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Margaret Chon

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BEING BETWEEN

A Review Essay of *Chinese Women Traversing Diaspora: Memoirs, Essays, and Poetry*

Margaret Chon*

An unnamed genre of children's literature exists in which girls have adventures: *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, *Heidi*, *The Secret Garden*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and *The Witch of Blackbury Pond*. In almost all of these stories, birth parents are missing in action and even siblings are rare. These girls seem all alone in the world, often after having been uprooted from another place. They may find older role models in a patchwork fashion, but they mostly rely on their own devices. These devices are not the typical "feminine" wiles of charm and making pacts with the opposite sex (indeed, most of the girls are in the golden period of pre-adolescence); instead they are methods such as interrogation, performance, or competition. The girls survive harsh or unusual experiences, yet they flourish. They do not feel scared, or if they do, the feeling dissolves with time and action into feelings of competence.

*Chinese Women Traversing Diaspora*¹ is the second volume of a series on the theme of "Gender, Culture, and Global Politics."² Professor Sharon Hom, who edited this volume, deliberately contextualizes the "I" and "we" that supply the narrative voice and subject in each of these works as specific ethnic, gendered, and generational locations within Asian America. Although the contributing writers share the experience of being women immigrants from mainland China or Hong Kong, their strategies reflect not only this historical commonality but also the heterogeneity of profession, sexual orientation, and culture. This volume expresses "the diversity and complexity of ways [we] struggl[e] with our disciplinary locations, our Chinese-ness, our multi-cultural, bi-lingual negotiations, and

* Associate Professor, Seattle University School of Law. I would like to thank Professor Lisa Ikemoto for encouraging me to participate in this Symposium, and to acknowledge the intellectual debt I owe to Professor Sharon Hom.

1. CHINESE WOMEN TRAVERSING DIASPORA: MEMOIRS, ESSAYS, AND POETRY (Sharon K. Hom ed., 1997).

2. The series is published by Garland Press and edited by Professor Chandra Tolpade Mohanty.

the ways [we] do not perceive [ourselves] in easy identity pigeonholes."³ Like Dorothy⁴ or Scout,⁵ young girls who transcend the roles assigned to women in different cultures, these authors surpass conventional experiences in their journeys towards voice.

For me—a second generation Korean American woman trained within the disciplinary constraints of American law—the pieces in the book not only raise questions about the authors' writing strategies, but also place demands on my reading strategies. Any reading of these works must be a disciplined one, simultaneously accounting for the multiple locations of the individual writer, the group, and the narrative subject as well as the reader. There are few easy points of identification. Disbelief cannot routinely be suspended for the sake of narrative flow. The authors are fiercely self-reflective and group-interrogative. Any reading of these texts must also strive to be *undisciplined*, in the sense of going beyond one's professional training or cultural ideology. A reader trained in legal texts may ponder the nature of voice and of silence, the loss within translation from and to other languages or disciplines, and the place of emotional rather than logical appeals to knowledge. Moreover, to a Western feminist reader who grew up in the textual tradition of Alice⁶ and Anne,⁷ the shared locus of gender between non-Western and Western experiences at once seems familiar and threatening. These stories blur and challenge my standing definitions of "self" and "other" so as to bring into crisis my own identity as an Asian American woman lawyer. These challenges to my identity resemble the explicit challenges to the identities (and therefore authority) of many of the contributors to this volume.⁸

I find the issue of how to read an increasingly important one for lawyers. Our training often disables us from "hearing" what needs to be heard or "reading" what is there to be read. We select relevant information

3. E-mail message from Sharon Hom, Editor, CHINESE WOMEN TRAVERSING DIASPORA: MEMOIRS, ESSAYS, AND POETRY, to Margaret Chon, Associate Professor, Seattle University School of Law (Mar. 20, 1997) (on file with author).

4. See L. FRANK BAUM, *THE WIZARD OF OZ* (Michael P. Hearn ed., Schocken Books 1983) (1900).

5. See HARPER LEE, *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* (Warner Books 1982) (1960).

6. See LEWIS CARROLL, *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND* (Selwyn H. Goodacre ed., 1982) (1896).

7. See L.M. MONTGOMERY, *ANNE OF GREEN GABLES* (1908).

8. For example, Zhang Zhen recounts her experience at an international poetry festival, at which her "seeming 'freedom' somehow became a marker of her inauthenticity as a Chinese poet." Zhang Zhen, *The Jet-lag of a Migratory Bird: Border-Crossings Toward/From "A Land That Is Not,"* in CHINESE WOMEN TRAVERSING DIASPORA: MEMOIRS, ESSAYS, AND POETRY 13 (Sharon K. Hom ed., 1997).

and discard the irrelevant in the quest to categorize according to the significant boundaries of law. Categorical thinking, however, induces us to ignore important information from outside established zones of knowledge. As contributor Eleanor Yung observes about choreography:

The stage to me has always been a segment of space only seemingly limited by the frame. The stage could be extended beyond the proscenium, or the walls. What happens on stage is only a captured moment of a much bigger picture. It is like watching TV. While the camera lens can only show a certain area, the area beyond the lens continues to exist. What we can see whether on stage or through the lens does not encompass the entirety. In fact, space, being limitless, provides room for all our imagination. While designing what is on stage, I think also of what could be off stage. Therefore, not only are entrances and exits of particular significance to me, the patterns on stage must also provide room for expansion beyond the stage.⁹

Language opens up new worlds, including intellectual worlds, and indeed knowledge itself. But as Eleanor Yung expresses, even two languages are insufficient to express the knowledge of diasporic experiences. Understanding these experiences demands going beyond vocabularies, categories, and concepts rather than limiting them within singular and predictable spaces. For Yung, even linear narratives are not enough; experience spills over into physical movement within and without multiple, revolving stages. Professor Hom also writes: "Ironically, I think I loved dance because I didn't have to find words, and ultimately, I left dance in part, because I also needed another way to speak again . . ." ¹⁰ Yung is also a writer and a dancer, as well as a tai chi practitioner. Contributor Zhang Zhen translated into Chinese the work of an obscure Finno-Swedish woman poet who wrote at the turn of the century from a sanitarium.¹¹ These and other authors connect two or more extremely different cultures through language, movement, or other media. In this process, what is offstage is as meaningful as the stage itself.

9. Eleanor S. Yung, *Moving into Stillness*, in CHINESE WOMEN TRAVERSING DIASPORA: MEMOIRS, ESSAYS, AND POETRY 12–13 (Sharon K. Hom ed., 1997).

10. Sharon K. Hom, *(Per)forming Law: Deformations and Transformations*, in CHINESE WOMEN TRAVERSING DIASPORA: MEMOIRS, ESSAYS, AND POETRY 10 (Sharon K. Hom ed., 1997).

11. "Aside from an intense utopian longing for a country which does not have a name, nor exists in the usual sense, I was from the very beginning intrigued by this semantically nonsensical and grammatically odd title." Zhang, *supra* note 8, at 12 (discussing Edith Sodergran's posthumous collection of poetry in *The Land that Is Not*).

If the “life of the law is not logic . . . [but rather] experience,”¹² then these works mine the experiences of multiple border-crossings and thus complicate Holmes’s aphorism of the legal search for meaning. Silence is as meaningful as sound: the stillness resulting from a dominating politic that suppresses certain forms of individualism in favor of others;¹³ the quiet but persistent studying of a foreign language—English—as a form of resistance to the Cultural Revolution;¹⁴ the invisibility that comes from not understanding or being afraid to act upon the nature of one’s own desire;¹⁵ or the chilled speech of “corporate intimidation, firings, downsizing, job insecurity, fear, cowardice, [] petty politics, and the cult of trivia worship.”¹⁶ Silence, as it has been constructed within the critical legal genres of the American academy, is simply a counterpoint to the previously suppressed voice. Here, the silence is as simple as the emptying out of all thoughts for meditation or as complex as the pre-verbal and meta-verbal fusion of memory, dream, and desire in three or four languages. And, frequently in these pieces, silence is a response to discursive antagonisms created by being between two or more cultural positions.¹⁷

Professor Margaret Woo writes of spending hours soaking up Chinese language books in the summer months in Boston. These Chinese words were determinedly placed into her American life by her Chinese mother and became the foundation for her work as a comparative law expert.¹⁸

12. Book Notices, 14 AM. L. REV. 233, 234 (1880) (reviewing SIR WILLIAM R. ANSON, PRINCIPLES OF THE ENGLISH LAW OF CONTRACT (1879)).

13. “For quite some time, I could not comprehend this contradiction: self-effacing versus self-displaying and trying to forget the self versus becoming more aware of the self.” Ma Yuanxi, *Self Reinstating and Coming to “Conscious Aloneness,”* in CHINESE WOMEN TRAVERSING DIASPORA: MEMOIRS, ESSAYS, AND POETRY 7 (Sharon K. Hom ed., 1997).

14. Zhong Xueping writes, “‘What’s the use? You can’t do anything with it’ they told me, apparently annoyed by non-conformative behavior. Indeed, most of the youngsters around me paid little attention to books (and, as a result, me). (Many, however, were playing even more potentially subversive and dangerous game[s]—having sex.) I did what most Chinese would do at the time—*yangfeng yinwei* (to feign compliance) and continued the study (but more discretely).” Zhong Xueping, *Multiple Readings and Personal Reconfigurations Across the “Nationalist Grain,”* in CHINESE WOMEN TRAVERSING DIASPORA: MEMOIRS, ESSAYS, AND POETRY 3 (Sharon K. Hom ed., 1997).

15. Vivien Ng, *Coming to Terms with History,* in CHINESE WOMEN TRAVERSING DIASPORA: MEMOIRS, ESSAYS, AND POETRY 9–14 (Sharon K. Hom ed., 1997).

16. Ying Chan, *Growing up Colonial and Crossing Borders: Tales of an Accidental Journalist,* in CHINESE WOMEN TRAVERSING DIASPORA: MEMOIRS, ESSAYS, AND POETRY 21 (Sharon K. Hom ed., 1997).

17. Zhong, *supra* note 14, at 37 (“I wondered about my loss for words. Maybe feeling speechless is a normal reaction in these situations.”).

18. Margaret Woo, *[Un]fracturing Images: Positioning Chinese Diaspora in Law and Culture,* in CHINESE WOMEN TRAVERSING DIASPORA: MEMOIRS, ESSAYS, AND POETRY 11–12 (Sharon K. Hom ed., 1997).

Negotiating between her mother's world and her own, Professor Woo forges the tools of her trade and signals her special authority as a "China expert." Although she may not be able to escape entirely the civilizing logic of Western imperialism, her "knowing" of China is a hybrid experience of being the colonizer and the colonized, one that minimizes the danger of recasting her subject—Chinese law—in an "enlightened" Western feminist mold. Professor Woo can claim an authority of understanding on a visceral level not reachable by standard academic knowledge with its dichotomy between scientist and observed. Indeed, there is spectacular emotional work behind the seemingly transparent images of these narratives—work that may be repressed, belittled, or denounced in positivist legal paradigms, with its centering of symbolic and logic-based ways of knowing. To read the narratives is to perform an epistemological excavation that must be at once historically, culturally, and emotionally informed. The coming to voice of these women is possible both because of their ability to escape from boundaries and their embracing of the potential of diaspora. They are moving away from and toward specific, ideologically imposed experiences, so that "destabilising movement itself [i]s a locus of being."¹⁹ These voices are the results of the simultaneous privilege these women enjoy as "Western" academics and the burden they bear as "non-Western" women of color in societies that are constructed on gender, race, and sexual-orientation based inequality. Several authors explicitly recognize the contradiction and insight of looking up from the bottom, to use Professor Mari Matsuda's powerful image,²⁰ as well as looking down from the top. As Professor Rey Chow has cautioned,²¹ the words "subaltern" or "victim"—of political persecution, economic upheaval, or social norms of inequality—are too simple to express the multiple positions occupied by these Chinese women in diaspora. Professor Woo writes:

It was with this sense of "returning" and yet not "arriving," "foreign" and yet not so "foreign," that I found myself being asked yet again to condone and to understand. It was in China, feeling not completely Chinese, categorized as "foreign," that I realized I was not "Chinese" but "Chinese in diaspora." . . . At the same time, it was precisely my position "in diaspora" that gave me more liberty to critique. It was in that position that I

19. Sharon Hom, *Introduction: Points of No Return*, in *CHINESE WOMEN TRAVERSING DIASPORA: MEMOIRS, ESSAYS, AND POETRY 2* (1997).

20. See Mari J. Matsuda, *Looking to the Bottom: Critical Legal Studies and Reparations*, 22 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 323 (1987).

21. See REY CHOW, *WRITING DIASPORA* 27–28 (1993).

was able to raise concerns not otherwise within reach of my Chinese colleagues. It was precisely at the borders that I learned that controls are escapable.²²

Accompanying the danger of easy dismissal of these narratives on the basis of apparent transparency is the “catch-22” of dismissal on the basis of apparent density—or what I term the jargon critique. If, as Michel Foucault claims, an author does not just create but also censors through her selection and exclusion of materials,²³ then legal authors repress information according to the law’s disciplinary requirements: relevant facts, applicable legal rules, favoring the rational voice, and the principle of objectivity while relegating emotions to a nether realm. What is being limited in this stuff of first year law school? Among other things, the perspectives “beyond” those named explicitly or the emotion that “exceeds” a logical argument—an argument that is being made to the powerful and thus crafted to fit particular perspectives. Lawyers often pride themselves on acquiring the skill of articulating stylized multiple perspectives in adversarial arguments. “Yet, the masked speaking of the law is often left un-interrogated,”²⁴ as Professor Sharon Hom reminds us. For lawyers to accuse others of using jargon is at once hypocritical and incomprehensible. The theoretical frameworks adopted by many of these writers allow them to speak about that which is unspeakable or cannot be named in the law’s conventions, as well as to address others who may or may not share the experience and power of either the diaspora or the law.

Professor Hom also tells us that memory is the “always-already-micro-political.”²⁵ Politics are embedded not just within the typical modes of narrative legal discourse—something that twentieth century legal theories have described—but also within our spirit, memories, dreams, and rituals.²⁶ In this collection, Zhang Zhen writes:

I found cinema the best and safest place to learn new languages, without the kind of embarrassment I felt in my rigorous language classes. . . . I tried so hard to read the Swedish subtitles

22. Woo, *supra* note 18, at 19.

23. Michel Foucault, *What is an Author?*, in TEXTUAL STRATEGIES 158–59 (Josué V. Harari ed., 1979).

24. Hom, *supra* note 19.

25. *Id.* at 5.

26. In her ethnographic work, Professor Aihwa Ong describes how Malaysian silicon chip workers in the export processing zones engage in periodic spirit possession as an expression of resistance against the social controls, categories, and contradictions of being female workers within a Muslim tradition, itself embedded within Western capital’s logic. Aihwa Ong, *Strategic Sisterhood or Sisters in Solidarity? Questions of Communitarianism and Citizenship in Asia*, IND. J. GLOBAL LEGAL STUDIES, Fall 1996, at 107.

while listening to the dialogues in English or French that my eyes and ears hurt. Emerging from the cinema, I was exhausted but ecstatic, although I usually had only understood half of the plot. But the images would stay with me a long time, become mingled with the images in my dreams and daily life. Then in my poems I would write about the off-shoots of these processes of alchemy, the alchemy of images and imagination.²⁷

What are the similarities between these narratives and those of Western feminist discourse? The commitment (at the cost of family relationships and mainstream cultural support) the writing represents. The audience that is not likely to be those in straightforwardly powerful (even if sympathetic) positions. But the narratives exceed even the categories such as “intersectionality” that those within the critical legal genres have created for naming experience.²⁸ To borrow from Professor Lisa Lowe, these narratives describe heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity within a dynamic global framework²⁹—speaking multiple tongues, multiple citizenship. Do I, as a “Western” feminist, connect? I can claim a tentative politically-based racial solidarity—Asian American-ness—but, as Professor Sharon Hom points out, “[T]he relationship of particular Asian groups to ethnicized minority groups in the U.S., Chinese for example, to Chinese Americans, needs closer examination if the differences engendered by diasporic traversings are not to be erased by a cultural politics enclosed within domestic frames.”³⁰ And in imagining a woman’s community, it is important not to brush aside “social imaginaries that do not view women’s rights in quite the same way.”³¹

With these twin warnings in mind, I still wonder whether the experiences that seem to separate me from these writers are as durable as we make them out to be. What do the points of commonality show me? Diasporic movement is home. Being part and not-part at once is home. Home is the privilege and loneliness, power and vertigo, of multiple and dynamic positioning. I have often wondered at the restlessness conveyed by my family history, and have jokingly attributed it to nomad “genes” inherited from Mongolian ancestors. But this sense of spatial and cultural movement as part of my “essence” is one that puts me in the same identity zone as these authors, many of whom also claim Asian American-ness.

27. Zhang, *supra* note 8, at 21–22.

28. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, 43 STAN. L. REV. 1241 (1991).

29. LISA LOWE, IMMIGRANT ACTS: ON ASIAN AMERICAN CULTURAL POLITICS (1996).

30. Hom, *supra* note 10, at 10.

31. Ong, *supra* note 26, at 115.

“To be born in colonial Hong Kong means that you are destined to be a permanent exile,” writes Ying Chan.³² She has spent the last twenty-two years in her adopted home of New York City as a journalist who has crossed over from the ethnic press to the mainstream press, and who is one of the few Asian American women to have done so.

Moreover, the same charge that is sometimes leveled against some of the contributors is sometimes also aimed at me: fraudulent misrepresentation. From my perspective, are they “non-Western” because they were born and raised in China (and am I more “Western” because I was born and raised in North America)? Yet, to the Chinese who have not left China, these women may seem inauthentically Chinese, just as to Americans who view Asians as permanent outsiders, I may be an inauthentic American. The categories of “Western” and “non-Western” are used to negate people located within cultural interstices, who might threaten national interests. And yet I think they can be useful categories. For example, embedded within “liberal political theory, from which Western feminism is derived,”³³ is the assumption of an “‘abstracted egalitarianism plateau’ according to which the ‘interests of the members of a community matter, and matter equally.’”³⁴ This does seem to be a significant departure from the way non-Western feminists may view the relation of individual to community.

For years, I have had a calligraphy hanging in my office at the law school, one that was created and given to me as a gift. The Chinese characters read “Man Leads Woman Follows.” One day, a student commented on it, and I finally had the opportunity to reply that it was not supposed to be a “straight” ethnic decoration but rather a kind of joke, a secret wink to anyone who knew me and also knew how to read Chinese characters. The student (an Asian American female) immediately responded that she believed in the social order prescribed by that saying. Our dialogue reminded me that people from “non-Western” cultural backgrounds might have a very different view of equality than those who claim intellectual ancestry within the European Enlightenment. But it was also a dialogue that would have made little or no sense to most of my White female “Western” colleagues. The terms “Western” and “non-Western,” while useful in capturing the cultural difference in understandings of equality, also obscured some of the other meanings that were floating in that conversation. In addition to being used to marginalize

32. Chan, *supra* note 16, at 22.

33. Ong, *supra* note 26, at 113.

34. *Id.*

those who are not “Western enough” or “too Western” to claim authority as an authentic national of a bounded political entity, these concepts are also too crude to express different degrees or kinds of Westernization of those in diaspora. There is no space in these terms for hybrids.

However, the points of divergence show me other things. Zhong Xueping writes self-consciously as a person from the margins (a location I occasionally claim for myself) about something that she claims I simply do not share: the gaze of the Chinese audience in a made-for-China TV show about overseas Chinese in America.³⁵ This gaze, which rewards a specific model of a Chinese woman working in America, according to Zhong, is a nationalist, masculinist gaze not necessarily shared by Asians in America. I find this plausible, as my domestic framework is not one that is weighted with a sense of an obligation to “return” to any particular geopolitical space or to a specific native culture other than that embodied in U.S. cultural production. Zhong’s choice of subject—the television show *Beijing Natives in New York*—is one to which I lack even an indirect response, as I might, for example, to a discussion of “gaze” in an American lesbian feminist filmmaker’s depiction of Black and Hispanic transsexuals in New York.³⁶

Ma Yuanxi’s piece triggers a cascade of thoughts about the construction of the individual within Communist political ideology as opposed to the individual in the capitalist liberal ideology. She arduously peels away the layers of cultural contradictions in the ideology of Communist China regarding the individual: “While directing people to condemn and eliminate individualism, the Chinese communist doctrine also cherished ‘revolutionary heroism,’ that it should be cultivated and developed in a person and displayed when a proper opportunity arose.”³⁷ Her reactions of confusion, alienation, and self-alienation are ones that seem familiar to me, but within a very different ideological frame. She explores her individualism as a ‘piercing of the communitarian veil’ that may be an essential pre-requisite to addressing sexual inequality in a society that embeds gender inequality within explicitly articulated communitarian rather than individualistic values.³⁸ Frame shifting shows us that neither the Communist heroine of selflessness nor the Western heroic

35. Zhong, *supra* note 14, at 13.

36. JUDITH BUTLER, BODIES THAT MATTER: ON THE DISCURSIVE LIMITS OF “SEX” 18 (1996) (reading of PARIS IS BURNING).

37. Yuanxi, *supra* note 13, at 6.

38. Ong, *supra* note 26, at 121.

model of an inflated self can escape the logic of contradictions within rapidly changing cultures.

Nonetheless, the reflexiveness encouraged in Western thought at least allows the corrosive effect of "reason upon reason" to open up the possibility of multiple perspectives. Is there something in these diasporic narratives that performs the same move, but more effectively, with more corrosiveness? Professor Hom convinced me long ago that the answer is "yes." And the best answer I can give to those who are not familiar with her work are her own words, which provide a point of departure for the works collected in this volume:

If as Victor Li suggests, the sojourner question is "Am I Chinese?," and the settler question is "Am I American?" the diaspora question posed by this collection might be stated as: Who am I and how do I exercise political agency in relationship to my communities of "origin" and of choice? . . . [D]iaspora as inhabited by the contributors of this volume, refers to a politics of positioning, and of literal and figurative relocations and transformations, to the re-imagining of "homelands" to arrive at heterogeneous and hybrid selves, to communities of belonging.³⁹

This anthology is not so much about the "I" as it is about the "we." Professor Hom is engaged in a project of excavating individual histories so as to enlarge the zone of group choice. Her reference to "political agency" is not so much a glorification of individual equality as it is a step in a long process of claiming *any* political terrain for Asian women. The women who wrote for this volume, like myself, do not represent the vast majority of Asian women globally. Statistically, we are outliers; politically, we may be unrepresented. But our choices do matter if only because we have greater resources, visibility and power to wield on behalf of other Asian women. The emphasis on the self in these works is ironically an emphasis on humility, because it is only through self-awareness that our power can be carefully deployed so as not to replicate existing structures of inequality.

If I have a criticism of Professor Hom's quest for naming the "beyond," for her creative performance of the already over-reified realm of social construction,⁴⁰ it is that she may be so far ahead of existing discursive tools that she is in danger of being misunderstood or manipulated or worse—ignored.

39. Hom, *supra* note 19, at 16.

40. MICHAEL TAUSSIG, *MINESIS AND ALTERITY: A PARTICULAR HISTORY OF THE SENSES* xvi-xvii (1993).

Yet in these works of Chinese women traversing diaspora, as in the books I read as a child, the strong female voice in movement is the centered voice. This voice is compelling without insisting on authority. And its authority rings even within the insistent complexity of Professor Hom's vision. I still treasure my edition of *Anne of Green Gables*, the pages of which are redolent of the Canadian childhood in which I had all the time in the world to climb trees and snowbanks. Many of these heroines are not likeable at first, either to us or to others within their stories. They are arrogant or gawky or neglected young girls who grow into grace and capability. Alchemy intervenes. I recently discovered *The Korean Cinderella*, written in English and exquisitely illustrated with a magic frog, birds, and bull, all of whom help the girl out of her difficulties. The American women who put the book together claim that the Cinderella story can be found in many cultures. In the Korean version, as in the French American version, the prince does eventually arrive. But, like the Chinese women whose works are reviewed here, it is the girl's own openness to experience of all kinds that rescues her in the first instance, and that creates space for her own agency.

