mode of cultural production which notes the differences in class, culture, racial identity, gender and sexuality among a given minority group or diaspora. It is Hall's latter point of cultural identity I wish to draw on further, as it is well represented in Jen Sook Fong Lee's novel *The End of East*.

Developing his idea of cultural identity and the production of cultural identity further, Hall argues that identity is not nearly as unproblematic or indeed as transparent as we may think. Rather, we should be thinking of identity as a type of production which is always in flux, it is never complete, "we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation" (234). Hall goes on to assert that, "This view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term 'cultural identity' lays claim" (234). In other words, Hall is suggesting that one's cultural identity is indeed a production that is never completed and remains dependent on representation.

Hall's argument puts emphasis on the diasporic experience. That is, it is all about context. In the context of Lee's *The End of East*, the emphasis lies on the characters' experiences in Canada and how they came to be shaped that way. The first way of breaking down cultural identity – the shared and collective experience – would be to see Lee's characters in her narrative as part of the larger immigration of Chinese men to Canada throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The subsequent second and third generations of the family would share in the collective experience of being children of immigrants and growing up rootless

and seemingly lost. These characters would simply be lost in the shadows of the Chinese-Canadian immigration historical narrative. On the other hand, the family's narrative would add to the collection of shared experiences of isolation and segregation in the early years of immigration and the subsequent feelings of loss and confusion as these families attempt to set down roots and set up new lives in another country, thus adding to the shared cultural identity of being Chinese in Canada or eventually part of the Chinese diaspora.

The second way of breaking down cultural identity, however, would see these characters not for what they have become necessarily, but for what they will become. This mode of cultural identity calls for the inclusion of history, culture and the transcendence of time and place. Much like in both SKY Lee and Jen Sook Fong Lee's respective narratives, this type of cultural identity is also non-linear. It is not only the past and the shared experiences that lend to one's cultural identity, but how that has shaped the individual identity. Identity, then, is constantly in flux, always in process, and subject to both culture and power, "...like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture and power..." (Hall 236). It is also about how one is positioned within historical narratives and frameworks just as much as how one would position themselves within (cultural) narratives of the past that constitutes this second form of cultural identity. Jen Sook Fong Lee's *The End of East* is useful in coming to terms with Hall's second version of cultural identity as the past is blurred with the present and future,

and the use of one space over three generations further adds to the confusion and processing of one's cultural identity.

Lee's *The End of East*, tells the story of the Chan family through three generations. Much like SKY Lee's, *Disappearing Moon Café*, *The End of East* employs a multi-generation and multi-protagonist narrative. While they share many stylistic parallels and similarities, *The End of East* delves deeper into discussions of representations of cultural and personal identity, versus the actual production of it. That is, *The End of East* explores ideas of Hall's conceptions of cultural identity while *Disappearing Moon Café* explores productions of identity through class, gender and sexuality, which is more akin to Lowe's thoughts on cultural production.

Set in Vancouver, but mostly in the Vancouver Chinatown area, Lee is careful not only in her discussion of various modes of identity, but also in making sure that the city is involved in her characters' production of cultural identity and memory. That is, in this text, Vancouver becomes a kind of the fourth protagonist – a character that is also capable of transcending both time and place. Vancouver is a backdrop for all three of the protagonists – Seid Quan, the patriarch; his son, Pon Man; and Sammy, Pon Man's youngest daughter and arguably the strongest protagonist out of the three. While all three characters interact with the city and Chinatown in various ways, it is the city that comes to represent and cultivate their cultural identities by way of time and space.

Arguably the main protagonist out of the three, the novel begins with Sammy and her return home to Vancouver after the death of her grandfather. It is at this point the reader is provided with the representation of cultural identity, which in

this case is not necessarily inherently tied to racial identity, “Walking down Ste-Catherine or St-Denis, past the well-dressed Montrealers, I had become convinced that they could smell the stink of Vancouver’s Chinatown – durian and rain-soaked cardboard boxes – leaking out of my pores” (Lee 11). Here, cultural identity is geographically tied to a sense of place and belonging and has little to do with race or diaspora. This initial cultural identity may be seen as a struggle between competing national (yet still very much localized) identities – that of a traditionally francophone Montreal and a traditionally English-speaking and rainy Vancouver. It is also interesting that the struggle for identity is constituted within Canada and not necessarily an international struggle for belonging and identity. To further demonstrate my point, Sammy’s internal monologue adds, “I had tried to let the city [Montreal] absorb me completely, envelop me in its own particular smells of poutine and river water, but it was no use. Leaving Vancouver was like leaving myself” (Lee 11). Sammy had tried to let the city absorb her, yet she was never able to become a full Montrealer. Hall’s second method of cultural identity reminds us that it is just as much about where we belong in the historical narrative as what we become within the narrative. Due to her own cultural identity, Sammy is unable to cope with the possibility of transforming into a new cultural identity in Montreal. That is, following Hall’s idea, due to her life in Vancouver as well as her place within her own family, Sammy is unable to fully integrate in a new city such as Montreal.

Family duty and history are also strong indicators of one’s cultural identity. Once again, Sammy is faced with a dilemma of whether or not to return home to Vancouver. This time, however, she must return home after the death of her

grandfather, “I had run away once before... fear and duty propelling me back to the place I had once escaped. I kept telling myself ... it was my turn to be the good daughter. What I didn’t know was that my spot in the family had been ready for me for a long time.” (11). Here, identity is out of Sammy’s control and remains regulated by familial and cultural ties and sense of duty. This quote also speaks to Sammy’s gender, mobility and sense of agency within her own family – she is a (grand)daughter in a seemingly traditional Chinese-Canadian family, all of these things inherently influence Sammy’s identity. Hall’s first method of cultural identity – that which is shared and collective – is arguably what is propelling Sammy to finally return to a place that she loves, although it is also a home that she hates and fears. It is also worth noting that Sammy is the youngest of five daughters in her family. Traditionally, the responsibility of caring for ageing parents and family members falls onto the eldest son of a given Chinese Canadian family (this is very similar to Chinese traditions throughout the global Chinese diaspora as well as with traditional Chinese customs). With five daughters, it would most likely have been Sammy’s eldest sister who was expected to take care of her ageing mother and making arrangements after the grandfather’s death. The fact that it is Sammy that feels compelled to return to Vancouver and take care of her ageing mother after being away in Montreal for so long not only disrupts the chain of command of a traditional Chinese Canadian family structure, but also demonstrates how one’s position within their family may play a larger role in shaping their identity.

Sammy’s thoughts of nostalgia and longing for Vancouver are sharply contrasted to those of her father, Pon Man, who views the city (more specifically

Vancouver Chinatown) as a place of squalor and abhorrence, “Nothing but a tourist trap. A dumping ground for human trash. These old buildings should be torn down. Probably full of rats; squatters too” (Lee 12). Both characters refer many times to Chinatown and their own experiences in the area. What Lee has done, however, is not only made Vancouver a character in and of its own – more than a geographical backdrop – rather, she has demonstrated how cultural identity can be influenced by time, history and power. The same physical space has come to represent two very different feelings within a family and spanning only one generation. What Sammy misses so desperately, her own father despises. Here, we can see Hall’s second method of cultural identity at work in so much that the history of Vancouver’s Chinatown would influence these characters differently. That is, historically speaking, the patriarch of the novel, Seid Quan, would have been legally and culturally confined to the limits of Chinatown when he immigrated as a young man in the early twentieth century. Due to legal restrictions caused by the Immigration Act that was in place upon Seid Quan’s arrival to Canada, Seid Quan would have been relegated to working, living and socializing within the borders of Chinatown. His son, Pon Man, would have had more freedom to roam about the city when he arrived in the mid-twentieth century, but any cultural and social ties would have remained within Chinatown for the next few decades. For a first-generation locally born Canadian, this could be frustrating, as Pon Man desires more freedom and views Chinatown as a limitation and hindrance on the independence that his father was never able to exercise. Sammy however, would have a very different perspective on the enclave. During the late twentieth and into the twenty-first

century, Chinatown is all but commercialized, aestheticized and indeed commodified for tourists and newcomers to the city alike. Indeed, it is almost fetishized for its historical significance in the city and for its once exotic and mysterious terrain. For Sammy, re-visiting Chinatown is a kind of return, a pilgrimage to see her family's history in Canada. She would have no roots culturally or personally to China, so Chinatown becomes a defacto homeland – the place her grandfather occupied upon his arrival to the country. Each character's cultural identity is indeed subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power. Pon Man had the power to leave Chinatown whereas Sammy has the power to return.

In *The End of East*, cultural identity is inherently tied to the city – Vancouver and Montreal – and the predicament or inability to feel completely removed from it. Identity, then, in keeping with Hall's argument, is a production, or produced within representation of the city. Vancouver and its Chinatown become inherently tied to the identities of the three protagonists in various ways. For the initial immigrant generation, Vancouver is both a place of confinement and often a place of exclusion. The second generation is able to break free from the (social and legal) confines of Chinatown, only for the third generation to return and revisit Chinatown in a way that both compels and repels. Sammy flees Vancouver for Montreal, only to find out that her cultural identity is indeed tied to the city she so desperately wanted to get away from. Although identity is constantly in production and always in flux, Lee demonstrates that modes of cultural identity are indeed constituted within representation. It is also worth noting that the cities themselves are identified by means of cultural representation. That is, Vancouver, or at least Vancouver's

Chinatown is identified for its smell of durian and rain-soaked boxes, while Montreal is described by its smells of poutine and river water, most likely stemming from the St. Laurent river. While seemingly stereotypical (associations with rain and poutine), the associations are nonetheless in keeping with Hall's mode of cultural identity and production.

These characters, then, are also keeping with the ideas of transculturalism and the complicated issue of Chineseness. That is, ideas of Chineseness are disrupted by geographical movement, time, and cultural mixing to the point that the very notion of a Chinese or even a Chinese-Canadian identity becomes blurred. Transcultural movement and migration are further complicated by notions of cultural production since the diaspora is far from being one cohesive or homogenous group. Factors such as age, gender, and class all contribute to one's position and identity within the diaspora itself. Sammy begins to realize this aspect of transculturalism when she realizes that she is inherently tied to Vancouver's Chinatown. That is, her Chineseness is noticeable to her when she thinks the Montrealer's can smell the durian and rain on her.

Breaking Down Identity – the diasporic experience

In *The End of East*, Lee goes to great lengths to demonstrate the many facets of Chinese immigration to Canada. From the initial immigration and the payment of the Canadian Head Tax to the seclusion and limitations of Vancouver's Chinatown for the Chinese bachelor communities faced by Chinese immigrants in the early

twentieth century, Lee works through many historical and social events that shaped Chinese immigration to Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lee continues to delve into aspects of immigration and its inherent ties to one's own identity through characters such as Pon Man who symbolizes the second generation of immigrants to Canada during the post-war years (and to some degree the experiences of the first generation of Canadian born Chinese). Having spent his childhood and adolescence in China, Pon Man is plucked from the village at his father's orders and sent to live with him in Canada once the immigration laws are relaxed for Chinese people. Unlike his father, who had been sent to Canada by the collective decision of the village to work abroad and send money back to China, Pon Man is sent to work for his father who is already an established figure in Vancouver's Chinatown society. Furthermore, Pon Man represents (and indeed displays) the resentment felt by many young boys and men who were uprooted from their ancestral homes and sent to work for their fathers, men whom they may have only met once or twice in their lifetime when they returned to China for limited stays. Sammy, however, represents a contemporary diasporic identity within Canadian society. She is a Canadian born Chinese woman with reluctant and strained ties to Vancouver's Chinatown, the place that once hosted her immigrant grandfather in his early days in Canada. Furthermore, Sammy represents many of the ruptures in the diasporic experience. Rather than a fully assimilated and racialized other (the model minority), Sammy is never truly comfortable with her roots in Chinatown or with her position in her own family.

Although a short scene in the novel, Lee's discussion of the 1907 Chinatown Riot and the impact it had on the community at large is worth examining for the links it makes to the diasporic experience and notions of Chinese and Canadian identities. After the Chinatown Riot in 1907, the Chinese community is very much on edge and expecting further backlash and attacks from the (White) Vancouver community, "The rumours start as whispers that snake their way through the streets of Chinatown, bouncing off the walls of buildings and ending as suspicions, not quite groundless, in the heads of men who have learned to fear the worst" (Lee 43). This quote highlights the way in which the residents of Chinatown lived in more or less constant fear of attacks and retribution. These attacks may have been due in part for Chinese labourers willing to work for less pay than White Canadians at the time, but as a social and cultural space, Chinatown was also believed to be a grimy and an undesirable place. Lee also expresses these sentiments when Seid Quan poignantly observes during the aftermath of the riot, "*No one will even notice, he thinks, because they just want Chinatown to disappear*" (Lee 43, original italics). It is a complicated dynamic between destruction and loss that is at play in Lee's representation of the riot. On the one hand, the riot was racially motivated and sought to destruct the property of the Chinese community. On the other hand, the riot sought to cleanse Vancouver of a notoriously seedy and mysterious part of the community. With the Chinese already being a racialized and marginalized minority within Vancouver, the riot scene in *The End of East* demonstrates not only the struggles they faced from the Canadian majority, but also the more complicated dynamic of Chinatown as a contested space for the marginalized and ostracized.

Having originally been friends in the village in China, Seid Quan and Lim meet up again in Canada, more specifically, in Vancouver's Chinatown. Their friendship is worth taking a closer look at as it both represents and exposes the diasporic experience of Chinese men in Canada during the early twentieth century. At first, both men are young and healthy and ready to work in their new country. While Seid Quan initially finds work as a sweeper in a barber shop (which he later takes over as owner), Lim slips into the underbelly of Chinatown, making a living under mysterious and secretive circumstances. After years of living and working within Chinatown's bachelor society of the early twentieth century, the differences between Seid Quan and Lim grow more apparent, especially in their physical appearance. After not seeing Lim for many years, Seid Quan begins to search for his friend all over Chinatown. Seid Quan eventually finds Lim in a disheveled and unruly state, "A thin man (so thin that his hands hang like weights from his stringy arms, his sharply angled shoulders) squints through the gloom" (Lee 54). Lim illuminates on his current appearance, "I made a lot of money doing things that good men would never do. And then I lost it smoking and whoring and drinking. I don't need a new, pious life" (Lee 55). While Seid Quan was able to lead a quiet life in Chinatown as a barber who eventually brought his own family to Canada, Lim succumbed to the isolation of a bachelor society and the false promises of a hostile new country and fell into vice and addiction. Both men represent different aspects of the diasporic experience – Seid Quan, the hardworking, successful, model-minority immigrant; and Lim, the failure and philanderer.

Seid Quan and Lim's diasporic narrative is further described when they speak to each other for the final time with Pon Man (they have one final interaction with one another in the novel, but at this point Lim is delirious and no longer knows his own name. It is only through the assistance of a volunteer at Lim's care home that Seid Quan knows for sure it is his friend he has encountered while on a walk). The fact that Seid Quan has married a girl back in China and has a family in China further demonstrates Seid Quan's success – he has been able to afford travel to and from China to get married and produce a child everytime he returns, he sends money back to the village to repay his debt for the initial boat ticket, he sends money back to his family, and even has enough money and resources to bring his son to Canada. Lim, however, has basically wasted away into little more than a Chinatown vagrant. The last time Seid Quan comes across his old friend is just after Pon Man's arrival to Canada as father and son are on their way to a café. By this point, Lim has succumbed to his life (and vices) in Canada and is a ghost-like figure, not even mentioned by name, "The thin man pulled himself up straight and stood facing Seid Quan, their chins almost touching, 'He won't catch anything from me, old friend... He will learn the truth about this fucking country on his own. Even you cannot protect him'" (Lee 76). Both men have experienced some form of success – Seid Quan with his barbershop and Lim with his suspected illicit activities – yet Seid Quan's success follows that of the model minority (a hardworking immigrant) that allows for the next generation of his family to be successful in Canada, while Lim's life in Canada acts more as a cautionary tale to the limitations of success for any immigrant, "And the thin man backed away, disappearing into to the dark alley as if

he had never emerged. Seid Quan sighed, 'Someone I used to know, I'm afraid,' he said. Pon Man did not dare to ask his name" (Lee 76). Here, Lim serves not only to contrast Seid Quan's image of the hard-working model minority, but also to demonstrate the social and class dynamics at play within Chinatown. Both men came from the same village, almost certainly from similar social classes, yet upon immigrating to Canada, it is Seid Quan who succeeds with his careful and hardworking nature, while Lim wastes away in a care home due to his not having any family in Canada to take care of him.

Although Seid Quan is successful enough to bring his son to Canada, he is not necessarily monetarily wealthy, nor has he acquired adequate living conditions as demonstrated when Pon Man first arrives in Canada and must adjust to his new life, "Pon Man shoves his hands into his pockets, shakes his head as if he is trying to get rid of something, 'I don't like this place. It's Wet... I don't like feeling cold all the time.' He stares defiantly into his father's eyes" (Lee 74). The smaller nuances such as weather and humidity are drawn out to demonstrate both the inadequacy of Seid Quan's living arrangements as well as the experiences of immigration and of a new home. Furthermore, Pon Man's emigration to Canada was not optional as Seid Quan had sent for his son. Pon Man's observations of his father's living conditions further demonstrate that although Canada may have the promise of a better life, it does not always turn out that way. That is, having observed his father's modest one-bedroom dwelling, Pon Man acknowledges that a new life in Canada is not necessarily a better one, "I don't see anything worth money here, just a room we have to share. Our house in the village was nicer, and it didn't smell so mouldy" (Lee 74). This passage

also demonstrates that it was not necessarily Canada that was unaccommodating with its mouldy bedrooms, but rather conditions of Chinatown's cramped and overcrowded housing. With the growing amount of Chinese immigrants to Canada after the ban on Chinese immigration was lifted in the post-war years, Chinatown saw an influx of new immigrants without the ability to expand its borders within the city. Having previously been known as a bachelor society for temporary migrant labourers, Chinatown was now transforming into a flourishing community (women were now allowed to immigrate to Canada to join their husbands who were already in the country). Although no longer technically sequestered to the confines of Chinatown, many Chinese Canadians were still culturally and linguistically tied to the enclave. Hostility and tensions with the greater (white) Vancouver community furthermore added to much of the segregation and isolation felt by Chinatown residents.

Another aspect of the Chinese diasporic experience in Canada is the inevitable issue of language. Both Seid Quan and Pon Man struggle to learn English upon their arrivals in Canada. Both characters needed to assimilate and learn English as it was spoken by the majority, and thus one of the only ways to fully integrate into Canadian society. Sammy however, represents a different aspect of diasporic language as she grows up speaking English with Chinese acting as her heritage language. Furthermore, she is never explicitly stated or written as being able to speak any Chinese dialect, her ability to converse fluently in Chinese is left rather ambiguous. Lee facetiously works through ideas of language barriers and perceived ignorance through Sammy's character when she is at the hospital being

treated for her injuries, “The doctor apologizes three times while he examines me and keeps asking if this hurts. Of course it does, but I don’t say anything. Perhaps if he thinks I don’t speak English, this will go faster” (Lee 182). In this instance it is the diasporic figure, Sammy, who can manipulate language to fit her needs. By drawing on her own racialized body as a Chinese Canadian woman, Sammy is attempting to create a barrier between her and the doctor that would allow for her false linguistic ignorance to speed up a painful medical examination. The fact that Sammy can even pretend not to speak English is dependent on her body being racialized – she would not be able to get away with such a ruse had she appeared White. In this scene, Lee is necessarily putting language and race into conversation with one another. One is not necessarily dependent on the other, but as we have seen in Sammy’s internal monologue at the hospital, she was able to feign not knowing English and potentially speed up her examination due to her racialized body.

If there is a connection between race and language, Lee disrupts this notion by not explicitly stating whether or not Sammy is capable of communicating in her ancestral language. Having been born and raised in Vancouver, it would seem natural for Sammy and her sisters to be fluent in English. This would also point towards the family assimilating, at least linguistically, into Canadian society. By the third generation, the family is fluent in English and even speaks it as a native language. The ambiguity of Sammy’s spoken Chinese further demonstrates the complicated relationship between language and race. The fact that Sammy’s heritage language is something other than English further demonstrates how personal and cultural identity are often intertwined and in competition with one

another. Sammy's (in)ability to speak Chinese fluently could also play into her Chineseness, or her cultural and racial identities as a (Canadian-born) Chinese Canadian woman. The ambiguity of Sammy's Chinese language skills also begs the question of the authenticity of her Chineseness. That is, would Sammy be any less Chinese for not being fluent in the language? Alternately, would she be any less Canadian if Chinese were to be her first language? By not explicitly telling the reader of Sammy's ability to communicate in Chinese, Lee disrupts and blurs the lines of language and its ties to cultural identity. Here, Lee forces us to look beyond the scope of language as an identifier of one's Chineseness or Canadianess and forces us to reconsider cultural identity within the immigrant and diasporic experience. After all, Seid Quan and Pon Man both learned English upon arriving in Canada. They did so in order to assimilate and integrate into Canadian society. By the third generation however, Sammy and her sisters are known to speak English but it is their ability to communicate in Chinese that is called into question through ambiguity.

Family First

Each generation in the novel struggles with the notion of family. For Seid Quan, the first generation, he must balance life in Canada while paying back his family in China while simultaneously maintaining a family of his own. Seid Quan must also reconcile the kinship networks he would have known in China with the ones he must form with his fellow immigrants when he arrives in Chinatown. For Pon Man, the second generation, he must reconcile the family he knew in China and

being uprooted to work for his father in Canada while being expected to integrate into Canadian society by becoming a neutralized (racialized) other. Finally, for Sammy, the third generation of the Chan family, she must come to terms with her own roots and position within her family. Here, Sammy struggles the most out of the three protagonists with her position within her family, what it means to be Chinese Canadian, how her Chineseness is constructed and represented, and simultaneously what her ties to Chinatown are. While all three protagonists face personal struggles of identity, they are all loosely tied to the larger theme of family and their individual positions within it.

After returning to Vancouver at her family's request, we learn that Sammy was living and studying in Montreal. Much like how she initially ran away from Vancouver to Montreal, she also runs away from Montreal to come back to Vancouver (leaving behind an unfinished graduate program and boyfriend). Sammy's education and her own cultural values come into question when she thinks of challenging her mother's, "I stare at her... wondering if I should say something, explain that school means nothing, dispute her ideas on good and bad luck, yell at her for being the only, faulty link I have left to my father as a young man" (Lee 59). There is an apparent generational distinction made between Sammy and her mother and their cultural values – the ideas on good luck and bad luck. There is however, a deeper distinction in values when it comes to school. It is worth noting that Sammy's mother chastises her for not finishing her graduate program, effectively putting an emphasis on the importance of a post-secondary education. Sammy, however, does not prioritize her graduate degree nearly as much as her mother. The

cultural differences at play here are also intricately tied to the generational and familial differences that run throughout Lee's narrative. Furthermore, this passage demonstrates the degree to which Sammy is connected to her own family. The fact that Sammy sees her mother as the last link to her deceased father is telling in so much that she was close to her father, but also that she does not necessarily see her mother as a maternal figure (simply as someone who connects her to her father), yet she still returns to Vancouver to stay with her and to take care of her. Here, Lee explores cultural differences and their connections to familial ties and responsibilities.

While Sammy hints at being close with Pon Man, there is fairly little interaction between the two characters as Pon Man passes away relatively young, leaving his wife to raise Sammy and her sisters. Unlike Seid Quan who raises Pon Man in Canada throughout his adolescence and spends time with him into his son's adulthood, Pon Man is unable to spend as much time with his own children.

Familial position and obligations are also challenged in Seid Quan's relationship with his son. The expectation for Pon Man was that he would work for his father and contribute to the family earnings once in Canada. This, of course, does not go as planned as their relationship is already off to a rocky start with Pon Man not liking Chinatown or his father. Lee teases out this strained relationship when Pon Man voices his dislike at the idea of working for Seid Quan, "I don't want to work at the shop. It smells funny" (Lee 80) and later on, "He remembers wishing he could come to Canada to be with his father, and he remembers that as soon as he set foot on Canadian soil and saw Seid Quan's thin shadow he wanted to go right back"

(Lee 203). Housing and living standards are also brought into question when Seid Quan looks for a house prior to his wife immigrating after their son has arrived, “The houses in Chinatown and Strathcona, where Seid Quan wants to stay, feel like a punch in the face to him – the rotting porches, the chipped siding” (Lee 85). Pon Man’s emphasis on housing and the area’s Seid Quan looks at are interesting. Seid Quan looks at houses in Chinatown and Strathcona, both areas being notoriously dingy and underprivileged neighbourhoods in Vancouver. Highlighting the geographical areas and rotting porches of the old houses his father is looking at also demonstrates Pon Man’s desire to leave or arguably escape Chinatown, “He can’t help thinking that everyone, like him, wants to escape this city, for despite the trees and mountains and pure water, Vancouver is as cold and hard at its core as anywhere else in Canada” (Lee 89). Housing in Lee’s narrative represents more than social stratification and the area of the city in which you live, it also comes to represent the different cultural values between one generation of a family and the next. For Seid Quan, he has spent the majority of his life in the relative squalor of his dingy Chinatown bedroom. Pon Man however, had grown up in relative comfort back in China precisely because Seid Quan saved all of his money to send home by living in the damp and mouldy Chinatown bedroom.

The cultural and familial struggles between Seid Quan and Pon Man do not stop at housing but become further teased out during the discussion of what Pon Man will do following high school, with Seid Quan arguing “Do you think a degree will change how people see you? You’ll just be a Chinaman who can read, that’s all” (Lee 93-94). Seid Quan’s desire for his son to remain in the shop cutting hair with

him still stands as a point of contention between father and son. Although said as a retort to his father's demands to cut hair, Pon Man raises a noteworthy point, "Aren't you the one who moved us all here so we could do better? Isn't that the point of living here instead of the village?" (Lee 94). The idea of success and prosperity are invoked and linked with immigration to Canada. The reality however, at least for Seid Quan and his family, is that although he has been successful enough to emigrate his family to Canada, it is not without consequence. That is, the family is not necessarily better off once they are united in Canada. There is still tension within the family as it relates to cultural values. Much like Pon Man's emphasis is on his education, so too does his wife emphasize Sammy's education by pointing out her unfinished graduate program. It is here that we see tension between Sammy and her family. Although she was close with her father, Sammy rebels against her mother causing tension in her family relationships. By physically running away to Montreal, Sammy temporarily escapes her mother, yet by returning to Vancouver to take care of her, Sammy effectively abandons her education – something her mother (and father) put great emphasis on. As the first generation in Canada, Seid Quan saw little significance to educating his children. Due to the social and cultural restrictions imposed on Chinese Canadians at the time, many people of Seid Quan's generation may have thought it more practical to stick to the family businesses and the confines of Chinatown. The second generation, Pon Man, however, saw Chinatown as a place he needed to escape. In order to rise above the limitations of what Chinatown had to offer as an increasingly seedy area to live, formal, secondary education became the way out. For the generation of Pon Man and his wife, a growing emphasis was

placed on school and post-secondary education. By the third generation, however, Canadian-born children who were accustomed to Canadian society and culture became somewhat complacent with the education they received. There was little added emphasis for a post-secondary education, as Sammy's generation had not been relegated to the confines of Chinatown. This generation was not restricted to the jobs and the way of life that Chinatown provided the earlier generations. That is, because of their parents a generation earlier, Sammy had grown up in the comforts of the city, she had grown up with day trips in to Chinatown, not day trips out of it. Sammy then, did not necessarily need added education to remove herself or escape from Chinatown. She was relatively free to come and go as she pleased.

Last thoughts

Jen Sook Fong Lee's novel works to disrupt many of the perceived notions of diaspora and Chinatown. By intersecting familial and generational differences simultaneously with diasporic identity and experiences, Lee creates a discussion of other ways the Chinese diaspora may necessarily be seen. By grounding her novel deeply within Vancouver and Chinatown, Lee successfully explores ideas of cultural differences and their inherent ties to one's own cultural identity. Furthermore, grounding *The End of East* within the borders of Chinatown simultaneously calls out the enclave as a contested space, both socially and culturally, "Chinatown was never a respectable place... It is only that, now, the problems have no fine veneer of entertainment or respectability covering them up; rather, they have bubbled to the

surface, raw sores on an already scarred rough skin” (Lee 202). Lee pushes her point further when Pon Man highlights the geographical proximity of Chinatown to the Downtown Eastside, itself a problematic and highly contested space, “Pon Man reflects that it is uneasy, the relationship between the Chinese and the single-room hotel dwellers... They have more in common, though, than they think. The goal for everyone is, of course, escape” (Lee 202). Here, the hotel dwellers Lee refers to are, of course, residents of the Single Occupancy Rooms (SROs) in the notorious neighbouring Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. Escape seems to be the only option for the characters in the narrative – escape from place (China, Chinatown, Vancouver), escape from family and obligations, and escape from reconciling ones cultural identity. Finally, transformation also serves the narrative in both time and space. That is, Chinatown transforms as a space of inclusion for the initial Chinese immigrants and migrant workers who were excluded from all other aspects of Canadian society as seen when Seid Quan first arrives in Canada to a place that ultimately provides a return for Sammy to eventually reconcile her cultural identity.

Mother vs. Nature: Jen Sook Fong Lee's, *The Better Mother*

If SKY Lee's, *Disappearing Moon Café* may be seen as a work that emerged during the anti-racism movement of the late 1980's and early 1990's, then Jen Sook Fong Lee's second novel, *The Better Mother*, may also be read as a response to similar modes of production twenty years later. Although published almost two decades after *Disappearing Moon Café*, Jen Sook Fong Lee's, *The Better Mother* goes to great lengths to discuss not only the role of Chinatown within Vancouver's Chinese Canadian community, but also the intersection of the Chinese Canadian community and other communities on the peripheries of society such as the LGBT and burlesque communities. As Larissa Lai argues in her book, *Slanting I, Imagining We: Asian Canadian Literary Production in the 1980s and 1990s*, Asian Canadian (literature, activism, theory, and the like) developed alongside and indeed intersected with other minority movements (2-3). This novel, then, acts as a type of response to the intersections of the Asian Canadian community and the LGBT community during the 1980s, specifically during the AIDS crisis that absorbed the city and created a panic throughout the city at large.

Also set against the backdrop of Vancouver, *The Better Mother* explores the seedier side of Vancouver's marginalized communities and the fringes of society. More specifically, Lee grounds her non-linear narrative within Vancouver's gay community during the AIDS crisis in the early 1980s as well as Vancouver's burlesque scene during the 1950s and 1960s. This is how the two protagonists come together in their respective narratives. The novel opens with Danny, an eight-year-

old boy in Chinatown during the 1950s, on a cigarette run for his father. He runs into Val while on his way home through one of Chinatown's notorious back alleys. At the time, Val is on a smoke break where she works as a burlesque dancer at a strip club in Chinatown under the moniker, the 'Siamese Kitten'. Val/the Siamese Kitten is a Caucasian woman working as a burlesque dancer in what was considered a very sleazy part of town in the 1950s. This sets the pace for the rest of the novel, however, as Danny is enamored with Miss Val upon their initial meeting. The two don't meet again until Danny is an adult though (and when Val is well into her middle ages and no longer dancing). Danny is still infatuated with Val all these years later and it is here that both Danny and Val are able to resolve previous internal conflict – namely Danny coming to terms with his sexuality and Val's role as a mother.

The novel rarely explicitly mentions HIV or AIDS, it is simply referred to as the 'mysterious gay cancer' as it was known during the 1980s. Throughout the novel, the ideas of fear and terror are invoked to demonstrate the marginalization of a particular community. Furthermore, Vancouver's gay community, a topic not often the main point of discussion in most contemporary or mainstream Canadian novels, is thrust to the forefront of discussion. Lee uses this to her advantage though, by demonstrating how the spread and fear of an unknown disease further heightens Danny's fears of coming out to his family. Having never been close with his own parents, Danny turns to Val, a reluctant maternal figure herself, to work through his sexual and cultural identities.

By creating seemingly nontraditional protagonists, *The Better Mother* not only allows for a discussion of misfits and eccentric protagonists, but rather, Lee's novel acknowledges and indeed provokes a discussion of ostracized and isolated spaces such as Chinatown and Vancouver's West End (a notorious hub for the gay community). What Lee does in this particular text then, is expose the people and communities that are often overlooked or otherwise ignored.

The Role of Sexuality

The Better Mother, is perhaps the most well known Chinese Canadian work of fiction that explicitly discusses notions of ethnic identity and diaspora intersecting with sexual identity among its protagonists. While ethnic identity and the limits of Chinatown are certainly present in this text, the focus remains on a gay Chinese Canadian, Danny, coming to terms with his childhood and his status and identity as a gay man during the AIDS epidemic of the early 1980's. Lee's choice to use sexuality as the intersecting identity marker is useful inasmuch that it may disrupt notions of cohesiveness and completeness within one's cultural identity. In other words, sexuality may be effective in provoking cultural identity politics. As scholar David Goellnicht notes, "sexuality becomes the agent that levers a traditional diasporic Chineseness out of its self-sustaining myths of homogeneity predicated on masculinist and ethnic-absolutist assumptions" (156). Again, the notion of ethnic authenticity and Chineseness are disrupted, only this time it is done through notions of sexuality and sexual identity. Goellnicht continues, "at the same time as both

sexuality and a provisional ethnicity become the agents that destabilize traditional notions of Canadianness predicated on whiteness and heteronormativity” (156).

While sexuality may complicate notions of diasporic identity, the two may also work simultaneously to disrupt whiteness and Canadianness. Goellnicht’s argument of disrupting Canadianness and whiteness are present throughout, *The Better Mother*, especially as it relates to Val’s status as a white woman working and performing in a racialized space such as Chinatown and Danny’s status as a gay-man-of-colour. Both Chineseness and Canadianness are disrupted and destabilized by notions of sexuality. Danny, a gay man, must reconcile cultural and sexual identities. Val, a white woman working as a burlesque dancer in Chinatown, must reconcile her own kind of diasporic identity (explored in further detail later in this paper) with her status as a mother.

Goellnicht is also quick to point out the lack of inclusion by post-colonialists and diasporists of the role of sexuality within diaspora studies. In other words, theorists such as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and James Cillford failed to acknowledge or shed light on the intersectional nature of race and sexuality. David Eng dedicates an entire book to furthering the discussion of race and sexuality, especially as it relates to Asian American studies and its diaspora. Literarily speaking, however, Jen Sook Fong Lee’s *The Better Mother* also grapples with the idea of race intersecting with sexual identity. For this reason, I turn now to a discussion of David Eng’s, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* in order to work through ideas of masculinity, sexuality, cultural hybridity and Asian Canadian culture. In his book, Eng brings together theories from Asian American Studies and psychoanalytic

theory to explore the intersection of sexuality and racial formation and identity as it relates to Asian American masculinity. Like Lowe's work on Asian American cultural production and identity, I also wish to consider Eng's work within the context of Asian Canadian masculinity and sexuality. Eng provides original insight on the intersection of themes of diaspora and sexuality as it relates to the Asian diaspora, insight that may extend to the discussion of Asian Canadian literary texts such as Jen Sook Fong Lee's, *The Better Mother*. It is some of Eng's ideas that he presents in, *Racial Castration*, that I wish to use as a jumping off point for my analysis of Lee's, *The Better Mother*. Eng's work is particularly useful in terms of working through and further examining the relationship between race and sexuality and personal identity.

Eng links the concepts of home and one's sexual identity in terms of both social and familial displacement, "The often literal ejection of queers from their homes – coupled with their marginalization by pervasive structures of normative heterosexuality – attests to similar dilemmas that emerge around this issue" (Eng 205). Here, Eng refers to queer bodies, or more specifically for the purpose of this study, openly gay men being ejected from their familial homes once they have come out to their families. It only becomes more difficult for these men to live freely, as they continue to be marginalized in society by dominant structures of heterosexuality. Eng continues, "Traumatic displacement from a lost heterosexual 'origin,' questions of political membership, and the impossibility of full social recognition dog the queer in a mainstream society impelled by the presumptions of compulsory heterosexuality" (205). That is to say, queer bodies struggle for social

recognition in a dominant heteronormative society. Such is the case in Jen Sook Fong Lee's, *The Better Mother*. One of the protagonists, Danny, continuously struggles with coming to terms with his own homosexuality in a dominant heteronormative society. Add to this, Danny's racialized identity as an Asian Canadian man, and he is forced to work through not only leaving his familial home in order to reconcile his sexual identity, but also being further marginalized as a person of colour while coming to terms with his identity in heteronormative and racialized spaces.

Although being out and trying to survive in heteronormative societies is complicated, especially for racialized bodies, Eng also breaks down the act of coming out to one's family in a longer quote:

In this particular ordering of the social sphere, to "come out" is precisely and finally never to *be* "out" – a never-ending process of constrained avowal, a perpetually deferred state of achievement, an uninhabitable domain. Suspended between "in" and "out" of the closet – between origin and destination and private and public space – queer entitlements to home and nation-state remain doubtful as well (Eng 205).

The act of 'coming out' is in constant negotiation with private and public spheres. For Eng, it is not exactly possible to be fully 'out' as queer entitlements are unattainable due to their continued existence within the realm of a heteronormative society. In other words, to finally 'be out' is a non-ending process that is constantly negotiated and in flux. Much like cultural identity and modes of representation along Hall's arguments, so too is being openly gay constantly renegotiated and always in flux. There are various degrees to which one can 'be out' or 'coming out' that is negotiated within origin and destination, or between private and public spheres. In the context of *The Better Mother*, Danny continuously struggles with

coming out, as he is never truly out. The end of the novel only hints at his coming out to his mother, although nothing is ever confirmed. This is in line with Eng's argument of one never being truly 'out of the closet.'

It is not just Danny's sexuality that creates struggle and conflict throughout the novel, though; Val's sexuality and her role as a burlesque dancer also shape the way in which Danny interacts with his mother figures and is then able to reconcile his sexual identity. As a young boy at the beginning of the narrative, Danny idolizes Val for her self-confidence and her voluptuous body. In their initial meeting in the Chinatown alley, Danny is mesmerized by Val's appearance and gumption. This is contrasted with his own mother's meek nature and quiet manner. Although Danny praises Val for her loud personality and fearlessness of life, he in turn is meek and quiet like his own mother when it comes to reconciling his own sexuality. That is, although he despises her timid and submissive ways, Danny is more like his mother when it comes to acknowledging his own sexuality. Even within the gay community, Danny is unable to fully come out to other gays. In his internal monologue, Danny rationalizes being unable to reconcile his actions with his thoughts, "...asking might spur this man to question him in turn, and how would Danny ever explain his compartmentalized self to someone else? This is something he has never done in the park and he doesn't want to start now. Please, not now" (Lee 29). Here, Danny is in the park outside of his apartment looking for a hook-up, or casual partner. The narrative alludes to many men from the gay community doing the same thing at the park – it is a normalized behavior and activity. Even among his peers in the gay community, Danny is never able to be fully out, but rather must compartmentalize

all the aspects in his life. In this sense, he is meeker and much more quiet about negotiating the private and public aspects of his sexuality, not unlike how his mother was with her own life.

The Role of Mother

One of the main plotlines of Lee's narrative is the role of mother to Danny. It is worth examining further as the relationship Danny develops with Val is arguably more maternal than the relationship he has with his own mother, Betty. Danny's relationship with his mother, Betty is strained at best. Having run away from home as a teenager, Danny manages to stay away from his family while remaining in Vancouver, having made a life for himself within the city's gay community. It is only upon returning home for dinner at the behest of his younger sister that Danny reflects on his relationship with his mother, "He realizes that not every moment with his mother was painful. Still, it would be simpler to leave it all in the dusty cracks of his mind. It's his fault for returning home" (Lee 199). Even after being away from home for so long, Danny's memories of his mother are still unreconciled – they remain uncomfortable and awkward.

Having left his parents home shortly after finishing high school, Danny's homelife is akin to what Eng describes as 'coming out' or 'being out.' That is, his parents home is not an inhabitable space for his status as a queer body. While it is only hinted at in the novel that Danny left his parent's house due to his frustration with his family being unable to accept his closeted homosexuality, Danny's liminal

status as Asian Canadian and queer intersects in such a way that both identities compete with one another without being entirely reconciled as it relates to his homelife. As a queer body, Danny must constantly negotiate between private and public spheres, constantly suspended between 'in' and 'out' of the closet, and between origin and destination. In his personal life in the West End, he is able to be 'out' and even cruises the local parks at night. At his parents home (a private sphere), Danny is back 'in the closet,' unable to acknowledge or discuss his sexuality with his family that expects him to marry and carry on the family name through his offspring.

Although Danny's sexual identity is intertwined with his cultural identity, his sexual identity is nonetheless discussed within the context of his mother figures. Both Betty and Val act as mother figures to Danny, and it is in such a way they are able to accommodate him coming to terms with his own sexuality. After returning home for the first time since he ran away from home, Danny realizes, "...how bad a son he really is, how he is no longer happy to sit with his gentle-voiced mother in a steamy kitchen. Now, whenever he thinks of her, he is devising ways to avoid her completely" (Lee 199-200). His mother is represented as nothing more than a housewife he actively seeks to avoid. Val, on the other hand, counters his mother's meek nature and is idolized for her brash and aggressive personality, "He thinks of Val. She feels, she rages, she can say, *You're a fucking idiot*. When, as a child, he had met her, he knew in an instant that she was not a woman like his mother" (Lee 200, Lee's italics). In terms of these two women and their involvement with Danny's sexuality, Danny realizes that Val, "is the mother who would have understood the

confusion that twisted within his belly when he thought of other boys, the longing to burst out of his humdrum shell and emerge as something new and wonderful” (Lee 200). In this instance, Val acts as more than a maternal figure for Danny, she is represented somewhat as a savior figure – releasing him from his closeted status, freeing him from the isolation he felt from within his own family. His mother after all, is represented as a meek, mundane and monotonous woman through Danny’s perspective, “His own mother is a turtle, sometimes poking her head out to watch the world with small black eyes, careful to upset nothing. Her smell speaks of work, days in the kitchen and cleaning other people’s homes, nights on her knees in her own narrow hallway” (Lee 200).

It is revealed that Val had become pregnant while on the road as a dancer and actually kept her baby. This does not go as Val planned however, as she soon realized that she was not well suited for motherhood, “Mothers were supposed to be competent, unfailingly loving and calm...everything they did or said was for their children, not to satisfy their disgusting desires for the gaze of men. Val was a mother. But not the kind anyone wanted” (Lee 292). Val ends up leaving the baby with her barren sister and her brother-in-law who end up raising the child as their own. It is only after Danny comes back into Val’s life (he is hired as the wedding photographer of Val’s “niece”) that she comes to terms with her decision years before when she is faced with having to be a maternal figure for an adult Danny. With Val acting as the better mother for Danny (instead of his own mother), she is also a better mother to Danny than she ever was to her own daughter. While Val is the biological mother of her ‘niece,’ it is Danny that she becomes the surrogate

mother figure to. In a way, this legitimizes and authenticates Val's lost status as a mother after previously giving up her daughter.

Both mother figures share only one scene in the entire novel. While still dancing in Chinatown, Val shops at Danny's family's store for costume pieces and props for her Siamese Kitten routine. The family store, is of course, in Chinatown. While they have no idea of the connections between them through the young Danny, Val ends up conversing with and inviting Danny's mother to come watch her perform, "Chuckling, the woman threw the fans back down on the counter. "I can tell you enjoyed that. You should come to the club sometime, catch my show." Betty giggled, shaking her head. "Oh no, I could never do that" (Lee 328). This scene is particularly telling in the ways these women view sexuality and their own bodies. Val is able to make a living off her body and its hypersexualization. Betty, rather, has used her body to produce and provide for her children. Val is also much more open with her sexuality and physical appearance, whereas Betty is content to watch and gaze at another female body.

Perhaps the most poignant part of their interaction is Val's unknowing motherly advice to Betty, "Honey, you should just tell your husband where he can stick it. You're the mother here. You know what your kids need" (Lee 329). Although this quote is in response to Betty's frustration with her husband thinking she babies Danny too much, the role of mother is nonetheless called into question. As Val asserts that it is the mother that knows what her children needs, it is slightly ironic that this advice is coming from a 'childless' burlesque dancer and being offered to a meek mother of two. Furthermore, this quote also undermines Betty's role as

mother – she does not in fact, know what her children need. Although she pampers Danny and tries to shelter him, he remains disconnected from his family and ends up running away from them entirely.

Betty does end up going to the club a few days later to watch the dancers, although she does not get to see Val perform her Siamese Kitten routine. This becomes a moot point as it is in this scene that we learn that Betty is not the turtle Danny describes her as earlier on in the book. That is, Betty is not necessarily content or satisfied with her monotonous and repetitive lifestyle, “The twenty minutes inside this place would have to be forgotten, locked away in her brain. It didn’t matter anyway... Her family didn’t dance, and that was that” (Lee 334). Although it is Betty’s memory of visiting the burlesque club after meeting the dancer, the same episode is also reiterated through Danny’s perspective when he remembers seeing his mother in the audience when he went into the club looking for Val (who had already left the club to work as a traveling dancer). It is worth noting that we are given both Betty’s and Danny’s perspective of the incident as it demonstrates the different ways in which Betty occupies her role as mother. Her intent to forget her twenty minutes in the club demonstrates that Betty is actually capable of being more than a housewife and domestic servant, she may also act as a spectator and take in what the burlesque club is able to offer – something Danny is completely unaware of up until this scene. It is only after he sees his mother in the audience at the burlesque club that Danny is aware his mother is capable of something more. Yet, it is also at this point that he is angered and feels betrayed by his mother for not acknowledging this part of herself in front of the family. Betty is

still a meek and understated woman that will never live up to Danny's admiration for Val.

There is a disconnect between what this family is and what it wants to be. Indeed, Betty highlights the fractured and misunderstood nature of the family when she is reminded of her son's attitudes towards her:

half the time, little Danny stared straight through her. He thought she wasn't interesting enough to hold his attention, and, while this occasionally made Betty sad, right now she considered it useful. The quiet, muddy-skinned other couldn't possibly have music and dance and laughter ringing inside her body. These things belonged to the beautiful people. (Lee 334)

This internal monologue is also the first time Betty acknowledges that she may indeed know more about her son than she lets on (and what Danny thinks she knows about him). It also demonstrates that much like how Danny is conflicted with coming out to his family about his sexual identity, so too does Betty struggle with coming to terms with only ever been a meek and quiet maternal figure. There is no dancing, only cleaning other people's houses and taking care of children.

At the close of the novel though, it seems as though Danny will indeed reconcile his relationship with his mother. It is also hinted that he is on his way to coming out to her as well, "He meets his mother's eyes and sees her for what she is: loving, worried, hemmed in by the borders of this house and her family. He doesn't wish she were someone else anymore. He doesn't wish that for anyone" (Lee 346). The novel ends shortly after this quote with Danny showing his mother a picture of him with Frank, his recently deceased ex-lover. It is left for the reader to assume that Danny has reconciled his sexual identity and is coming out to his mother. What is just as significant about this quote is that Danny has also realized something in his

mother, that she is not the timid and submissive housewife he had thought her to be throughout the novel, but rather that her worry and passivity were as a result of being 'hemmed in by the borders' of their home for all those years.

The Role of Chinese Canadian

Much like in her first novel, *The End of East*, Lee goes to great lengths to represent the diasporic experience and being Chinese in Canada. This novel, however, has the added dimension of sexual identity added to it. At play here is the overlap of Danny's cultural identity as a Chinese Canadian and his sexual identity as a gay man in the 1980s during the AIDS epidemic. Danny must reconcile his position within his family, not unlike Sammy in Lee's first novel, while also having to negotiate the terms of his sexual identity as a non-white male. Lee combines the overlapping notions of Danny's sexual identity and his racial identity in the way she presents Danny's relationships with his family members. At the same time, Lee is quick to add a brief acknowledgement of the AIDS epidemic of the 1980's when Danny ponders what finally coming out to his family could look like, "If he calls his sister, or goes to see his parents, he will risk the silence that inevitably descends on his family gatherings; the silence that would be too tempting to break with *I am gay, or I think I might be dying*" (Lee 206, Lee's italics). Danny does however acknowledge his unreconciled cultural identity by admitting, "He knew he wasn't trying to make his parents even a little bit happy. He knew that he was sacrificing his sister for his own imperfect freedom" (Lee 324). By running away from home

and letting his younger sister look after their parents, Danny escapes one identity only to be trapped by another. Traditionally, as a son and the eldest child, Danny would have been expected to care for his ageing parents and start a family of his own. By running away and refusing to out himself to his family as a homosexual, Danny avoids coming to terms with both his sexual and cultural identities. He does not have to admit he is gay, nor does he take on the traditional roles of a heterosexual Chinese Canadian male – husband, father, and caregiver for elderly parents.

Chinatown ultimately becomes a space of contention for Danny, especially as it relates to his childhood. His father's store was located in Chinatown, the enclave is where he meets Val, and like other characters in *The End of East* and *Disappearing Moon Café*, Danny seeks to avoid any connection with the ethnic enclave, "Chinatown is a place Danny avoids. Elements from his past hide in alleys and doorways, emerging silently when he walks by. They watch him with eyes full of reproach, frowning at his well-dressed self..." (Lee 308). Much like how Pon Man in *The End of East* avoids Chinatown at all costs once he has moved away from the area, so too does Danny try to stay away once he runs away from his family. For both characters, it seems that too much of their past is entrenched in the space for them to be able to go back. Furthermore, Chinatown in, *The Better Mother*, does not appear as a space where Danny can reconcile any kind of a sexual identity. In Chinatown, he is bound by his family and obligation as the only son and is unable to acknowledge any other kind of identity other than that of a Chinese Canadian son.

In terms of racialized bodies and cultural identity, Danny's identity seems to be coded within ideas of home or at the very least belonging to a sense of place. Danny leaves his childhood home after feeling like he does not belong there, only to create a surrogate home within Vancouver's gay community throughout his twenties. David Eng provides an interesting correlation between location and citizenship that speaks well to Danny's reconciliation of cultural and sexual identities, "In its alignment with the nation-state, home becomes the site of validation, the privileged location for the benefits of citizenship, the central place for belonging" (Eng 205-06). It is from his parent's home that Danny receives no validation, no acknowledgment of his identity as a queer body. Without a sense of home, Danny has no place to belong and yields no benefits of belonging to his family. That is, the benefits of citizenship that Eng is referring to, do not yield themselves in the context of Danny's position (or citizenship) within his own family. Val also faces challenges in aligning a sense of home and belonging with her life as a travelling burlesque dancer. Initially leaving their parent's destitute house in the suburbs for a damp bedroom in a Vancouver boarding house, Val and her sister leave home in order to make a new life for themselves. The only life Val is able to make for herself is in Chinatown as a waitress and then a dancer. It is only in, what was the dingiest part of town at the time that Val is able to carve out a place of home and belonging. As a burlesque dancer in the mid-twentieth century, Val is already on the fringes of society for her occupation. As a white female, she is only able to carve a place of belonging in a specifically non-white part of town, Chinatown.

Eng takes his argument of home and place for queer bodies further, “Taken together, these numerous problems of home urge us to consider the intersection of queerness and diaspora – the implications of their various crossings – in Asian American studies” (206). Jen Sook Fong Lee brings the intersection of diaspora and queerness to the forefront in, *The Better Mother*, not only through queer bodies such as Danny’s, but also through sexualized bodies from marginalized communities such as Val’s. Danny, a Chinese Canadian gay man, must reconcile the intersectionality of his racialized identity as a Chinese Canadian man and his sexual identity as a gay man during the 1980s. Danny’s diasporic identity as a person of colour is intersected with his emerging identity as a gay man. Similarly, Val acts a diasporic figure in so much that she lives on the peripheries of society and is only able to finally make a kind of home for herself in an area that was never really meant to be hers in the first place. By forging a sense of place within Chinatown, where she works, Val becomes a diasporic figure, an other. Val’s identity also intersects in so much that she must reconcile her diasporic identity – a travelling burlesque dancer with routes to Chinatown – with that of her maternal identity. Her status as a both a biological and a surrogate mother intersect her identity as a non-maternal burlesque dancer.

One of the last quotes of Eng’s I wish to consider concerns the role of the hyphen and its correlation to both the diasporic and the queer, “To consider the hyphen in Asian American studies requires the investigation of diaspora as a function of queerness” (215). Here, Eng is not merely referencing queerness as one’s sexual identity, as he continues, “This is queerness not only in the sense of sexual

identity and sexual practices; it is also queerness in the sense of critical methodology for evaluating Asian American racial formation across multiple axes of difference as well as in numerous local and global manifestations” (215). Eng’s passage extends very well to the Asian Canadian context. Diaspora is not merely a racial displacement like the Chinese in Vancouver, but rather a much more complicated formation across many boundaries and in numerous locations. It is the intersectionality and the complicated nature of an Asian Canadian identity (in this context Chinese Canadian identity) in *The Better Mother*, that proves to be the queerness to which Eng is referring. The basis for which Danny’s identity is evaluated in the public sphere – that of a racialized and hyphenated Canadian, as well as a closeted gay – differs from that which is evaluated in public spheres. Here, Danny may be seen as the runaway son who abandoned his family. He may also be seen as emerging from his closeted status as a gay man as he slowly reveals himself throughout the novel.

The idea of Chinatown as an ethnic enclave is worth exploring in terms of one’s authenticity as a Chinese Canadian. The purpose of Chinatown was initially to segregate the Chinese migrant workers from the rest of the (white) population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the mid twentieth century, Chinatown was becoming less of a place of isolation for Chinese Canadians. As we have seen in SKY Lee’s, *Disappearing Moon Café*, many Chinese people succeeded in Chinatown as part of the model minority, while others faded in to obscurity and vice. Still, these characters were racially and ethnically Chinese. Jen Sook Fong Lee presents an intriguing case with a character like Val. Although Caucasian, Val is

arguably the only character in the novel who really succeeds in Chinatown. Val is a successful burlesque dancer under her Siamese Kitten moniker and makes a very good living for herself, even after the birth of her child. Compared to someone like Danny, who runs away from, and wants nothing to do with his father's store in Chinatown, Val is able to maintain herself by working in the enclave. Danny's father's success in Chinatown is also somewhat debatable as he runs a humble and modest shop in Chinatown that mostly caters to tourists and visitors. None of the Chinese Canadian characters in *The Better Mother*, owe any of their successes to Chinatown. Although not ethnically Chinese, Val remains on the margins of society and is able to make a place for herself in a space that would not normally be a hospitable environment for her.

Val's relative success in Chinatown demonstrates some of the ways in which racial and cultural identity are not always relegated or even negotiated/constituted within ethnic enclaves. That is, one's race does not always constitute the level of achievement they may have in a racialized space. Unlike in Jen Sook Fong Lee's, *The End of East*, where Chinatown was necessarily intertwined with cultural and racial identity, Lee's, *The Better Mother*, disrupts the correlation between race, ethnic enclave and isolation. The idea that Val, a Caucasian burlesque dancer, is able to succeed in the predominantly Chinese Canadian Chinatown serves to disrupt the notion that race and gender are inherently tied to the enclave. What is worth noting, however, is that the space in which Val is able to succeed is nonetheless a racialized and marginalized space. That her success is relegated to the boundaries of Chinatown demonstrate that characters such as Val continue to intersect with other

marginalized people and communities. Even after retiring from the burlesque scene, Val finds work as a lingerie salesclerk at Woodward's department store, only a few blocks away from the notorious Chinatown.

Both Val and Danny eventually escape the notorious area – Danny, for the West End of Vancouver, and Val, for a job as a department store salesgirl a few blocks away. Not unlike the two previous novels examined, Chinatown continues to be a space from which to escape. It is not a place where one finds solace for extended amounts of time. Although Val was able to make her living as a dancer in Chinatown, she eventually leaves the space and settles in an apartment outside of the city. There remains a push to get away from a space that once isolated and segregated a very specific group of people.

Last Thoughts

Themes of personal and cultural identity are at work throughout *The Better Mother*. While Chinatown does not figure as significantly in this narrative as it does in *Disappearing Moon Café* and *The End of East*, *The Better Mother* nevertheless explores the idea of Chinese Canadian identity and its unstable and competitive nature. What *The Better Mother*, does explore in greater detail is the intersection of cultural identity with one's sexuality. Unable to integrate into Vancouver's Chinatown, Danny escapes his life within Chinatown and his family's home for the comforts of Vancouver's West End and the gay community. Alternately, Val is only (initially) able to succeed within the confines of Chinatown, first, as a waitress at a

café in order to support her and her younger sister, then, as a burlesque dancer and entertainer at a Chinatown club. Space, in *The Better Mother*, is negotiated and disrupted constantly depending on one's social standing and socio-economic status.

Furthermore, *The Better Mother*, takes the idea's of the female body and motherhood beyond the scope of the biological. Unable to conceive any children of her own due to the physical trauma she suffered at as a young girl, Val's sister raises Val's biological daughter as her own. Val's inability to cope with motherhood early on in her daughter's life also challenges the idea of maternal instincts and desires. In order to keep living her life as a travelling burlesque dancer, Val gives up her only child to her sister and brother-in-law to raise in the suburbs. Val does, however, become a surrogate mother to Danny who is unable to connect with his own mother. It is here that Val becomes the better mother in two ways – she is a better mother to Danny than his own mother, and she is a better mother to an adult Danny than she ever was to her own child. Val's role as a burlesque dancer also serves to undermine or at the very least challenge the role of the female body – it is not simply meant as a vehicle for producing and raising children, but rather, Val's body is used as a means to entertain both a male and female audience. Val's occupation as a burlesque dancer furthermore allows her to use her body to support herself financially. Finally, Danny's liminal position as a Chinese Canadian gay man also calls into question what it means to be Chinese Canadian and what it means to be a queer body. Although Chinese Canadian and gay identities intersect, they remain distinct and separate from one another. That is, for Danny, his cultural identity is tied more

to race as a Chinese Canadian, while his sexual identity as a queer body remains something else entirely to be reconciled.

Leaking Borders: Concluding Discussions of Diaspora

This project has sought to grapple with many questions currently in discussion across diaspora studies, Canadian studies and Cultural studies by examining literary representations of Chinatown within twentieth century Asian-Canadian fiction. More specifically, this thesis discusses representations of Vancouver's Chinatown and its relationship to cultural identity and memory in three contemporary Chinese Canadian texts: SKY Lee's, *Disappearing Moon Café* and Jen Sook Fong Lee's *End of East* and *The Better Mother*. Both authors are women of the Chinese Canadian diaspora and include Chinese characters as protagonists in their respective narratives. For these reasons, I label them as Chinese Canadian texts throughout this thesis. While much work has been done in the fields of sociology, cultural studies and history on subjects such as Chinese people in Canada, Chinese culture in Canada and the history of the Chinese in Canada, my particular research of examining works of fiction written by and about Chinese Canadians will also contribute the growing body of work in fields such as: Diaspora studies, Canadian Post Colonial fiction in English, Asian North American studies and Canadian Cultural Studies. Furthermore, by paying particular attention to ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown, a more succinct historical background can be provided of the Chinese in Canada. This historical background also provides the basis for which I use as a jumping off point to further discuss works of fiction.

Some of the questions discussed in previous chapters include: How does one's ethnic identity influence their cultural identity (and vice versa)? What is

'Chineseness' and how (if at all) is it tied to a larger diasporic identity? How has the significance of ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown developed, altered or challenged the status quo of cultural identity? What are the implications of legitimacy and authenticity of one's cultural awareness and cultural identity? Finally, how are legitimacy and authenticity connected to one's family lineage?

I would like to close this project with a brief discussion of Chinese Canadian literature. With a project that has attempted to explore and reconcile themes of identity, culture, race, ethnic enclaves, and sexuality within Chinese Canadian literature, it is useful to return albeit briefly, to the body of work as it currently stands. Larissa Lai reminds us that much of the art and literature stemming from the Chinese (and Asian) Canadian community was initially brought about as a response to political calls for redress, formal acknowledgment at the federal level for past racist legislation and institutional exclusion, as well as demands for more inclusion of racialized minority groups (2-3). As such, SKY Lee's, *Disappearing Moon Café*; and Jen Sook Fong Lee's, *The End of East* and *The Better Mother*, may all be viewed as part of a larger corpus of work within Canadian literature that demands attention and recognition as its own genre within the Canadian context. All three texts discuss many of the notions found in most Chinese Canadian fiction: what it means to be Chinese in Canada at different periods throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. All three narratives challenge and even disrupt accepted ideas of Vancouver's Chinatown as one of the largest ethnic enclaves for the Chinese in Canada. Furthermore, all three texts represent many versions of what it is to be Chinese in Canada.

Overarching Themes

Beginning with SKY Lee's, *Disappearing Moon Café*, there is a marked difference between the business owning and white-collar Wong family and the working-class staff they employ. Furthermore, ideas such as the model minority are also discussed through the first-generation immigrant characters – some of them succeed and raise healthy, productive families, while other characters fall victim to their own vices, living in squalor and obscurity after their temporary wealth fades away. Lee's, *Disappearing Moon Café*, also goes to great lengths to focus on the female members of the family, initial outsiders who married into the family. By emphasizing the female characters, Lee demonstrates not only the tribulations of a Chinatown bachelor society during the first half of the twentieth century, but also how female characters may exercise a sense of agency and power over their male counterparts. They become much more than vehicles for reproducing the family line and the next generation of the Wong family. Rather, through the incestuous storyline, Lee is able to demonstrate the complicated intersections of gender, race, identity politics and class status among immigrants and their children in Canada.

In regards to Jen Sook Fong Lee's, *End of East*, however, the narrative goes to greater lengths to represent the cultural identity and race politics within a given family unit. Although Chinatown is present and indeed involved in coming to terms with one's cultural identity and position within the family unit, the emphasis on what constitutes being Chinese Canadian is found within the position (and

generation) one occupies within the family. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the presence or absence of a heritage language such as Chinese by the third generation further disrupts notions of authenticity, legitimacy and what constitutes Chineseness and Canadianess. Not unlike how SKY Lee puts English and Chinese first names in competition with one another, so too does Jen Sook Fong Lee use ambiguity and language to disrupt the idea of one's cultural identity and what it means to be Chinese in Canada to the second and third generations of Chinese Canadian families. Markers and identifiers such as names and language (or even dialect) are put into dialogue with one another in order to discuss authenticity and legitimacy to a particular culture or cultural identity. It is worth noting that Beatrice Wong (*Disappearing Moon Café*) and Sammy Chan (*The End of East*) are both third generation female characters in their respective narratives. Both women are called by an English name, and the level of their abilities to communicate in any Chinese dialect remains ambiguous throughout the story. If name and language act as signifiers for one's cultural authenticity, then the question remains if third generation characters such as Beatrice and Sammy are indeed Chinese, or otherwise Canadian or Chinese Canadian. The purpose of the ambiguity is not necessarily to provide a concrete answer in terms of cultural politics and identity, but rather to disrupt them and provoke a deeper examination of what it even means to be culturally authentic.

Jen Sook Fong Lee's second novel, *The Better Mother*, furthers the discussion of cultural identity by intersecting it with topics such as race and sexuality. While cultural identity is certainly reconciled in the way characters such as Danny comes

to terms with his status as a Chinese Canadian man in the gay community, and alternately a gay man within the Chinese Canadian community; and the way Val transitions from a young girl growing up in a poor family on a destitute farm in a small town outside Vancouver, to a burlesque dancer working in a Chinatown club and living in a boarding house on the outskirts of Chinatown, *The Better Mother* forces the limits of identity beyond culture to include sexuality and marginalized people. As SKY Lee intersects race and culture through the interracial families of the Aboriginal and First Nation's characters that form relations with the initial Chinese migrant workers, so too does Jen Sook Fong Lee intersect race and sexuality to bring together marginalized groups on the peripheries of society. In the instance of *Disappearing Moon Café*, it is the Aboriginal people and Chinese migrant workers who act as the initial marginalized communities. In *The Better Mother*, it is the burlesque community of the mid twentieth century, the gay community of the 1980's and the Chinese Canadian community of the twentieth century that form the basis of Vancouver's social outcasts. Furthermore, *The Better Mother*, calls into question notions of motherhood, family lineage, legitimacy and authenticity. Although Val does not raise her daughter after the first year, she remains a mother figure to Danny as he reconciles his identity as a gay Chinese Canadian during the AIDS epidemic in 1980's Vancouver. Val's legitimacy as a mother is brought into question since she is not a mother to her biological daughter, yet she becomes a surrogate mother to Danny who fails to keep any kind of relationship with his own mother. Family lineage is also distorted when Val's sister and brother-in-law take her daughter, rename her 'Kelly,' and raise her as their own without telling the child

any different. Although incest and inter-family relationships are not present in *The Better Mother* as they are in *Disappearing Moon Café*, both narratives blur the lines between family lineage and legitimacy to one's family name. The legitimacy and authenticity of motherhood is called into question in *The Better Mother*, through Val's interactions with Danny, and with her niece/daughter, Kelly. Although not a biological mother to Danny, Val maintains some aspects of motherhood by becoming an unexpected surrogate mother to him. The incest storyline present in *Disappearing Moon Café*, demonstrates the significance of family lineage as well as the authenticity of it. Ting An, after all, remains the orphan - the illegitimate son of a Chinese man and Aboriginal mother, yet fathers the children of his half-brother's wife, Fong Mei (Beatrice, John and Suzanne). Ting An's own son, Morgan, will later father a child with one of Ting An's illegitimate daughter's, Suzanne. Although entwined in a relatively taboo subject such as incest, family lineage, legitimacy and parenthood are nonetheless challenged and questioned not unlike how they are in *The Better Mother*. Both narratives negotiate the boundaries of parenthood as well as legitimacy within one's own family. Legitimacy and authenticity become intertwined with motherhood and parenthood as legitimate lineage comes into question. In essence, both authors are forcing various marginalized communities to intersect and come together in their narratives, not unlike the ways in which similar communities came together artistically and politically during the 1980s and 1990s for recognition and acknowledgment. These narratives however, simultaneously maintain a dialogue between authenticity, family lineage and motherhood.

Book Titles

Before I move on from my final discussion of the novels, I will briefly draw attention to the books' titles. These titles are worth exploring further, especially as it relates to the cultural identity and conflicts that are found throughout the respective narratives. Lee's title for her novel, *Disappearing Moon Café*, is worth careful consideration as it possibly foreshadows the absence of links to China or Chineseness. After all, China is not remembered or reconciled throughout the narrative, it remains in the past. Only Fong Mei has plans to return to Hong Kong after years of nostalgia, but even so, at the time the novel is set, Hong Kong is still under the control of Great Britain. In effect, China all but disappears from Chinatown (and by extension, the characters), not unlike how the moon disappears at sunrise. Whether the book title was a conscious choice made by the author, the link between China and Chineseness slowly disappearing throughout the novel is visible within the books' title.

Jen Sook Fong Lee's, *The End of East*, literally signals to the end of ties with the east, in this case, China being located in East Asia. Sammy is the third generation of her family and part of the first generation to be born in Canada. By the time the Chan family is finished immigrating to Canada (Pon Man's mother and sisters arrive in Canada shortly after he does) and Pon Man's wife immigrates to Canada, all ties with China are cut, signaling an end to the ties with the east. The 'end of east' could also stand for the end of China's relationship with this particular family. Turning towards the other direction, one could go eastbound to get to Canada by water or

air. As such, once the Chan family is finished immigrating to Canada, there would be no need to return. This would sever all ties from the Chan's ancestral village in China to the east (Canada).

The Better Mother puts race into play, as the Caucasian character, Val, becomes the better mother to the Chinese-born-Canadian, Danny. As his surrogate mother, Val becomes a better mother to Danny than his own mother was ever able to be for him. Val is also a better mother to Danny than she ever was to her own biological daughter. Here, Val's motherhood and status as mother is disrupted when she gives away her daughter for her sister to raise, only to be reinstated by her status as surrogate mother to Danny. Furthermore, Val was the mother figure and main provider for her sister after they left the family home to live at the boarding house in Vancouver. While her sister is still too weak and ill to work, Val finds work first as a waitress in Chinatown, then as a burlesque dancer in order to provide for her and her sister. Connections between motherhood and the motherland are also absent in Lee's, *The Better Mother*. Notions of China are visibly absent throughout this novel. Only the cook Val worked for upon her arrival to Vancouver returns to China, but no other discussion of him or China is mentioned afterwards. In this sense, Canada becomes the better, if not only, motherland throughout the novel.

Significance of research

The impetus for bringing together these three specific narratives for closer analysis alongside one another was for various reasons. All three novels are written

by Chinese Canadian women over the last twenty-five years. Thematically speaking, all three novels employ a multi-protagonist narrative that is told over a non-linear timeline. Furthermore, all three novels are grounded within and around Vancouver's Chinatown. All three texts discuss themes of family, immigration, cultural identity and identity politics. That said, the ways in which these themes are discussed and even disrupted varies according to each respective text. While there are thematic similarities between all three novels, the ways in which they are discussed remains unique and original to each text. As such, *Disappearing Moon Café*, *The End of East* and *The Better Mother*, provide valuable insight into the Chinese Canadian literary community when explored alongside one another, which also happens to be manageable within the limits of a graduate thesis.

By exploring works of fiction from Chinese Canadian authors alongside theory and research from fields such as: Canadian studies, Asian North American Diaspora studies, Cultural studies and Post Colonial studies, this thesis sought to bring together a particular literature and theory that has not otherwise been studied together on a large enough scale. This original research attempts to add to the existing body of knowledge in the aforementioned fields while making a contribution to the growing field of Canadian Literature studies. Within current academic circles, there exists varied discussions on the many aspects of Asian Canadians; this thesis explores the position of literature written by and about Chinese Canadians within the larger framework or umbrella of Canadian literature and its representations of culture, identity and ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown's. More specifically, this research explores literary representations of Vancouver's

Chinatown and its links to time and place, cultural identity and sense of family. In doing so, this research aims to add to current discussions of Chinese Canadian literature and theory, while attempting to situate the genre itself among the many other minority genres within Canadian literature.

Final Thoughts – Remaining Research and Further Studies Needed

With the end of this project, it is clear that much research remains to be done to continue linking Chinese Canadian and Asian Canadian literature with academic writing and theory of the Chinese in Canada. Further studies linking marginalized groups and spaces such as Canadian Chinatown's and the queer community are required to better understand the contexts from which they are emerging. Much work has been done on these themes as individual topics; however, a substantial study is still needed at this time to intersect these communities and fields at a scholarly level.

While David Eng's research regarding the intersection of queer studies and Asian American studies is no doubt still relevant and valuable to the field of knowledge in many fields, there has yet to be any comprehensive study or examination of the intersection of queer bodies within the context of Asian Canadian spaces. Furthermore, the work of scholars and artists such as Roy Miki and Larissa Lai have begun to unite artistic and academic communities as it relates to Chinese Canadian literature and cinema during the late 1980's and early 1990's. As the field of Asian Canadian literary studies continues to grow however, more research is

needed to include the current body of work by Chinese Canadian authors. It is this current literature and theory that this thesis has worked to include and represent in its research. By exploring modes of cultural production and identity and the significance of ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown in three Chinese Canadian works of fiction, this thesis attempts to be the beginning of a more comprehensive and detailed examination of Chinese Canadian literature.

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