

Metropolis spaces are shifting sites of struggle over identity, meaning and power. The streets, as global urban spaces in which gendered/sexualized subjects are placed and have to negotiate their routes and embodied mobility, can become “a map of visible and invisible relations of meaning, identity and power” for the metropolis always contains “the psychodrama of everyday life” (Pile, 1996: 245-246). Here, I am interested in the relation between city, power, ethnicity, and memory, particularly individual and collective memory and haunting subjectivity within Toronto’s Chinatown. How can Chinatown become a space for individual and collective remembrance, the jet lag disjunctured traveling memory of a particular community? Memory within cityscapes, however ephemeral, speaks of national sentiments, nostalgia, spaces of belonging, and urban cultural politics. How can an Asian postcolonial woman living in a global city of the First World nation remember differently, remember transnationally, remember critically? Why is Chinatown important to the Asian communities - its smell/scent, sensation, sense-making, Chinese and Vietnamese linguistic signs evoking particular histories, commerce, community, belonging and unbelonging? In this *creative auto-textuality*, I will negotiate my own mobility and embodied movements within Toronto’s Chinatown, what Chinatown holds for me, its signifying gestures, its memory traces, its historical lines and grooves unmarked on overt mappings. This is a story line, a contour and a detour, a return with suspicion, to imagine more creatively the relation between history, memory, family and community.

We meet at Dragon City, at the corner of Dundas Street West and Spadina, Ah-ma and my sisters and I. We are heading towards our favorite Vietnamese restaurant. We called it The Train, because the restaurant has a picture of a green train as its logo. The restaurant's decor emits a flavor of bad taste, yet it is comforting, somehow lived in. The walls are a bamboo bright green, covered with large murals of scenes from Vietnam, particularly Vietnamese women in their traditional dresses. Most Chinese and Vietnamese household and public space decor remind me of Svetlana Boym's (2001) research on immigrant homes, nostalgia, memories of homeland, and collectibles. It is as if the immigrants or migrants seem to place a mix match of various immigrant souvenirs to recall the homeland, irrespective of patterns or design plans.

Most people like to order Pho in a Vietnamese restaurant, a hot rice noodle soup with a beef base, topped with fresh basil, bean sprouts and a dash of lemon. I prefer the rice vermicelli with spring rolls and barbecue pork, served with a spicy lemon sweet fish sauce. One of my favorite drinks is Mixed Nut - an iced drink with seaweed, lotus seeds, dried dates and plums. It is said that the drink can cool one's bodily system, diminish the fire anxiety, and rejuvenate one's epidermis.

My mother and sisters are chatting in excitement, sing songs of liquid happiness. These moments are rare; I pause to absorb, hold still to stretch the elasticity of time. Afraid to exhale too quickly lest the magic of everyday spaces disappears. It feels like a family reunion. It has been so long since all of us are in one place, having a meal together, telling vignettes, laugh, cry, laugh and cry some more.

I always knew my extended family is transnational, but lately, even our nuclear family is stretched across the globe. Van lives in Toronto working as an agent for

commercial artists. My mother is retiring in Toronto. And I am doing my Ph.D. at York University. Hong is working on her post doc in San Diego. And Samantha works with wild life animals in Durango, Colorado. Most of the time, she is a globetrotter, traveling in Niger, Ghana, Thailand, Indonesia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Belize, Chili, Australia, and Europe. My father lives and works in Windsor, Ontario. I have family members in Vietnam, Australia, Switzerland, California, Texas, and Ontario Canada, as a result of the post-Vietnam War refugee exodus. At the moment, the minute details of the local spaces take on precedence over the global, the sweetness of the simplicity of tasting steaming noodle soup in the Canadian winter, surrounded by my loved ones.

My experience of the Canadian winter and landscape is far from the Susanna Moodie syndrome; it is always a mix of the need to endure the cold and isolation and the nostalgia for the tropical landscapes of Vietnam. But at the moment, sitting in the booth of this Vietnamese restaurant in Toronto's Chinatown, hearing the heterogeneous speech acts of Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin, Teochiu, and English, tasting on my tongue the familiarity of certain spices like lemon grass and basil, I can fairly reclaim my temporary belonging in this Canadian wintry landscape.

Most literatures on Chinatown have been written from an outsider's perspective looking in: how policies and social regulations exile the Chinese into ghettoized margins within the downtown core; how the mass media portrays the Chinese as "yellow peril" or exoticize Asian women into eroticized, submissive, obedient, Lotus Blossoms or Tiger Ladies. Some studies on Chinatown have retraced the archival cartography of the changing urban blue prints of various Chinatowns.

Chinatown is a diaspora space, linguistically heterogeneous, haunted by the history of racism in conjunction with sexism, class exploitation and homophobia; a place where various bodies and subjectivities collide and gather, negotiate movement and identity, home and belonging; a location permeated by the collective memories of transnational life histories and experiential epistemology. Chinatown, for me, signifies community life with fluid boundaries and disjunctured power negotiation; family relations and dynamics; the interrelation of food and ethnic identity; particular linguistic signs and speech acts; masses of diverse gendered and sexed bodies labor, visit, create, produce, reproduce, suffer and find pleasures within this physical and imagined urban space. Chinatown is a nodal point amongst many nodal points of Chinese/Vietnamese transnational migration. Chinatown has a distinctive smell, a pungent mix of raw and cooked food, human odor and waste; the smell of garlic, ginger, and onion in sizzling hot oil; the smell of seafood such as sea bass, lobster, crab, prawn, scallop and squid; the smell of strange herb found in the Chinese medicine stores; the smell of black dried mushroom, pickled fish, dried scallops, dried shrimps, dried persimmons of the bulk food Chinese stores.

As a Chinese woman born in Vietnam, I have an uncanny doubling reaction to Chinatown spaces. Some days I am frustrated by my feelings of social and physical claustrophobia in Chinatown, the need to always push one's way through the crowd, too many bodies of strangers in one confined social space. I feel exiled from the community linguistically, socially, and politically because of my point of departure as a Chinese diaspora woman born and raised in Vietnam. Because I speak a split tongue of English and Teochiu, and I am unable to communicate in Mandarin or Cantonese, I am perceived

as either a minority amongst minority or I have been assimilated to “Western culture.” I am also exiled because of my deep belief in feminist thinking, movement and activism. My affiliation to feminism, the fact that I am working on my Ph.D. in Women’s Studies, poses a threat to the Chinese patriarchal, patrilineal structures that have taken on new masks in the diaspora contexts. Yet, some days, I also feel at home in Chinatown. My body moves with agility, with comfort, fluid yet solid, one amongst many, unafraid and confident. I do not feel the objectifying sexist, racist and class-bound gaze judging me or exoticizing me. I am simultaneously significant and insignificant; I am only a small part of the larger whole.

Chinatowns as imaginative spaces can stretch, bend, and fold into one another. Toronto’s Chinatown here is inseparable from Vancouver’s Chinatown, inseparable from the history of racist and sexist Canadian immigration acts and the Head Taxes imposed on the Chinese in Canada in the late 19th and early 20th century. Toronto’s Chinatown is inseparable from my remembrance of Vietnam. Toronto’s Chinatown is inseparable from my readings of the Chinese diaspora fiction of Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Laraiisa Lai, Lydia Kwa, Wayson Choy, Sky Lee, Denise Chong, where the setting of the novel, memoir or poetry often takes place in historical or contemporary Chinatowns. At the level of metaphoric collective imagination, Chinatown is a traveling space, warping time and space, to unfold untold stories and lost records. Deep within each Chinatown are the haunting of ghosts and spirits, of those long gone, of those who had suffered and survived - the Pacific railroad builders, the coolie laborers and merchants, the early pioneer Chinese women and men with their bone stories wind blown to dust and particles over time.

Memory is a trickster, shape-shifting fox or coyote. In one moment I am here in Toronto's Chinatown, then a particular smell, a sensation, a song triggers and transports me to scenes in Vietnam. Memory is like the soft footsteps of a tiny warrior woman, leaping from terra-cotta roof to terra-cotta roof, stealing insights in the night. Do you see her fly, leap, vaporize, and transform, metamorphize, blue smoke over a serene lake? Are you fascinated by her dexterity, agility, and skill, robed in black, veiled in black, disguised in magic? She is memory; she is remembrance.

Memory is a hawk, owl and tree. Memory is sand, limestone groove, and fossil engravings. Memory is repressed, memory is suffered, memory is recall, and memory is awakening. She holds my head on her lap and lets me weep. Memory is willow, bamboo green, jasmine scent lingering in the dark of night.

I remember one hot summer day in Toronto's Chinatown. The scent of the durian fruit, the heat wave, the noise, so many Asian bodies in public spaces reminded me of Vietnam. I heard a Vietnamese song played over the loud speaker, coming from a small Vietnamese music store. I did not understand the lyrics of the song, for I have lost most of my applied knowledge of the Vietnamese language. But the melancholic melody and the lingering rhythm, typical of Vietnamese songs about the war and lost love, transported me, stirred emotions in my chest, nostalgia for the past, and my childhood in Vietnam. The smell of the fruit durian sold in Toronto's Chinatown recalled for me scenes of Chinese New Year or Moon Day in Vietnam, familial and communal festivities on the streets and alleyways, and never ending talk-talk.

During the Moon Day Festival, young girls and boys march the streets with colorful lanterns in all shapes and sizes – stars, moon, dragon, fish, and rooster. Tiny

candles and red lanterns of hope and sing songs of laughter, murmur and excitement. We eat moon cakes made of taro, lotus seed, red beans and pickled egg yolk. We taste steamed sweet potatoes, cassava sprinkled with shredded coconut, green grapefruit, with Chinese jasmine green tea after we honor the Moon Goddess with incense on our balcony. Ah-ma would narrate in her soft alluring voice the story of the Moon Goddess.

I stared wide-eyed at the harvest full moon, circle of completion, and vowed to follow her magic and power monthly like the tidal waves lapping the shore. She promises to honor my being becoming, the internal core, and the starting point of the four directions of the earth, so close to the heart a pulsing organ of fire. This here, She points to my heart and chest, is where it all begins. The passion, the writing, the art, the dance for life of non-interference and respect, truth and unmasked honor, loving interrelations, life loving solidarity, diverse women loving diversified women, pleasures and desire, self-embracing erotic, all of these begin here. You must write from the passion within, the inner energy and core. I hold her blessing and guidance in a box for rainy days to come.

Toronto's Chinatown is the physical and social space of Spadina Road between College and Queen St. West, Dundas St. West between Bathurst and University Avenue. Toronto's Chinatown caresses the body and limbs of Kensington Market, the few blocks of restaurants and cafes on Baldwin St., the AGO (Art Gallery of Ontario), and the fashion district of Queen St. West including the blocks of textile stores west of Spadina. Chinatown is bodies and flesh, food, fashion, ghetto, tourist attraction, cultural cosmopolitan, performative identities, confining patriarchy, counter-memory and counter-culture resistance, pop cultural films and music from Hong Kong and Mainland

China, jade stone cool to the ear lobes. Chinatown is a spider web of intricate life narratives, especially women's life stories, some too fragmented or traumatized to be translated by language, a human invention half flawed and mostly limited.

Chinatown is a transnational space, evoking memories, silence and voices, tripping decibels, hybrid pause and awkward narration, linguistic gap and incomprehension, partial understanding balancing partial location. Chinatown is diaspora subject imagining, narrating, and performing the homelands of one's ethnic identity and one's place of birth, to remember one's individual, familial and community's histories, often clothed in problematic nostalgia to soothe the wounds of racial epistemic violence and lack of home and belonging. Chinatown is that bakery where one can purchase cassava cake and coconut bun, that deli which sells Vietnamese submarine stuffed with cold cuts for one dollar each without tax, that vendor woman who sells sticky rice and mung beans wrapped in banana leaves at the corner of Spadina and Dundas. Chinatown is a few strings of green onion, coriander, basil, lemon grass and hot red peppers. Chinatown is commerce, informal ethnic economy providing the produce for the tongue that misses home. Chinatown is exile for the nation-state, backdrop for Hollywood melodramas, and home for the Asian exilic subjects reclaiming belonging, urban global spaces, voice, and embodied identities. Chinatown is an epistemology yet to be understood because of the systemic erasure and forgetting of ethnocentric modernist historiography and neo-Orientalism. Chinatown is wings of madness and wings of desire, blue dragonflies and other botany pressed on rice paper or bamboo paper, brushed with a few strokes of Chinese calligraphy. Chinatown is Chinese watercolor paintings of pink peonies petals caressing desire, gold fish signifying fortune and Lotus of the

Holiness. Chinatown is Buddha, Guan Yin, ancestor worshipping, and the Buddhist temple humble in its simplicity. Chinatown is everything and nothing, nothing and everything, but it means something to me. Chinatown is where I return to when I am homesick, when I miss my family, where I can speak Teochiu and taste fish sauce on my palate. Chinatown is individual and collective memory rooted/routed in a global urban topography, perpetually shifting, always destabilized, where Asian and non-Asian gendered subjects live, labor, make love, find passion, make art, imagine revolution, practice resistance within a homely and unhomely space. Chinatown is the gesture of my artistic and scholarly hand holding a brush dipping into black ink and writing with caution the few strokes for the character – people, human.

Work Cited

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