Theorising the Chinese Diaspora: Chinese Canadian and Chinese Australian Narratives

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DECLARATION

The work in this dissertation is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text. The material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents a study of Chinese diasporic narratives from Canada and Australia and examines the formation and negotiation of diasporic cultural identity and consciousness. Drawing upon theoretical discussions on diasporas in general, it investigates how the Chinese diaspora is imagined and represented, as a visible minority group, within the context of the multicultural nation state.

This dissertation begins with a taxonomy of the modes of explaining diaspora and offers three ways of theorising diasporic consciousness. In analysing the filmic and fictional narrative forms of the Chinese in Canada and Australia, the practices of cultural self-representation and of minority group participation and enjoyment of the nation are foregrounded in order to advance critical analysis of the Chinese diaspora. While taking into account the heterogeneity of the imagined diasporic Chinese community, this study also contends that the formation and negotiation of diasporic consciousness and diasporic cultural identity politics is strongly and invariably affected by the multicultural conditions and policies of their host countries. The adaptation and manifestation of minority groups’ cultural practices are thus a matter of social, cultural and political contingencies more often aligned with dominant cultural expectations and manipulations than with the assertiveness of more empowered minority group participation. This dissertation therefore argues for a broader and more complex understanding of diasporic cultural and identity politics in the widespread attempts to merge and incorporate minority group narratives into the key foundational (‘grand’) narratives of the white
nation state. The importance of reinscribing Chinese diasporic histories into the cultural landscapes of their receiving countries is moreover increasingly propelled by the speed and momentum of globalisation that has resulted in the growing number of multicultural societies on the one hand but also led to the homogenisation of cultural differences and diversities.

In focussing on the fictional and filmic narratives from Canada and Australia, the diversity of the Chinese diasporic community and their conditions are emphasised in order to reflect upon the differences in the administration and practice of multiculturalism in these two countries. The comparative reading of Chinese-Canadian and Chinese-Australian novels and films locates its analysis of notions of ‘homeland’ and belonging, community and national and cultural citizenship within the context of the development and negotiation of diasporic identity politics.
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INTRODUCTION

Rethinking/theorising Diasporas

Ten years ago Ien Ang wrote an article entitled “On Not Speaking Chinese” in which she raised several issues concerning diasporic identity. Of special note is the fact that she began her essay with an autobiographical narrative about Chineseness “to illuminate the very difficulty of constructing a position from which [she] can speak as an (Overseas) Chinese” (2001: 24). In so doing, she highlighted “the notion of [the] precariousness of identity” while signalling “the indeterminacy of Chineseness as a signifier for identity” (2001: 24). For Ang, the syncretic meanings of “diasporic Chineseness” are the result of the irreducible specificity of diverse and heterogeneous hybridisations in dispersed temporal and spatial contexts. This in turn means that the unevenly scattered imagined community of the diaspora itself cannot be envisioned in any unified or homogeneous way. (2001: 36)

The heterogeneity of diasporic Chinese communities has been attested to in earlier works such as Lynn Pan’s Sons of the Yellow Emperor: The Story of the Overseas Chinese (1990) and Wang Gungwu’s China and the Chinese Overseas (1991). In Sons of the Yellow Emperor we are told that “[t]he overseas Chinese world ... was very far from a microcosm of the Chinese world, for they were mostly people from the two maritime provinces who migrated overseas” (Pan, 1990: 17). Wang’s book identifies four main patterns of Chinese migration, which he names, in chronological order, as trader pattern (“huashang”), coolie pattern (“huagong”), sojourner pattern (“huaqiao”) and descent or re-migrant pattern (“huayi”) (Wang, 1991: 4-12). These
patterns have undergone numerous transformations and modifications over time — the coolie pattern, for instance, constituted a discrete historical period (Wang, 1991: 21) — so much so that a single point of reference no longer exists whenever the term “Overseas Chinese” is invoked. To demonstrate this point, Wang draws upon China’s distinction between “Foreign Chinese” and “Overseas Chinese”, where “Foreign Chinese” specifically refers to “the large majority of those who are foreign nationals but of Chinese descent”, while “Overseas Chinese” addresses “the small minority of Chinese nationals who more or less permanently reside abroad” (Wang, 1991: 289).

The polysemic nature of Chineseness, however, has its limits, which are contained in the idea of diaspora, defined by Ang as “the (imagined) condition of a ‘people’ dispersed throughout the world, by force or by choice” (Ang, 2001: 25). Pan gestures towards this notion of diaspora when she describes the ‘imagined community’ idealised by migrant Chinese:

To assume that all those who bear the same surname share a common origin is patently absurd, but the idea that every Li, say, is related to every Li from the same region has nevertheless a tenacious hold on the minds of the Chinese. As we shall see, one of the most remarkable of the social structures evolved by the immigrant Chinese were ‘same-surname’ associations, groupings of men bearing a common surname. A consciousness of shared origin no doubt compensated for the feeling of being lost in a new country. (Pan, 1990: 12; italics mine)

The importance of the ‘same-surname associations’, sometimes known also as clan associations, cannot be underestimated because, more than the consciousness of shared origins, it is the commonality of their ‘dispersed’ condition that serves as a unifying experience for immigrant Chinese in foreign countries. To return, however,
to Ang’s essay, we note that having first established the irreducible heterogeneity of
the Chinese diaspora, she then attempts to unravel “some of the possibilities and
problems of the cultural politics of diaspora” (2001: 25), and to identify the common
ground shared by most general theories of diasporas.

Ien Ang’s intervention in the cultural politics of diaspora is invaluable and this
dissertation, too, engages with what she has termed the “possibilities and problems”
(2001: 25) of Chinese diaspora politics. However, it will look specifically at the
hybrid spaces and practices of diasporic Chinese in the multicultural societies and
nation-states of Canada and Australia. To give the Chinese diasporic experience a
rather different context, it is argued that the fact of multiculturalism serves to
problematicise the issue of diasporic identity politics, at both community and individual
levels. Identity politics therefore gets caught up with the history of colonisation and
its postcolonial critique as well as with the larger issues of hybridity and ethnic
collectivity. These aspects of diasporic cultural-identity politics, already signalled in
Ang’s essay, form the backdrop upon/against which this dissertation manoeuvres and
performs its analysis of Chinese diasporic cultural practices and productions. It is the
aim of this dissertation to rethink the notions and implications of Chineseness for
those in the diaspora. It follows, therefore, that the need to reconsider general theories
of diasporas and of the Chinese diaspora in particular becomes urgent. To this end,
this dissertation draws upon Ang’s work for an informed engagement with
Chineseness and diaspora; however, it also contends that conceptualisations and
manifestations of hybridity\(^2\) — as a cultural practice and product, as well as a liminal,
in-between space — need to be further grounded in the social practices and economic and cultural relations between the nation-state and the diasporic individual or community. As well, representations of and by diasporic individuals and communities in officially multicultural societies have to be read in the context of an analysis of diasporic cultural practices and productions. In the domain of cultural production, this dissertation is, therefore, concerned primarily, though not exclusively, with the people who were born in predominantly white nation states, and/or who see and identify themselves primarily as citizens of such states but who are also confronted by the fact of their own corporeal difference from the dominant community.

This dissertation begins with an overview of the work done in general diaspora theory, drawing upon the current literature on diasporas via a taxonomy of the modes of explaining diaspora. In Chapter 1, it is argued that diasporic communities and the theorisations about them can be seen as exhibiting, broadly speaking, three forms of consciousness or psychological states: homeland idealisation, boutique multiculturalist manifestation, and transitional/transformational identification. While these forms of consciousness can be said to apply to any given diaspora, this taxonomy is in no way a strict limitation of diasporic experience; rather it serves as a heuristic model for a richer understanding of the diasporic condition that will also reveal concerns currently faced by diasporas as well as pinpoint the bases of theoretical anxieties that surround this field of study.
Diasporic communities, generally, can be defined as “any group living in displacement or feeling, for whatever reason (state policies, collective nostalgia, etc.) that while they live ‘here’ they belong ‘elsewhere’” (Mishra, 1999: 46). The constant foregrounding of an ‘elsewhere’, or ‘where you’re from’, in the place ‘where you’re at’ (to borrow from Paul Gilroy), raises a whole host of issues and concerns surrounding cultural identity/identification practices as well as questions (sometimes suspicions) of national or other forms of affiliation and allegiance. Yet, as the editors of *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* have noted, the term ‘diaspora’ is itself ambiguous:

>a term which literally (and on an historical level) denotes communities of people dislocated from their native homelands through migration, immigration, or exile as a consequence of colonial expansion, but etymologically suggests the (more positive) fertility of dispersion, dissemination, and the scattering of seeds. (Braziel and Mannur, 2003: 4)

While theorising about diasporas provides “an alternative paradigm for national (or multinational, transnational, and even postnational) identification” (Braziel and Mannur, 2003: 8), theories of diaspora in general are nonetheless unsettling to familiar notions and ways of understanding identities, in as much as they introduce ambiguity and ambivalence into the concept of nationhood and citizenship, thereby exposing the artifice and arbitrariness of those constructs.³

Diaspora, as Paul Gilroy reminds us, “is an ancient word” (1994: 207), etymologically derived from the Greek term ‘diasperein’, to refer to “a dispersion”. Its first definition, according to the *New Webster’s Dictionary*, is the “dispersion of Jews to areas outside Palestine since the 6th century B.C.”, but has now come to mean
a dispersion, scattering, or decentralization, as of national or religious groups living outside their homeland but maintaining their cultural identity; the people of such a group. (*New Webster’s Dictionary*, 1977: 435)

Braziel and Mannur suggest that “diaspora can perhaps be seen as a naming of the other which has historically referred to displaced communities of people who have been dislocated from their native homeland through the movements of migration, immigration, or exile” (2003: 1), while Avtar Brah notes that “the word embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a ‘home’ from where the dispersion occurs. It invokes images of multiple journeys” (1996: 181). However, these notions of “home”, dispersions and dislocations do not now adequately contextualise and account for the contemporary flows of diaspora in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Brah proposes that the concept of diaspora needs to consider also the ‘politics of location’ in addition to its already strong association with displacement and dislocation, and argues that the space of diaspora (what she calls “diaspora space”) “is ‘inhabited’ not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous” (1996: 181). The increasing need to scrutinise, rethink and re-theorise these notions of diaspora is a reflection of the accelerated pace of population movements across the globe which has given rise to deeper engagements and problematisations of identity issues. Questions of identity categories, practices and politics, such as ‘where you’re from’ as well as the naming of cultural and/or national ‘others’, are especially pertinent in many western nation states where the proliferation of racial and cultural differences have manifested and reified themselves as social and cultural realities for both diasporic groups and their new adoptive host countries.
The study of diasporas and diasporic consciousness, as argued in this dissertation, is underscored by the fact of multiculturalism being an official national policy of Canada and Australia, both predominantly white settler/invader nation-states. The instituting of official multicultural policies invariably affects diasporic consciousness, from the decision to migrate, through to the lived social, cultural and political realities faced by diasporic communities in their experiences of cross-cultural transitions and transformations. Where previously the initial movements of diasporas had been organised along the lines of classic capitalism and colonialism (around the 19th century), that is, as indentured, slave or coolie labour as a result of the rise of mercantilism alongside the growth and expansion of European empires, contemporary flows of diasporas are now aligned with the modalities of late capitalism, globalisation and global capitalism. Still, when considering the frequent alignment of diasporic migration with capital — into nation states with the best possibilities and opportunities — these ‘old’ and ‘new’ diasporas reinforce perceptions and conceptualisations of economic migration and migrants, which substantively facilitate their functioning within multicultural liberal democracies. To this effect, Chapter 1 locates its study of diasporic consciousness within the grand narratives of the nation state and the rhetoric and policies of official multiculturalism, examining the (post)colonial investments and entanglements of the white, western nation and the discursive constructions as well as management of racial categories and cultural differences. The forms of diasporic consciousness that are played out within these
designated spaces are therefore indicative of non-white settler migrant concerns as well as the nation state’s apprehension of and relations with them.

Another notion explored in Chapter 1 is the connection between manifestations of diasporic consciousness with (correlative) moments of trauma that signify either the homeland or the diasporic condition (Mishra, 1999: 46-71). As Brah has noted, diasporas, or “the word ‘diaspora’, often invoke the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience” (1996: 193). In this argument, the experience of loss of homeland coupled with experiences of racial and cultural discrimination in diaspora often combine to engender strong effects akin to a traumatised state or condition, of which mourning and melancholia are taken to be symptomatic, and for which self-representation — for that aspect of self which was denied or ‘lost’ — is then posited as a ‘cure’. Consequently the forms of diasporic consciousness discussed in this chapter can be seen as predicated in some way upon the ‘lost’ homeland, which thereby functions as the trope around which diasporic behaviour, and its attendant forms of cultural practices and identifications, is significantly organised. As Braziel and Mannur have observed, this type of theorising inevitably appears to privilege the geographical, political, cultural, and subjective spaces of the homenation as an authentic space of belonging and civic participation, while devaluing and bastardizing the states of displacement or dislocation, rendering them inauthentic places of residence. (Braziel and Mannur, 1993: 6)

Chapter 1 asserts, furthermore, that the conceptualisation of diasporas (and diasporic conditions) as transitional/transformational can lead to more productive ways of
theorising diasporas, out of the double bind of being ‘trapped’ or caught in the space ‘in-between’ homeland and the adoptive country.

Chapter 2 concentrates on the Chinese diaspora, addressing the issues of a heterogeneously constituted community both within China and overseas. This chapter sets the Chinese apart from other diasporas because the Chinese diaspora does not, generally speaking, follow the historical patterns of other diasporas. As evidenced by the writing and theorisation of the Chinese diaspora, a provisional set of traits can be identified as setting the Chinese diaspora apart from its other global counterparts. While this is meant to neither essentialise nor pathologise the Chinese diasporic condition, it is necessary for the purposes of this dissertation to delineate certain historically contingent and culturally relative boundaries. Within the overseas Chinese diaspora, multiple divisions and differentiations further problematise the issues of identity politics, or, politics of identification. This chapter focuses on the experiences and cultural-identity politics of the Chinese diaspora in the industrialised, largely white, liberal, democratic and, especially, multicultural nation states of Canada and Australia to contextualise the social, cultural and economic practices of diasporic Chinese in relation to their adoptive nation states.

Chapter 2 identifies, firstly, the groups from China that migrated, as well as why and in what numbers, in an attempt to locate a common ground for discussions of the Chinese diasporic experience. This analysis has significant bearing on the formations and perceptions of diasporic Chinese communities overseas because of the
proliferation and/or prevalence of particular groups of Chinese communities — for instance, those organised by clan association or those identified according to spoken dialect/s — in predominantly white, western spaces that inform and influence notions of Chineseness. Put differently, the meaning of Chineseness, or what it means to be Chinese, is often a contextual, hence political, matter that is highly contingent upon the patterns and precedence established by earlier Chinese migrants. As Wang Gungwu notes, the various communities of Chinese in Southeast Asian countries have defined ‘Chinese’ and/or ‘Chineseness’ differently, reflecting specific historical and/or political circumstances (1991: 292-3). Therefore, the notion of a ‘common ground’ with regards to Chineseness is customarily tied up with the politics of location and the superimposition of ‘where you’re from’ upon ‘where you’re at’.

This does not mean to delimit or homogenise the vastly divergent experiences and conditions of cross-cultural displacement and geo-physical dislocation, but rather, is intended to set the Chinese diaspora apart from other diasporic groups that follow similar migration patterns and trajectories into predominantly white host countries. While this dissertation strongly disputes (and resists) the notion of homogeneity imposed on perceptions and conceptualisations of diasporas, and considers that diasporic cultures maintain themselves in immeasurably different ways, there exist nonetheless common experiences of discrimination when relations between the nation state and its diasporic newcomers are addressed. The Chinese diaspora, as one of the more visible minorities in majority-white societies, is set apart from other less visibly different diasporas when it comes to the issue of ‘enjoyment’ of the nation (Mishra,
1999: 47), and/or of adaptation into the (popular) cultural forms and practices of the host nation. In other words, the trauma of ‘corporeal malediction’ (Fanon, 1967: 111) is more often and acutely felt by Chinese diasporic groups and individuals in their attempt to merge with/into the (grand) narratives of white, western societies where visibly different minorities are marked by significantly different discourses.

Within this sphere of diasporic experience and consciousness, the cultural ‘depth’ of Chineseness emerges as an organising metaphor for cultural and racial differences that appear ‘unknown/unknowable’, giving rise to a legacy of particular kinds of representation within which the diaspora is irrevocably implicated. In relation to the multicultural societies of Canada and Australia, traces of historical forms of racial discrimination and exclusion still circulate in and by the functioning of stereotypes that continue to dominate mainstream representations of otherness and difference. The advent and rise of the Asia-Pacific region as an economic trading zone has facilitated opportunities for cross-cultural contact and also accelerated awareness by host nations of racial minority groups as well as the latter’s increasing confidence (Khoo, 1999). As China progressively opens up its markets to higher levels of foreign investment, western democracies (especially Australia) are well positioned to exploit its economic growth. Yet, in and to the white western imagination, the dominance of China as an absolute ‘other’ has persistently characterised relations with, and perceptions of, this visibly different group. For countries such as Canada and Australia, the lived, everyday multicultural experiences and realities continually transcend the scope and policy of official multiculturalism — acknowledged as
problematic, even controversial. As Kuan-Hsing Chen notes, multiculturalism “recognizes differences but covers up ethnicity/race/nationality as the nodal point of division, and generates an identification with the self in the form of nativism and identity politics” (1998: 19-20).

The constant foregrounding of cultural identity politics within such overtly and politically configured spaces lends also to the dilemma/condition of ‘not speaking Chinese’ when one’s cultural identity precedes other forms of national and/or sub-cultural identification and affiliation. Chinese diasporic consciousness therefore has to contend not only with the traumatic merging of its diasporic narratives with the grand narratives of the host nation, but also the imposition of an ‘other’ alterity, discursively as well as materially constituted, within the troubled space and politics of multiculturalism envisioned as a policy for management and containment of difference. The chapters that follow, to this end, present readings of cultural self-representation through analyses of novels and films by diasporic Chinese in Canada and Australia, and provide a more thorough grounding of these hybrid cultural forms and practices within the contexts of relations between nation-states and diasporas, against the backdrop of multicultural realities and/versus policies.

Chapter 3 looks closely at the sociocultural environment in Canada to show how the Chinese diaspora is constituted, and constitutes itself as it enters into the collective consciousness and founding narratives of the nation state. In addition, the analysis given in this chapter is mindful of the diversity of the Chinese diasporic experience
that serves to problematise notions and identifications of a unified and homogeneous
Chineseness as perceived by mainstream society. For instance, of the 45,381 new
immigrants that became permanent residents of Canada during the first quarter of
2003, China was by far the leading source country, with 8,282 new immigrants in that
quarter.\textsuperscript{8} The shift in Canada’s migrant population, from largely European nations
such as the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands as well as the
United States, to Asian countries (with China in the lead and Chinese being the
largest visible minority group in the country with a population surpassing 1 million)\textsuperscript{9}
has led to a reconfiguration as well as redefinition of the Canadian ethno-cultural
landscape. In 2001, the 1,029,400 individuals (an increase of 20\%, from 860,100 in
1996) who identified as Chinese represented 26\% of the visible minority population
and accounted for 3.5\% of the total population. On closer analysis, however, this
group of Chinese-identifying persons also comprises immigrants from Hong Kong
and Taiwan, countries ranked fourth and seventh on the list of birthplaces of Canada’s
immigrants. While these groups of immigrants identify as Chinese, they nonetheless
are differentiated in terms of nationality and other affiliations, thereby exposing the
limitations of the category of ‘Chineseness’.

This chapter examines and engages with the literary output of Chinese Canadians in
two novels for a deeper consideration of the specific and historical experiences of the
Chinese diaspora and for a better understanding of Chinese symbolic and cultural
practices in Canada.\textsuperscript{10} Charting the historical beginnings of a Chinese community in
Canada alongside key ‘founding’ moments such as the Gold Rush and Federation,
this chapter argues that the Chinese experience is as old as the postcolonial nation state. The first major wave of Chinese immigration to Canada occurred during the late 1800s when Chinese labourers arrived in western Canada to build the Canadian Pacific Railway. This explains the strong Chinese presence in British Columbia where they now comprise the largest proportion of the visible minority population (44%). In Ontario, where the proportion of Chinese stands at 22% (behind Alberta’s 30% and Saskatchewan’s 29%), the number of Chinese there is still the highest among all the provinces, at 481,500. Following an examination of these figures, the literary texts that are taken up for discussion can be seen as representative of Chinese diasporic experiences and concerns within the Canadian nation state.

The first novel discussed in this chapter is SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1991). Set in British Columbia, it is one of the first Chinese Canadian novels published. It represents an attempt at inserting the Chinese perspective within the historical events of Canada, and reads as an active positioning and reclaiming of the heterogeneous Chinese community within the historical grand narrative of Canadian nationhood and subjectivity. This novel is an important landmark in Canadian literature because it was the first novel published by a Chinese Canadian, and it was shortlisted for the Canadian Governor General’s Literary Award in 1990. It recreates, in fictional form, a part of Canadian history frequently overlooked and marginalised in other accounts; in presenting “a woman’s attempt to understand and end a legacy of silence” (back cover description), the novel also documents a community’s
struggle for identity and continues to resonate and be upheld as a significant contribution to Canadian literary production.

The second novel, Terry Woo’s *Banana Boys* (2000), published a decade later, focuses on the ‘new’ diaspora of Canadian-born Chinese and as such is concerned with contemporary socio-cultural phenomena such as ‘being Banana’ — a notable source of much existential angst and predicament among the diasporic Chinese in Western environments. Like *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, this novel represents a debut effort by Terry Woo and has been shortlisted for the 1999 Asian-Canadian Writer’s Workshop Award. Even though the Chinese diasporic community in Canada has by now grown in diversity, Canadian-born Chinese find themselves nonetheless pigeonholed according to how they *look*, regardless of the extent of their (often problematic) identification with ‘Chineseness’. The historical weight of the Chinese diasporic community’s identity and cultural struggles now appear to have given way and evolved to a certain extent; the community’s struggles for identity and recognition are now being replaced by the more internalised, social and psychological conflicts of its new generation. The novel seizes upon the now-familiar cultural icon of the ‘banana’ to illuminate the cultural and social pressures that confront many young Canadian-born Chinese who have grown up with a ‘double-consciousness’ (after Gilroy). This novel thus represents a timely insertion into the literary chronicling of Chinese Canadian lives and histories and, in working through the personal difficulties of each member of the new generation of Chinese Canadian, it also articulates and illuminates many of the contemporary dilemmas facing later generations of diasporas worldwide.
These two novels, published a decade apart, weave together a multitude of diasporic Chinese voices and experiences that challenge monolithic conceptions and perceptions of ‘Chineseness’. While *Disappearing Moon Cafe* engages with issues of racism manifest in restrictive immigration policies through to present-day forms of discrimination, *Banana Boys* narrates the more intimate details of the lives of diasporic Chinese who have grown up with discrimination, in spite of the assimilationist model of multiculturalism in Canada, and provides useful insights and critiques about diasporic identity and culture formation in a multicultural society. The significance and importance of *Disappearing Moon Cafe*’s ficto-historical narrative about Chinese Canadians now finds resonance in the representations of young Chinese Canadians who are now speaking from within the diasporic community. As a minority group with first-hand experience of the effects of assimilation and discrimination in a multicultural climate, the Banana Boys are well positioned to reflect upon the gains and losses, claims and controversies surrounding Canada’s policies on and practices of multiculturalism. It is useful here to turn to the definition of multiculturalism as used in the Canadian national and political context.

“Multiculturalism” in Canada has been defined, “descriptively (as sociological fact), prescriptively (as ideology), from a political perspective (as policy), or as a set of intergroup dynamics (as process)” (Leman, 1999: 1). Leman continues:

As fact, “multiculturalism” in Canada refers to the presence and persistence of diverse racial and ethnic minorities who define themselves as different and who wish to remain so. Ideologically, multiculturalism consists of a relatively coherent set of ideas and ideals pertaining to the celebration of Canada’s cultural mosaic. Multiculturalism at the policy level is structured around the
management of diversity through formal initiatives in the federal, provincial and municipal domains. Finally, multiculturalism is the process by which racial and ethnic minorities compete with central authorities for achievement of certain goals and aspirations. (Leman, 1999:1)

Within this broad definition, there exist several discrepancies between interpretations of and approaches to multiculturalism as lived experience, everyday reality, and multiculturalism as officially sanctioned state policy that recognises the need to manage and contain differences between cultural, racial and ethnic groups. As Sneja Gunew explains, “[m]ulticulturalism has long been regarded as tainted with state concerns and perceived as a strategic ‘top-down’ imposition of state policies/narratives when viewed in relation to Canada and Australia” (1999a: 16). It therefore follows that state multiculturalism serves to construct dominant versions of multicultural difference while ignoring the empirical realities of those migrants that do not identify with ‘mainstream’ culture or even with constructed versions of cultural difference — as attested to in the novels by SKY Lee and Terry Woo.

Chapter 4 extends the discussion on Chinese Canadians to consider another form of cultural production, namely the feature-length film. The historical context established in Chapter 3 is given another, visual, focal point that involves the literal staging of identities on-screen in order to achieve a more visceral relation and identification with viewers, in this instance the diasporic Chinese. The two films examined here were made almost within a year of each other, yet circulate among very different networks and distribution channels. Although both films were presented in the Perspective Canada series in the 1993 and 1994 Toronto International Film Festivals, they differ
significantly in production and aesthetic styles and values. Nonetheless, these two cinematic texts create a layered and multi-textured dialogue by presenting various aspects of the Chinese diasporic experience: *Small Pleasures* [1993] looks at the lives of recent Chinese immigrants to Canada while *Double Happiness* [1994] shifts to the issues of identity politics as played out in the life of a young Chinese Canadian woman caught between two worlds. The frequent juxtapositioning of East and West invariably functions as a metaphorical trope around and upon which many narratives of the diaspora are centred, and to this effect the cinematic text is best served in its scopophilic exploitation of corporeal, visible differences by the specular positioning of racialised others.

Chapter 5 turns the attention of this dissertation towards the southern hemisphere and focuses on the condition of the Chinese in Australia, extending the discussion of Chinese diasporic experience beyond the scope of the North American context. The socio-historical, cultural and economic factors are taken into account when examining the movements of diasporic Chinese into the largely white nation state of Australia from around the period of the Australian Gold Rush. In addition, this chapter seeks to establish the historical presence of the Chinese in the foundational narratives of the Australian nation state.

The 2001 Canadian census report acknowledges that “only in Australia is the proportion of population born outside the country higher than it is in Canada […] according to Australia’s 2001 census, 22% of its population was foreign-born,
compared with 18% for Canada”. Yet it is worth noting that the leading country of birth for settlers arriving in Australia in 2000 was the United Kingdom (7,131 settler arrivals), followed by China with 5,780 settler arrivals. Demographers are also careful to distinguish between China, Taiwan and the Special Administrative Region (i.e. Hong Kong); countries which, interestingly, do not appear on the list of top 10 countries of birth/origin. In this instance, persons of Chinese descent are not simply referred to as “Chinese” but rather are identified according to their countries of origin, such that “China-born” persons are differentiated from “other overseas born communities in Australia, for example, Singaporeans and Malaysians [who] are also of Chinese origin”. ¹²

Of the 22% of Australians who were foreign-born, as recorded in the 2001 Australian census, 142,720 were identified as China-born, an increase of 29% from the 1996 Census. This figure, interestingly, falls behind the number of Vietnamese-born Australians (154,818), who make up the fourth largest group of overseas born Australians from an Asian country. ¹³ In Australia the Chinese, consequently, do not have the same critical mass as in Canada. The highest concentration of China-born Chinese in Australia are found in the state of New South Wales, numbering 85,450 (or 59.9% of the Chinese community in Australia) and this is followed by Victoria with 36,760 China-born Chinese (or 25.8% of the community) (DIMIA, “Community Information Summary”). Still, as a visible minority in a western country positioned in such close proximity to the Asian region, ¹⁴ their status as a ‘different’ racial and cultural group is constantly highlighted — as evidenced in the imbrication of race and
politics, and the politicisation of Asian communities, during events such as the rise of
Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party in Australia, the Tampa crisis, and more recently
the 2003 outbreak of the SARS virus. The last incident, especially, has caused
significant concern and hysteria because of the disease’s connections with ‘Asian’
countries and/or people, conjuring connotations and images reminiscent of
‘infection’, particularly of the ‘Yellow Peril’, and threatening to resurrect extreme
anti-immigration measures as well as racist rhetoric/propaganda. For Australia, as a
western nation state virtually surrounded by Asian countries, the need for border
patrol, regulation and protection is therefore continually felt and fuelled by a
government that has “ideologically legitimised, even institutionalised, the culture of
worrying” to a degree that no other government has (Hage, 2003: n.p.). This has
critical bearings on the management of cultural diversity and containment of
differences in the administration of the country’s official multiculturalism policy.

According to the 2003 document “Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity —
Updating the 1999 New Agenda for Multicultural Australia: Strategic directions for
2003-2006”,

Australian multiculturalism recognises, accepts, respects and
celebrates cultural diversity. It embraces the heritage of Indigenous
Australians, early European settlement, our Australian-grown customs
and those of the diverse range of migrants now coming to this
country.15

While the Australian government acknowledges that “[o]ne of the greatest strengths
of our nation is our cultural diversity”, which “continues to give us distinct social,
cultural and business advantages”, there is also the need to manage that cultural
diversity (“to reap the rewards of our diversity”), and “to respond to the associated ongoing benefits and challenges”. In 1999 the Howard government announced the New Agenda for Multicultural Australia as a statement of its multicultural policy, which clearly delineates four principles:

- **Civic Duty**, which obliges all Australian to support those basic structures and principles of Australian society which guarantee us our freedom and equality and enable diversity in our society to flourish;
- **Cultural Respect**, which, subject to the law, gives all Australians the right to express their own culture and beliefs and obliges them to accept the right of others to do the same;
- **Social Equity**, which entitles all Australians to equality of treatment and opportunity so that they are able to contribute to the social, political and economic life of Australia, free from discrimination, including on the grounds of race, culture, religion, language, location, gender or place of birth; and
- **Productive Diversity**, which maximises for all Australians the significant cultural, social and economic dividends arising from the diversity of our population.

This statement was slightly revised in 2003, following the events of 11 September 2001 in the United States of America and the 12 October 2002 bombing in Bali, which profoundly affected community relations in and around Australia. The same four principles in the 1999 statement are reiterated in the 2003 statement, with an emphasis on promoting “good community relations and social harmony among us all”.

Jon Stratton and Ien Ang have criticised this multicultural policy as “a top-down political strategy” (1998: 137), functioning as “a response to a crisis of identity in a settler society which, for a variety of reasons, could no longer sustain a national identity dependent on the myth of a British origin” (1998: 155). They also observe
that multiculturalism, as a policy, is intended “not to foster cultural differences but, on the contrary, to direct them into safe channels” (1998: 157). Therefore, although the strategy is “implemented by those in power precisely to advance the inclusion of ethnic minorities within Australian national culture” (1998: 137), with the effect that “the Australian national can be represented as constituted by multiculturalism” (1998: 156), this also means that visibly different ‘others’ are permanently marginalised and suppressed by/within “the continued hegemony of Anglo-Celtic Australian culture by making it invisible” (1998: 158). From that marginalised position, the issue of national identification becomes problematic when considering the fact that the term ‘ethnic’ still operates to define “one’s sense of both belonging to a group and being ‘exclu[ded] from the national definition of a country’” (Gunew, 1994: 49).

Sneja Gunew highlights this point when, writing about the multicultural situations in Australia and Canada, she asserts that

> Multiculturalism (like any other ‘ism’) represents a site of multiple socio-political particularities of the specific state formations of multiculturalism. In all of these, multiculturalism can mean on the one hand simply a way of managing or controlling diversity. On the other it might signal a more democratic participation by minority groups, and constitute, notionally, a utopian move. (1999a: 18)

The utopianism of multiculturalism as official policy remains largely idealistic and imaginary, as current methods and models of administering multicultural policy continue to be directed towards containment and neutralisation of cultural difference, while exploiting, economically, the benefits of ‘productive diversity’. The recognition of racial and cultural differences identifies and demarcates extremely broad categories of ‘ethnicity’ that constitute commonly stereotyped and narrativised versions of
cultural difference and attaches a ‘fixed’ meaning, instead of fully recognising culturally different groups and individuals. Moreover, this form of acknowledgement overlooks the fact that different groups are “differently racialised” (Brah, 1996: 228).

As Nikos Papastergiadis explains and observes,

> Hybridity may be a condition that is common to all those who have sharp memories of deprivation, but — as Bhabha also reminds us — it seems an insufficient basis on which to consolidate new forms of collectivity that can overcome the embeddedness of prior antagonisms. (1997: 274)

In his book *Race Daze*, Jon Stratton examines how race is used in Australia to signify culture so that, when ‘culture’ is conceived as a discrete and integrated identity, the belief may be supported about the incompatibility and incommensurability of certain cultures. This type of thinking that underpins official understanding of multiculturalism effectively highlights and reinforces perceptions of cultures as diverse and distinct, thereby emphasising the divisive politics of cultural difference. It is also the same line of thinking that functions to keep “migrants” distinct from “Australians”, with the implications that “migrants” “can be people who have been born in Australia but who are from non-British or Irish backgrounds”, while the latter group are “identified as ‘real Australians’”, who “may themselves only be second, or even first, generation residents in Australia” (Stratton, 1998: 10). With minority groups having been denied full cultural and social recognition, these perceptions of cultural incommensurability function to further exclude them from discourses and narratives of the nation state, with a profound impact on the groups’ ability to represent themselves and to articulate their levels of affiliation and identification with/in the nation. Set against the context of this multicultural environment and
framework, this chapter therefore looks at the literary self-representation and constitution of the Chinese diaspora in Australia for an analysis of Chinese Australian cultural and national identity.

The first novel discussed is Brian Castro’s *Birds of Passage* (1983) and the second, Ouyang Yü’s *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* (2002). These two novels, published nearly twenty years apart, both look at the entry of their respective mainland Chinese protagonists into Australia at different historical periods to create an extended dialogue centred around issues of identity politics. The social and political effects of historically entrenched racism and discrimination upon the diasporic consciousness of Chinese in Australia are palpably rendered in Castro’s novel, while Ouyang’s work continues the exploration of the issue of exclusion in his engagement with more contemporary and political dilemmas about national and cultural identity against a multicultural backdrop. The diasporic entanglements also necessarily raise political concerns because of Australia’s unique, and sometimes problematic, location as a Western nation within a largely and definitively Asian region, a position that has facilitated much cross-cultural contact as well as conflict between East and West.

Again, the cultural and political identities of ‘East’ and ‘West’ are discursively drawn upon to reify racial and cultural differences as forms of absolute otherness, creating a ‘false (and problematic) consciousness’ about notions of homogeneous diasporic identities.
Chapter 6 addresses and critiques the notions of a “singular community identity and ethnicity” by looking at the cinematic and visual representations of Chinese in Australia, as depicted, firstly, in Clara Law’s feature-length film *Floating Life* (1996), and secondly, in William Yang’s documentary/monologue/slideshow *Sadness* (1992). Law’s film, the first ever foreign language film to be made in Australia, looks at the difficulties often encountered by new migrants to Australia, as disparately experienced by the individual members of a Hong Kong Chinese family trying to settle in to their new environment. Yang’s monologue *Sadness* is an engagement with his family and personal history from his perspective as a third-generation Chinese-Australian who has had, as he admits, “a completely assimilated upbringing” in Australia. In this sense, *Sadness* can be read as an extension of the immigrant diasporic narrative that had its beginnings in *Floating Life*, with both films examining the notions of cultural identity and citizenship from within racially marginalised positions.

In this dissertation, the hybrid spaces and practices of diasporic Chinese in the multicultural societies and nation-states of Canada and Australia are examined through a discussion of novels and films that mark the attempts at cultural self-representation in predominantly white multicultural nation-states. However, it is also important to note that these representations do not constitute or encompass the diversities of diasporic experience. As R. Radhakrishnan points out, while the establishing of either real or conceptual “common ground” is “of utmost importance to cultural theory of ethnicity and post-ethnicity”, it cannot happen “unless and until
the ideology of difference (in this instance, hypostasized as race) is unmasked in all its historical specificity” (1996: 81). In other words, although the importance of solidarity and coalitional politics cannot be overemphasised, it is sometimes at odds with very real contradictions within the diasporic group/community. Nevertheless, this dissertation’s engagement with forms of cultural self-representation by the Chinese diaspora identifies these narratives as speaking to and about a carefully constructed and imagined collective identity, experience and memory, amidst highly contentious social, historical and political environments.

In addition to addressing the major themes that explore issues and politics of cultural and national identity, racially-motivated marginalisation and discrimination, these literary and film narratives also point to mainstream concerns about establishing and situating the histories and narratives of non-white ethnic groups and communities alongside the grand narratives of the nation state. The highly self-conscious mode of engagement in the novels and films prefigure, firstly, a keen awareness of diasporic narratives as they enter into the historical and foundational texts of the host nation, and secondly, the ambivalent positioning of diasporas within these texts and their contexts. As diasporic subjectivity and consciousness are often double, even plural, the multiple points of identification for diasporic groups and individuals indicate that their identities are never absolute or stable. Furthermore, they ‘locate’ diasporic texts and narratives within ambivalent spaces, paving the way for more open and fluid interrogations about national histories and multicultural policies, as well as forms of
racialised discrimination and exclusion that present diasporas as (pathologically) ‘traumatised’.

The insertion and re-siting of diasporic histories and narratives into the grand narratives of the host nation also introduce elements of instability and ambiguity into the imagined collective dominant consciousness. The national fixation with boundaries, especially pertaining to matters of race, culture and ethnicity, can thus be explained vis-à-vis a real or imagined need to regulate those potentially unsettling aspects of diasporas, especially since “embedded within the concept of diaspora is the notion of the border” (Brah, 1996: 198). Consequently, the production of racial and cultural differences as represented in/by visibly different minority groups, especially diasporas, is more about a reaction towards the perceived/imagined threat of destabilisation and disruption as posed by vastly disparate ‘foreign’ constituents. The resultant clean and clearly demarcated boundaries of cultural differences speak more about the host nation’s anxieties towards its diasporic newcomers, especially with regards to the managing of those differences most expediently. These impositions of a ‘coherent’ set of differences often neglect the divisions and differentiations within and between diasporic groups, but they function also as indicators of the modes of existence and production of racial groupings and categorisations, facilitated by contextual conditions of possibility. Whether diasporic subjects identify with these socially assigned identities is another matter that is addressed in this dissertation.

Taken as a ‘whole’, however, diasporic groups/communities are often perceived and
judged based on “colour or ‘looks’ [that] serve as the racialised signifier in and through which economic inequalities and state policies articulate” (Brah, 1996: 203).

It is here that Ang’s work on diaspora and Chineseness, as well as on issues of multiculturalism, are especially useful not only in providing insights about the heterogeneity and hybridity of the Chinese diaspora, but also in fleshing out the contexts and conditions within which these phenomena emanate. This dissertation draws upon Ang’s work in this area to highlight the currency and growth in contemporary discourses on diasporas as well as problematising the conception of diasporas as potentially liberating forces. However, where this dissertation parts company with Ang’s body of work on the Chinese diaspora is precisely at the very point where the definition of Chineseness becomes problematic. For Ang, the notion and identification of Chineseness is ostensibly and almost entirely imbricated in and with the issue of language; her influential article, “On Not Speaking Chinese”, examines and emphasises the “ambivalences of [her] being interpellated, increasingly frequently, as ‘Chinese’ (even though [she] was born in Indonesia, a very different place in Asia than China)” (2001: 11). While her essay begins with affirmations about the polysemy of Chineseness and “heterogeneous hybridisations”, her constant address to an imagined/imaginary Chinese-speaking entity — or rather, in drawing attention to the inability of a Chinese-looking person to speak Chinese — underscores (and also undermines) the bulk of her argument about the multiple disjunctures and tensions between large-scale, publicly reproduced categorical identities — ‘Chinese’, ‘Asian’ — and the concrete social subjectivities and experiences which are shaped and
circumscribed by these identity categories but at the same time always exceed their reified boundaries. (2001: 11)

Ang’s writing about “hybrid personal experience”, apparently, locates itself closer to ‘normative/ised’ notions and traits associated with Chineseness, than about the cultural hybridisations manifest in Chinese diasporic groups around the world. While her work is deeply involved in the deconstruction of “a socially assigned ‘identity’” (2001: 11) and the championing of hybridity, she nonetheless infers and depends on an essentialised ‘Chinese’ identity in order to make her points about the disjunctures and excesses of categorical identities.

Throughout the article “On Not Speaking Chinese”, circumscribed identity categories and their ‘reified boundaries’ are extensively engaged with, which explain to some extent the clarification that Ang provides about her background. The one-day trip to China that begins the article highlights, most of all, the in-between position that Ang finds herself caught in. It is from here that the diasporic subject (Ang) sees China and recognises an ambivalence: “I refused to be lumped together with the (other) Westerners, but I couldn’t fully identify with [the tourist guide] Lan-lan either” (2001: 22). Yet, as she confesses,

I didn’t have the courage to go on my own since I don’t speak any Chinese, not even one of the dialects. But I had to go, I had no choice. It was (like) an imposed pilgrimage. (2001: 21)

The question that we are then led to, as a result, is why Ang, as a diasporic subject over whom China has no claim, would feel such a compulsion to visit China. Her ‘enjoyment’ of the country is necessarily and inevitably a cautiously mediated one, as she says,
while I did not quite have the freedom to see this country as exotic because I have always had to see it as somehow my country, even if only in my imagination, I repeatedly found myself looking at this minute piece of ‘China’ through the tourists’ eyes. (2001: 23)

This reaction, typifying the diasporic condition of being caught ‘in-between’ two worlds, is not so unusual when considered in the light of Ang’s family history. Her grandfather’s realisation when he went back to China in the late 1920s, that “the mainland Chinese no longer saw him as ‘one of them’” (2001: 27), and her parents’ decision to move the family from Indonesia to the Netherlands in 1966 to escape the ethnic tensions and conflicts all attest to the cultural translations and transformations that had been a vital component of her family’s lived experiences. However, this visit to the cultural ‘homeland’ presents several misgivings because questions of presumably shared and imposed cultural identity now come to the fore for Ang, who is Chinese-looking but not Chinese-speaking. Wang Gungwu’s brief explanation of the different meanings of ‘Chineseness’ leading to an “awkward” problem for the Indonesian government perhaps elucidates Ang’s “dilemma” more clearly:

For the past twenty years, there had been (a) Indonesians of Chinese descent; (b) Chinese who were citizens of the People’s Republic; (c) Chinese who were citizens of the Republic of China (Taiwan) whom the Indonesians treated as “stateless”; (d) Stateless Chinese waiting for Indonesian citizenship willing to be protected by the People’s Republic and by the Republic in Taiwan while waiting; and (e) Stateless Chinese awaiting citizenship who wanted to have nothing to do with either government. (1991: 289)

Although it is not clear which ‘category’ of ‘Chineseness’ Ang falls into — if only because these definitions of Chineseness are measured in terms of a genealogical proximity to the ‘homeland’ — the important point is that she has chosen to identify herself as a Chinese person, of Chinese descent, distanced from the ‘homeland’ but
‘caught’ in a complex relationship with it. Under the circumstances of Dutch colonisation, ethnic Chinese were “mobilised to transform their self-consciousness into one of membership in the greater ‘imagined community’ of a unified pan-Chinese nation” (Ang, 2001: 26). Under Indonesian nationalism, which defined the Indonesian nation “as comprising only the indigenous peoples of the archipelago, excluding the Chinese”, the Chinese minority were pressured “to assimilate, to erase as many traces of Chineseness as possible” (Ang, 2001: 27). \(^{21}\) For Ang, as a \textit{peranakan} Chinese, “a thoroughly hybrid identity” meant having to suppress or even erase those aspects of her cultural identity that associated her with being Chinese.

As Braziel and Mannur point out, “[d]iasporic subjects are marked by hybridity and heterogeneity — cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national — and these subjects are defined by a traversal of the boundaries demarcating nation and diaspora” (2003: 5). It is possible, therefore, to say that being Chinese-looking and perceiving China (the ‘homeland’) as “my country” has interpellated Ang as a cultural subject who identifies with Chineseness, and to a certain extent, China — especially when we consider the extent of her resistance against being “lumped together” with the “(other) Westerners”. Yet, she also identifies closely with “not speaking Chinese”, which has been “hegemonically constructed as a lack, a sign of loss of authenticity” (Ang, 2001: 30), therefore implying ‘not being Chinese’. Indeed, “On Not Speaking Chinese” suggests a preoccupation with Chineseness, which, for Ang, can then be taken as a (possible) sign of trauma; that is, signifying the loss of authenticity, or, in Ang’s case, the ‘lost’ ability to speak Chinese for which “the writing of the text, the book, may
complete the work of mourning” (Mishra, 1999: 48). Therefore, Ang’s writing about
diaspora, taking the route of autobiography, is considered as

a more or less deliberate, rhetorical construction of a ‘self’ for public,
not private purposes: the displayed self is a strategically fabricated
performance, one which stages a useful identity, an identity which can
be put to work. (Ang, 2001: 24)

However, the usefulness of Ang’s ‘staged’ identity appears to lie within that entity
against which her notion of diaspora is positioned, that is, the imagined and
imaginary speaking Chinese identity or Chineseness, ostensibly located within a
Chinese-speaking subject position. Here, positing herself as ‘lack’ stirs up echoes of
the hierarchical subordinate relation between diaspora and homeland, in which the
diaspora stands as “the bastard child of the nation — disavowed, inauthentic,
illegitimate, and impoverished imitation of the originary culture” (Gopinath, 1995:
317). The boundaries demarcating nation and diaspora are not only essential to this
understanding of diasporic experience but are also further reinforced in a rigid
binarism of centre-versus-periphery. Therefore, China, as well as the Chinese
language, signifies a trauma or traumatic moment for the non-Chinese speaking
diasporic subject who has come to be associated with his/her cultural identity in this
way, while at the same time, the relationship thus established continues to firmly
entrench the subject within that ‘traumatic’ moment in space and time. In other
words, the (self) marginalisation of the diasporic subject sometimes functions to
protractedly sustain the trauma, so that the ability to speak Chinese becomes the
measure of ‘authenticity’, against which the subject will continue, invariably, to be
found ‘lacking’.
In thus defining Chineseness, or what it means to be Chinese, and equating it with the ability to speak the language, other syncretic forms, practices and manifestations of Chinese cultural identity are sometimes overlooked in favour of more readily and easily identifiable cultural characteristics. Bearing in mind that the autobiography mode is a “strategically fabricated performance”, this is a position that allows and enables Ang to appeal to a shared collectivity, based on the experience of traumatic moments in the diasporic condition, which “also circulate and re-circulate; they connect with other people’s traumas and they are shared [so that] the loss signified by the trauma can be collectively mourned and collectively connected to guilt” (Mishra, 1999: 48). The point here is that the appeal to a collectivity of shared cultural identities and histories among the diaspora — although reminiscent of the “consciousness of shared origin” (Pan, 1990: 12) mentioned in the beginning of this chapter — inevitably exceeds the scope of an autobiographical exploration of an individual’s relations with cultural identity. As an Indonesian-born Chinese, Ang’s experiences of discrimination, under Indonesian nationalism, and of identifying as thoroughly hybrid, in her peranakan identity, may provide some type of ‘common ground’ from which to construct an analysis of marginalisation in relation to the Chinese diasporic experience. That is, the shared experience of being defined as ‘other’, marginalised and lacking in relation to a central or ‘core’ Chinese culture, is frequently invoked as a unifying trope around which Chinese diasporic experiences and narratives converge. However, the specificity of Ang’s context, that locates itself in an Indonesian-Chinese socio-historical and cultural perspective, does not easily and/or necessarily represent an epistemological analysis. In other words, the
conditions of possibility for Ang’s articulation of her particularly situated diasporic subjecthood, although hybrid and heterogeneous, are not similarly experienced by others in diaspora, even within the category of ‘Chinese diaspora’. Moreover, her emphasis on questions frequently posed to her, such as “where are you really from” and “do you speak Chinese”, elides and obscures the very heterogeneity of Chinese cultural identity first mentioned in the essay, especially when considering the even more complex issue of diasporic identity/ies.

Ang’s analysis of the hybrid and heterogeneous constitution of diasporic subjectivity reveals itself to be predicated upon an understanding of a unified and monolithic notion of Chineseness, or Chinese identity, that stands as an absolute culture to the west, and against which the composition/s of diasporic identity may be perceived and conceived. What this analysis also reveals is the troubled (or, as she admits, “epic”) relationship she has had with Chinese identity and its predominance in her life. To provide further contextualisation to Ang’s essay, it is also incumbent to consider the Australian social, cultural and political spaces within which her writing and theorisations circulate. One of the effects of Australia’s official policy of multiculturalism has been to polarise and further differentiate cultural differences from mainstream white society, while administering strategies of containment, management and regulation of these differences. The discrepancies between official and practised multiculturalism in Australia have given rise to tensions in an increasingly racialised environment, leading to preoccupations with and investigations into issues of cultural and national identity. Coming from a background
in which Dutch colonialism and Indonesian nationalism had had considerable
influence on the formation of one’s cultural identity, it was possible to construe the
situation in multicultural Australia as yet another form of racial and ethnic
surveillance, thereby further entrenching the consciousness of the minority diasporic
subject in a marginalised and precarious state. Put differently, trauma and other forms
of anxiety function not only as responses but also as the result of “social and
psychological forces of oppression that are based on specific if sometimes global
histories of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc” (Willett, 1998: 4).

Ang’s essay, written “precisely [in] the space of hybridity” (2001: 2), eventually ends
on the theme of hybridity and postmodern ethnicity. This is a recognition that,
although “ethnic minorities derive a sense of joy and dignity, as well as a sense of
(vicarious) belonging from their identification with a ‘homeland’ which is
elsewhere”, they are nonetheless “fundamentally and inevitably transnational in their
scope”. While this statement indicates an idealisation of the diasporic condition, it
nonetheless serves as an important reminder of the diasporic “potential to unsettle
static, essentialist and totalitarian conceptions of ‘national culture’ or ‘national
identity’ which are firmly rooted in geography and history” (2001: 34-5). Ang’s
valorisation of hybridity, as “hybrid cultural forms born out of a productive, creative
syncretism” (2001: 35), is an emancipatory acknowledgement that releases, even
liberates, the diasporic subject from the ‘homeland’. This means that while the
diasporic subject can never return to his/her ‘origins’, he/she is by the same token
freed from the grasp of the “transparent master-signified of ‘Chineseness’; instead,
‘Chineseness’ becomes an open signifier invested with resource potential, the raw material for the construction of syncretic identities suitable for living ‘where you’re at’” (2001: 35).

Ang’s position can be seen as an empowered and empowering one, from which the diasporic subject is empowered to choose his/her mode of cultural identification. However, although this stance asserts the invigorating capacity that diasporas have to contest and disrupt hegemonic majoritarian definitions of ‘where you’re at’, it does so by none other than juxtapositioning those hegemonic (i.e. largely-white) definitions against an ‘absolute’ cultural other in the form of the master-signified of Chineseness. Moreover, the freedom of choice for diasporic subjects to assert their cultural identity is not similarly experienced by or extended to all in diaspora. While Ang does remind us that (what she calls) “postmodern ethnicity” “is experienced as a provisional and partial ‘identity’ which must be constantly (re)invented and (re)negotiated” (2001: 36), the ability of diasporic groups and individuals to exercise this choice is not always equal or existent. Because of very real contradictions among and within diasporic communities, there exist groups and individuals without access to forms of self-representation, and therefore cannot even begin to articulate a position from which to effect and/or assert cultural identity. Besides, there remain those other groups and individuals that consciously prefer, and engage with, certain modes of representation identified as forms of “strategic essentialism” — as, in Gayatri Spivak’s meaning of “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (1987: 205), which may either perpetuate or intervene in the
functioning of cultural stereotypes. As Pnina Werbner points out, “we have to recognise the differential interests social groups have in sustaining boundaries” (1997: 22), and to consider “why such essentialisms are so awfully difficult to transcend” (1997: 4). This statement alludes to the vested interests held by minority as well as mainstream parties in the perpetuation of certain cultural stereotypes, thereby posing a barrier to the anti-essentialising potential of diasporas to disrupt hegemonic structures and representations of cultural differences.

On the one hand, the assertiveness of Ang’s essay about productive and hybrid forms of diasporic cultural identification idealises certain modes of identity politics that may overlook significant discrepancies in the diverse conditions of diasporic experiences. On the other hand, it enables the recognition of certain contexts in which the affirmation of cultural identity may not only be feasible but also necessary. From this empowered position, the ability to choose “when and how” one's cultural identity is to be asserted is not only “a matter of politics”, but also a function of knowledge of prevailing mainstream culture and its ‘rules’ as well as the ability and confidence to engage with the host culture at those levels.

On this last point, Ang’s work is highly valuable for its discussion of and insights into the productive energies of new, diasporic hybrid identities. Recognising the discursive, historical and social constructions of subject identities and the formation of diasporic subjectivities marks the beginnings of emancipation for diasporas from their homeland as transparent master-signifier of cultural identity. In other words, it
releases diasporic identities from the grasp of the homeland’s grand narrative (see Chapter 1) about cultural identity, to forge new narratives and forms of identifications. After all, diasporas “are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure” (Brah, 1996: 193). To this end, this dissertation’s analysis of the formation of diasporic subjectivities through both filmic and fictional narrative forms engages with specific national contexts (in this case Canada and Australia), and argues that claims to hybridity need to be grounded in the practices and relations between the nation-state and the diasporic individual or community.
Notes


2 Nikos Papastergiadis notes that the term ‘hybridity’ has been used, in the last decade, frequently to connote positivity and productivity, serving “as a threat to the fullness of selfhood”, especially endorsing the poststructuralist liberation of the subject “from notions of fixity and purity in origin” (1997: 257). His detailed analysis of the term ‘hybridity’ locates its use in different contexts, most revealing of which is the differing applications by Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha for whom hybridity, determined by specific historical formations and cultural repertoires of enunciation, represents an anti-essentialist perspective, driven by the flows of an ongoing process. However, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak — coming from the point of view of subalternity/subaltern studies — “seems to limit the concept of hybridity as a metaphor for cultural identity” because, for her, “this evocation of hybridity is ‘so macrological that it cannot account for the micrological texture of power’” (Papastergiadis, 1997: 279). See Nikos Papastergiadis (1997); Homi Bhabha (1990a; 1994); Stuart Hall (1990); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1993b).

3 I also want to draw attention to the use of the term ‘community’, as highlighted by Gerd Baumann, who observes that, “[u]nlike the word ‘culture’, ‘community’ has never held a privileged place in the vocabulary of social institutions. On the contrary, among academics it has had a decidedly bad press” (1997: 223). In Baumann’s brief account of the use of the term, he shows that, while “the word appears quite clearly as a common-sense term with no theoretical potential for analytic use”, it has also been revealed to be “a contextually contingent ‘symbolic construction’” (1997: 223). Ultimately, the word still has purchase “because it appears to value people as members of a special collective. What is special about this collective, in the case of ‘ethnic’ minorities, is that they are readily presumed to share a ‘culture’ in its reified form” (1997: 223). See Gerd Baumann (1997). For the purposes of the present discussion, I refer to the term in its ‘common-sense’, denotative application.

4 Here, official multiculturalism or multicultural policy, as ‘top-down’ policy aimed at managing cultural diversity, is differentiated from everyday multiculturalism, or ‘the lived experience of cultural diversity’ (Stratton, 1998: 206).

5 The recent signing of a Trade and Economic Framework — the first step towards a free trade agreement worth billions of dollars — between China and Australia (October 2003) heralds an important and significant development of Sino-Australian relations.

6 See, for instance, Rey Chow (1993) “Introduction”.

7 Jon Stratton and Ien Ang (1998); see also Kuan-Hsing Chen (1998) “Introduction: The Decolonization Question”; Chen argues, following Ghassan Hage’s theorisation, that, “if the cultural basis of colonialism is racism, and its cultural strategy, assimilation ... then can one say that the cultural basis of neocolonialism is multiculturalism ... and its cultural strategy, peaceful co-existence” (1998: 21).

8 This is followed by India with 4,580 landings, then Pakistan, the Philippines and South Korea ranking third, fourth and fifth respectively.
As part of symbolic and cultural practices among Chinese communities worldwide, language — or the lack of it, as attested to in the bulk of Ien Ang’s writing — constitutes an integral part of Chinese identity and culture. However, the focus of this dissertation is on the literary and filmic productions of the Chinese diaspora and I shall at this point therefore address only those aspects of Chinese cultural practices that pertain most strongly to the formation of Chinese cultural identity amidst the foundational narratives of the Canadian nation state. This is not to dismiss or undermine the importance of language in these diasporic circumstances, because, at any other given point in time, Chinese communities engage in various dialects and often exercise a conscious choice in terms of linguistic- and code-switching to differentiate themselves according to the different regions of China from which they came. Nonetheless, the tendency to band together as a cultural group illustrates the perceived need on the part of ethnic minorities to hold on to some notion of a shared culture in the face of a more dominant white majority.

An article in *The Vancouver Sun* reports that, “[a]ccording to the 1996 census, Vancouver was by far Canada’s most Asian city. A full 31 per cent of residents reported that they belonged to a visible minority group; the majority of these claimed their place of origin was Hong Kong, China, Taiwan or India”. See Michelle Mossop (2001).

The top three countries from which overseas-born Australians came were, respectively, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Italy.

Jamie Mackie even goes so far as to suggest that Australia be recognised as “an offshore island in an Asia-Pacific world of very dynamic and fast-growing societies and civilisations” in his Foreword in Alison Broinowski (1996: v). The former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating had also raised the suggestion that Australia is a “multicultural nation in Asia”. In Stratton and Ang (1998: 137).

For instance, Avtar Brah’s observations of the various degrees of differentiation among political formations in the USA leads to the conclusion that, “*The politics of solidarity with another group is one thing, but the self-organising political mobilisation of the group itself is quite another*” (1996: 8). [italics in original]
therefore, “there is no prior space that can facilitate a dialogue between the West and its Other” (Papastergiadis, 1997: 276).

19 As evidenced by rigorous border patrols (not only geo-physical but also social and cultural) in the case of the recent landing of a boat of refugees from Indonesia on an island off the north coast of Australia, on 4 November 2003. This has been met with an almost immediate and spontaneous government reaction resulting in amendments to the Australian legal system (as well as the geo-political terrain of the nation in a rezoning exercise) that now excludes Melville Island, the landing site — amongst several thousands of other islands — as a migration zone. See Morris (2003), Pryer (2003).

20 The importance of speech in Chinese communities cannot be underestimated, because, as Lynn Pan notes, “above all it is speech that distinguishes one community of Chinese from another”, and that “[a] common tongue gives its speakers membership of a mutual-help fraternity”, while the use of different dialects functions also to differentiate between poorer and wealthier socio-economic regions in China itself, frequently used to demonstrate one’s superiority (Pan, 1990: 14-15).

21 This notion of assimilation has been examined by Peter S. Li (2003) in his study of the usage of integration and assimilationist discourse in Canadian policy statements and immigration debates to endorse a conformity model of assimilation in integration discourse.
PART A

DIASPORAS IN GENERAL
CHAPTER 1

Theorising Diasporas

This chapter draws upon the current literature on diasporas, in order to advance the field by highlighting the diversity of diasporic communities, and by moving beyond conventional models of diaspora which see them as either culturally dislocated or ideologically ‘fixed’ – that is, through methods that are culturally essentialist. I take my notion of diaspora from Ien Ang who defines them as “transnational, spatially and temporally sprawling sociocultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original ‘homeland’” (2001: 25). Building upon the secondary literature on diaspora studies, I will be theorising diasporas via a taxonomic exercise, examining not diasporic conditions per se, but rather, the different ways or modes of explaining diaspora. I will also be foregrounding the impact of class, politics and wealth on diasporic communities. These create further differentiation at all levels of privilege and wealth within the diasporic communities. These factors have a significant bearing on how a diasporic community relates to the diverse groups within itself and also to the wider society at large.

I shall first of all begin with the argument that diasporic communities tend to exhibit, broadly, three main types of psychological states, or forms of consciousness, which are, firstly, idealisation of homeland, boutique multicultural manifestation, and
transitional/transformational identity politics. It can also be said that these forms of consciousness apply to almost any given diaspora. However, it is not my intention to limit the diasporic experience strictly to these three categories. My aim is to better understand the diasporic condition by using these categories strategically and to reveal concerns and anxieties that diasporas currently face. These anxieties are exacerbated by phenomena such as rapid globalisation and its accompanying impact on mobility and homeland memories. In each of the categories that I will be elaborating on, the importance of mobility and memory in shaping diasporic consciousness cannot be overlooked.

Mobility, as a pre-requisite or defining characteristic of diasporas, is itself closely linked to the economic realities of diasporas because they can either facilitate or impair movement or migration, especially in countries which require a certain amount of capital investment before migration is approved. As Avtar Brah points out, “[t]he accelerated mobility of capital to wherever profitability can be maximised within domestic boundaries or overseas has a particular bearing on population movements” (1996: 200). Economic migration therefore confers upon the usually upwardly-mobile diaspora certain levels of privilege, or facilitates their access to those privileges.¹ However, the inevitable consequences of economic migration are often manifest in disruptions to the psychological, social, cultural and political attachments and affiliations for relocated diasporas. I will briefly describe each of the categories of diasporic consciousness, before entering into a more detailed analysis of each category and how economic migration influences or shapes that consciousness.
The first type of diasporic consciousness is what I shall call homeland idealism. This takes the form of a strong identification with, and idealisation of, the homeland by its diaspora. In this conceptualisation of the diasporic condition, the diaspora is defined largely in terms of distance from its homeland, with the attendant implications of removal or exclusion, geographical, cultural and psychical dislocation. This way of theorising the diaspora posits the homeland myth — within which is embedded the myth of return to the homeland — as a powerful and effective motivator of diasporic experiences.

The second type of diasporic consciousness perceives and (re)presents diasporas as a kind of exotic, Other community, whose value for the hostland lies precisely in the fact of their being different. As societies become increasingly multicultural, diasporic/ethnic minorities sometimes play up the fact of their difference, highlighting their visibility, in order to gain recognition and some kind of acceptance into the host society. This, however, involves a *complicit* kind of recognition by which the dominant community has already ‘read’ diaspora in their hegemonic terms, *and which the diaspora recognises and returns in kind*. In other words, the diaspora knows what the host society wants, and feeds it to them, by self-consciously re-enacting for the dominant community their moments of ethnicity, or ‘origins’, such as traditional, ritualistic practices. This reciprocal but superficial form of recognition is important because not only is it largely based on a systematic exploitation of the cultural plurality of ethnicities and the economic structuring of those groups into a
sub-class, but it is also almost a guarantee of value-added capital and economic surpluses. Conversely, diasporas which re/present themselves, or which get re/presented, in this way, are seen as manifestations of a trendy, ‘boutique’ form of multiculturalism in western and predominantly white societies, a perception which further entrenches them in certain social, cultural and political relations.

Thirdly, there is the conceptualisation of diasporas as being in a transitional or transformational state. Here, diasporas are seen as integrating in an informed if not ambivalent way with their host societies to a certain degree. However, it is the extent of their integration that remains a problematic and contentious issue, largely because of conflicting expectations — from the receiving country as well as the migrant community — for migrants to ‘integrate’ or ‘assimilate’. By foregrounding the transitional state of the diaspora, the frequently worked notion of ‘hybridity’ (Bhabha, 1990a: 207-221) may be highlighted and problematised. As Paul Gilroy tells us, “It Ain’t Where You’re From, It’s Where You’re At …” (1991); the transitional social realities that make up diasporic experience refocuses our attention back onto the irreducible aspects of ‘roots’ and ‘routes’ (Gilroy, 1993). While theorists have tended to foreground the histories of diasporas because these histories are significant for accounts of how the ‘here and now’ is arrived at and negotiated with, there have been few (or no) considerations for the future of diasporic trajectories. This added notion is an important consideration in the negotiation of diasporic identification, which will have significant impact on the framing and positioning of diasporic subjects and their narratives.
These categories and types, while indicative of the diversity of diasporic communities, are however neither watertight nor mutually exclusive; there are bound to be overlaps and intersections between the categories. Markers of race, ethnicity and class are also fluid and mutable, highly contingent upon the current situation. As Brah puts it,

The impact of electronic media, together with growing opportunities for fast travel, invests Marshall McLuhan’s idea of ‘the global village’ with new meanings. Simultaneous transmission to countries linked by satellite means that an event happening in one part of the world can be ‘watched together’ by people in different parts of the globe. These developments have important implications for the construction of new and varied ‘imagined communities.’ (1996: 195)

The creation of these new ‘imagined communities’ serves, on the one hand, to reinforce the image of an increasingly unified ‘global village’ while, on the other hand, creating newer and more exclusive criteria for belonging. Because the global “does not (yet) fully encompass the lived experience of actors or the domain of institutional orders and cultural formations; it persists as a partial condition” (Sassen, 2000: 215). As a result, the ways in which communities are imagined become inevitably and profoundly influenced by the extent to which globalisation has created or delimited their life opportunities. This “creation of new spatialities and temporalities” (Sassen, 2000: 215) further emphasises the fracturing potential and effects of globalisation on the already-heterogeneous and constantly evolving diasporic communities. In drawing attention to the three categories of diasporas outlined, my intention is that such an analysis will highlight the fluidity of those arbitrarily drawn up boundaries, yet show up the implications and complexities
beneath those categories. These issues will have the capacity to illuminate particular
texts that I shall be looking at, and highlight contemporary issues that diasporas most
commonly face.

Before entering into an examination of the diasporic categories outlined above, I want
to position my notion of diaspora within the context of how nations define
themselves. A nation state’s existence and functioning are built upon the narrative
structure of a grand narrative. The modern project of the nation state, emphasising
unity and sameness over difference and diversity, champions particular ideological
assumptions that are incorporated into the construction of ‘national identity’. The
perceived unity of ‘national identity’, believed to be the product of racial, therefore
cultural and national, homogeneity, ultimately feeds into a sense of nationalism.
Zygmunt Bauman’s description of the modern nation states shows it to be “one which
legislated order into existence and defined order as the clarity of binding divisions,
classifications, allocations and boundaries” (1997: 47). Put differently, if the ‘unity’
of ‘national identity’ was not self-evidently present or available, it was always
possible to manipulate, mould and superimpose that vision of unified ‘national
identity’ via institutional and legal, even punitive, measures. Yet, within those
‘ordered’ boundaries, claims to homogeneity and continuity are revealed to be forms
of ‘false consciousness’ because the nation state is deeply divided when it comes to
the issue of class and labour. In fact, the nation state itself “constitutes one highly
distinctive and important elaboration of the social division of labour” (Gellner, 1983:
4).
The phenomenon of globalisation, which aims at creating a ‘world without borders’, further adds to this ‘crisis’ (of division) by accelerating those processes that fragment grand narratives and cause nation states to crumble, even possibly vanish.

Globalisation, overtly motivated by economics, can divide the classes within nations even more. As Saskia Sassen has noted, globalisation and “its discontents” has come to be synonymous with the widening gap between society’s haves and its have-nots (1998). This global ‘world without borders’ favours not only the upper classes (wealthy, capitalist, bourgeois) but also, and increasingly, the new technologically savvy class. The old distinctions separating the upper from the working classes are no longer tenable as technological capital begins to disrupt the prevailing status quo.

What this means for the nation state is that its balancing act is further complicated by issues of class and the creation of new classes, in addition to the already existing tensions surrounding race and culture. At the same time, it also has to deal with the pressures that are challenging and dismantling, even obliterating, its authoritarian narrative, now further accelerated into oblivion by the globalising phenomenon. It is therefore timely here to ask exactly what is at stake in the diminishing and disappearance of the nation state and its narrative.

The grand narrative of the nation state aimed primarily to convey a sense of ‘nation-ness’, based on shared commonalities, such as culture, while at the same time drawing up boundaries between a perceived unified self and its foreign ‘other’. Within those boundaries, ‘appropriate’ members are enabled and encouraged to
imagine themselves as ‘unified’. Outside of those boundaries, excluded elements constitute the basis upon which that unified national self is imagined and opposed to. Zygmunt Bauman observes of the modern nation state that while “each kind of society produces its own kind of strangers, and produces them in its own inimitable way”, and

while drawing its borders and charting its cognitive, aesthetic and moral maps, it cannot but gestate people who conceal borderlines deemed crucial to its orderly and/or meaningful life, and are thus charged with causing the discomfort experienced as the most painful and least bearable. (1997: 46)

As mechanisms of exclusion, boundaries manifest themselves in various ways, one form of which is the act of forgetting. According to Ernest Renan, “Forgetting … is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation” (1990: 11). The outcome of that forgetting is the construction of a unified narrative which presents the nation as “the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice and devotion”, so as to “have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present” (Renan 1990: 19). Commonality is of great significance here because it legitimises the nation state’s claim to homogeneity, leading to the imaginary idealisation of a pure, unified denizen. In the ‘war’ against “its own kind of strangers” that each society produces in its own way, one of the strategies adopted, as outlined by Bauman, was that of an “anthropoemic” “vomiting” of the strangers, which involves banishing them from the limits of the orderly world and barring all communication with those outside. This was the strategy of exclusion — confining the strangers within the visible walls of the ghettos or behind the invisible yet no less tangible prohibitions of commensality, connubium, and commercium; expelling the strangers beyond the frontiers of the managed and manageable territory; and, when neither of these two measures was feasible, destroying them physically. (Bauman, 1997: 47-8)
In less extreme cases, the non-national and ‘other-ed’ strangers that make up the nation state get obscured, forgotten, or silenced – in other words, they are marginalised and symbolically excluded from the national grand narrative.  

This exclusion points to an already existing ambivalence and antagonism in the nation state. According to Homi Bhabha, there is “a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation”, which “inscribes a much more transitional social reality” (1990b: 1) than most narrative accounts of the nation would have us believe. Speaking of the “performativity of language in the narratives of the nation”, Bhabha says,

the nation, as a form of cultural elaboration (in the Gramscian sense), is an agency of ambivalent narration that holds culture at its most productive position, as a force for ‘subordination, fracturing, diffusing, reproducing, as much as producing, creating, forcing, guiding.’ (1990b: 3-4)

This is because the “politics of memory”, as shown by Andreas Huyssen, is such that “the fault line between mythic past and real past is not always that easy to draw”, therefore “[the] real can be mythologised just as the mythic may engender strong reality effects” (2000: 26). The nation-state’s self-address is therefore also an attempt to mythologise itself and to construct an image of itself that will be effectively and positively motivating. In that act of self-mythologising, its narrative is necessarily double, not least because of the need to placate the ‘others’ coexisting with its ‘self’, as well as to cater for the needs and anxieties of the dominant majority. This creates an ambivalence that opens up marginal spaces for cultural and political negotiation and provides avenues for
substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity … that rationalise the authoritarian, ‘normalising’ tendencies within cultures in the name of the national interest of the ethnic prerogative. (Bhabha, 1990b: 4)

The “national interest” here would be the construction of a narrative that produces “the fact of sharing” (Renan, 1990: 19), so that the nation is conceived of as “a large-scale solidarity” (Renan, 1990: 19). It is in the interest of the nation state to pursue this single and singular interest which is why many countries have chosen, from force of a modernist habit, not to project their heterogeneous, multiple narratives. Still, there is no denying that the nation is “an agency of ambivalent narration” (Bhabha 1990b: 3),

Always itself [in] a process of hybridity, incorporating new ‘people’ in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation. (1990b: 4)

The unpredictability of those forces means that there is still ‘incomplete signification’, especially where there exist sites that remain unchecked, and where potential political complications may arise. In its narrative address, therefore, the nation state strives to elide and obscure those gaps or ‘in-between’ spaces that arise from its hybrid condition, so as to reinforce the sense of solidarity in its message. However, the excluded multiple narratives cannot be silenced, because

The ‘other’ is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously ‘between ourselves’. (1990b: 4)

Here, the nation is shown to imagine itself as a unified, consolidated whole – one that is based on a “White Nation” fantasy. In the nation state’s “intimate” and “indigenous” address to that imagined self, its sense of ‘nation-ness’ is also largely
dependent on the exclusion of an ‘other’ from its ‘self’. This is where the
ambivalence of the nation state and its narrative is most marked – because of its need
to exclude in order to unify. This ambivalence is further compounded by the fact of
its being ‘hybrid’ and transitional, always in negotiation with its multiple selves and
its others. This ambivalence reminds the nation state of its hybrid and transitional
state, a fact that it represses by focussing instead on the idea of a homogeneously
constituted self. However, the already-inscribed transitional social reality returns to
haunt the nation state, along with other acts of exclusion committed earlier by the
state, thereby destabilising the nation’s linear sense of historicity by dismantling the
gestures of grandeur in its modernist, monolithic narrative.

I have discussed the notion of exclusion as a way of beginning to conceptualise the
diasporic condition, because the notion of exclusion is always double for the
diaspora; first, from the homeland, and second, from the hostland, in different ways
and at different levels; physical, psychological, social, cultural, economic, and
political. This notion of exclusion is useful for entering into discussions on diaspora
because, in so many ways, diasporas are marked by distance, physically and
psychologically, from their homeland and also from their host society. I shall now
take up a closer examination of the categories outlined above, beginning with the
conceptualisation of diasporas in terms of homeland idealism, since this concept
overtly refers to the exclusionary effects of historical, geographical and cultural
dislocation.
**Homeland Idealism**

This type of consciousness credits the homeland as being the most powerful motivator of diasporic behaviour. Here, myths surrounding the homeland and the possibility of returning to it hold great sway over its diasporic community. First, it is important to turn to Bronislaw Malinowski’s definition of myth as

> [acting] as a charter for the present-day social order; it supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief, the function of which is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events. (in T. Brennan, 1990: 45)

The use of “retrospective” is significant because it captures what the sense of this diaspora is about: located psychically in the past and looking back at that past, idealising it in the form of a “magical belief” so that those past events become larger than life. Seen in this way, the homeland and its myths function as a grand narrative, both aimed at the unification and the homogeneous representation of the nation. These narratives that are subsequently appropriated by the homeland-idealising diaspora thus further inscribes upon the latter’s consciousness a particular version of social reality that lead to a narrow and idealised perception of past events.

Conversely, the homeland-idealising diaspora also represents itself as being trapped within an idealised historical space and time, thereby fashioning itself after a “backward-looking conception of diaspora” (Hall, 1990: 235). In other words, I am also making the point that this way of conceptualising diaspora has the effect of making the diasporic community an always *supplementary* one. As pointed out by Derrida, this is a concept that contains a dual signification. In its first signification,
The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It cumulates and accumulates presence (1992: 83);

In the second, it only ‘just’ supplements, in the sense that

It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as one fills a void. (1992: 83)

The existence of diasporas reminds nation states, both home and host, of a void in themselves. This is a void that is occupied by a certain ambivalence which problematises, especially at the cognitive level, relations between diasporas and their homelands and host societies. As Bhabha points out,

The supplementary strategy suggests that adding ‘to’ need not ‘add up’ but may disturb the calculation . . . The supplementary strategy interrupts the successive seriality of the narrative of plurals and pluralism by radically changing their mode of articulation. (1990b: 305)

The position of ‘secondariness’, or a sense of belatedness ‘after’ the original, continues to characterise sentiments and perceptions of diasporas, whether in relation to its homeland or host society. The homeland-idealising diasporic community is consequently always located on the ‘outside’ – that is, marginalised – because it is at once removed from the homeland which functions symbolically as its ‘centre’, while it is also located on the periphery of the host society because it is unwilling and/or unable to participate in the national narrative of the new country. Borrowing terms from Derrida, we can say that the diaspora finds confirmation here of its status as ‘other’, always in relation to a ‘positivity’ (Derrida, 1992: 84). The use of ‘positivity’ is noteworthy here because both homeland and hostland, as nation states, tend to also construct themselves in this way, that is, positiv-istic-ally, as ‘truth’, via narratives that invoke positive images.
The hostland’s positivity lies in the myth that it constructs for the imagination a
homogeneous self, ‘pure’ and untainted by foreign elements. While social reality
attests to a plurality of ‘other’ voices and cultures, the national imaginary locates its
own existence within an idealised spatiality and temporality, the boundaries of which
it tries to ‘fix’ by nationalist rhetoric and narratives. This imaginary may not
materialise, because its function is purely mythical, existing as the symbolic
homeland for which its diaspora may retain positive images and memories of. At the
same time, the national imaginary also acts as a propagandist vehicle for validating
the nation as an ideal space, in which its people are encouraged and exhorted to
remain. By constantly projecting positive images of itself, the nation is thus able to
generate a sense of agency and empowerment for both its local and diasporic
communities.

A homeland-idealising diasporic community that has internalised the positivistic
images of its homeland is enabled in its identification with the homeland and it holds
onto that identification for sustenance and a sense of empowerment. In other words,
the image of the homeland provides an image-based (‘imaginary’) identification for
the diaspora, while mnemonic devices, such as memory, distortion, and idealisation,
and other past events work to enhance that image-based identification of the
homeland, thereby imbuing the image with symbolic significance and signification. I
would argue that this is where imaginary and symbolic identification can be said to
have collapsed onto each other, because where there once was a physical image,
retrospection has led to an accumulation of other images, or a distortion of that image, so that it now takes on mythical qualities, and past events take on a “supernatural reality” (T. Brennan, 1990: 45). Diasporic narratives of this kind commonly reveal a genuflection towards the homeland, in which certain cultural practices are presented or explained as ‘alien’ and/or ‘exotic’ – further mystifying their already visible difference.

With globalisation, it seems possible that a ‘world without borders’ is fast becoming a reality even though other barriers are still firmly in place. The globalisation phenomenon also shows up the fragility of national boundaries, especially internal class boundaries, which deeply disturbs the belief in the solidarity and unity of the nation state. Globalisation, therefore, is seen as contributing to the loss of stability that makes up much of the contemporary experience in the here-and-now post-modern world. Globalisation not only destabilises, but because its mechanisms are inherently inequitable in terms of asset distribution and resource re/allocation, its impact and effects will therefore be as disparate as they are contingent upon the proximity of access that people have to those resources and distribution networks. In other words, the various manifestations of globalisation are fundamentally determined by the functionality of economic systems in various places. As a consequence, relationships based primarily on economics are seen to be the primary motivators governing much of contemporary experiences of cultural and class differences. These experiences, in turn, become even more diverse and disparate for the individual, community and nation, which further shed light on the intricacies governing global
and diasporic relations, thus making for a propitious entry into the experiences of the diasporic world. If modernist discourse deems the nation state as positivity, now threatened by the globalisation phenomena, diasporas then find themselves defined, relatively, in terms of a certain negativity. This is why much of the writing on diasporas have tended to focus on their exclusion, displacement, dislocation, and so on. Narratives which attest to a homeland idealising diasporic consciousness not only look back to a historical space and time, but also reveal a withdrawal from the present, or a denial of their actual and current situation. The homeland-idealising diaspora remains trapped in the present because there is a limit to which the extent of their histories can be recovered in their narratives. It is a liminal existence that these diasporas inhabit, marginalised by their homeland as well as marginalising themselves in the new country. Their ‘exterior’ status has repercussions and implications for the narratives produced by diasporic writers, and this is a point that will be more extensively elaborated and discussed further on in this chapter.

The benefits of physical, geographical relocation, usually derived in terms of economic gain and an upwardly class mobility, are not lost on the diasporic community. While bemoaning the ‘loss’ of homeland, history and culture, relocated diasporas are often perceived, especially by those in the homeland, as gaining access to levels of privilege previously unattainable in the homeland. Because economic migration is so closely associated with diasporic relocation, the decision to migrate is often thoroughly informed and influenced by the opportunities that the new country can offer and provide. Those opportunities, while often of a materialistic nature, are
not without certain disadvantages – the most common of which would be the real or perceived erosion, even loss, of the minority group’s culture and, sometimes, their history too.

The above scenario is merely half the story because diasporic relocation is not always a consequence of economic factors; political and religious pressures have recently been highlighted as major push factors for people leaving their home countries. Under these conditions, the extent to which the diaspora idealises its homeland will be considerably attenuated. Even so, relocation to a new country is generally motivated by material concerns, and this is a factor that can contribute to the resentment felt by those ‘left behind’. Popular perceptions of relocated diasporas, aided by narratives that attempt to explain their ‘condition’, therefore tend towards normativisations of the diasporic condition as being trapped, or psychologically and culturally located, in historical space and time, regardless of their economic circumstances.

In an attempt at circumventing this kind of normativisation, diasporas are sometimes represented as existing in their own right, usually in terms of an exotic, ‘other’ community in relation to the more dominant culture of their host society. This is a form of engagement, albeit a limited yet ‘informed’ one, with the materiality of their current situation whereby the diaspora re/presents itself as being of value for their host society, especially in an environment of cultural pluralism, known as ‘boutique multiculturalism’.

59
Boutique multiculturalism

A direct effect of globalisation and transnational migration has been the increase in cultural plurality, giving rise to more and more multicultural societies, and resulting in debates over the treatment of vastly different cultures. Most notably, the foremost issue has been the granting of equal recognition and equal worth to minority cultures. This is especially in liberal humanist democracies where there is a need to give “the impression that every kind of expression, every kind of representation, and every kind of culture is as valid as others” (Chow, 1998: 11). The intention is to establish, with “the politics of equal dignity”, something that is “meant to be universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities” (Taylor, 1994: 38). The end result, however, is towards the absorption of ethnics into a community, regulated by enforced policies of toleration. These tactics strongly suggest either the physical destruction of foreign elements or the erosion of cultural differences for assimilation through punitive measures such as the sheer force of the law and the nation state.  

However, in spite of benign and benevolent intentions, “the politics of equal dignity” is at odds with “the politics of difference” whereby 

what we are asked to [recognise] is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else. (Taylor, 1994: 38)

To assimilate the group’s distinctness would be to violate the “ideal of authenticity” (Taylor, 1994: 38), yet this is what many multicultural societies, faced with cultural pluralism, are compelled to do, that is, manage and negotiate difference.  

In this
situation, race and ethnicity become the dominant modes of identification as everyone is assigned and ‘classified’ thus. The ensuing power relations are a direct result of racial signifiers, or race markers, now evidently displacing previous older markers of class and status. Race and ethnicity therefore become the ‘new’ status symbols in a racially stratified and hierarchised environment.

In Amy Tan’s *The Hundred Secret Senses*, the pronouncement is made that “it’s hip to be ethnic” (1996: 157). This fictional scenario, however, has been carried over into real life and literally dramatised in North America, where ‘Hapa’ (the Polynesian word describing people who are half-white) or mixed-race Asians are fast gaining street credibility and becoming a prominent feature of the demographic landscape. Images of ‘Hapa’ youth have begun to dominate fashion magazines and billboards, so much so that a Vancouver daily has hailed the ‘Hapa’ face as the ultimate fashion accessory one can acquire. This is the kind of situation that readily lends itself to, if not already demonstrating, exploitation at the popular culture level; that is, when minorities, previously disadvantaged because of race and ethnicity, find an avenue that gives them access to cultural capital and credibility vis-à-vis that very same ‘disadvantage’.

In the realm of popular culture, the production of the minority, or Chow’s ‘native’ (by white, Western discourse), means that

the “native” is turned into an absolute entity in the form of an image … whose silence becomes the occasion for our speech. (Chow, 1993: 34)
Yet, it is worth noting that “[the] “authentic” native, like the aura in a kind of mise-en-abîme, keeps receding from our grasp” (Chow, 1993: 46), which indicates the futility of attempting to “grasp” or capture, much less consume it. In the Hapa instance, the minority literally becomes an “absolute entity” whose image is a commercially viable and exploitable resource. The underlying motivation, as Chow explains further, is that “it is actually the colonizer who feels looked at by the native’s gaze” (1993: 51), and therefore has to work at producing (the image of) the native as object, silent and passive. According to her,

> [o]ur fascination with the native, the oppressed, the savage, and all such figures is therefore a desire to hold on to an unchanging certainty somewhere outside our own “fake” experience. It is a desire for being “non-duped”, which is a not-too-innocent desire to seize control. (1993: 53)

This passage makes clear the motivations behind a dominant society’s apparent embrace of minorities in a climate of cultural pluralism; basically, to hold on to and replicate existing structures of power that keep minorities in their place.

However, the flip side to Chow’s argument is that, since the “native” is actively gazing, and furthermore, that there is the “desire for being ‘non-duped’”, by an unnamed and presumably white society, the implication is that there exists the possibility of ‘duping’ or being duped. In other words, the “native” can equally possess the same “not-too-innocent” desire to gain some form of control by complying with the desire of dominant discourse to construct ‘nativity’ in a certain way. That is to say, a native who is aware of the insecurities and anxieties surrounding the coloniser is *actively complicit* in the production of him/herself as
silent object. Therefore, underlying the silence of the ‘native’ or ‘studied object’ is actually an active sense of marginalised subject agency, enabling the “native” to conceal this act of ‘duping’, and to play along with the coloniser’s fantasy (of ‘not being duped’). In Bhabha’s article “Signs taken for wonders”, this particular situation is read as an effect of hybridity, whereby

Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority — its rules of recognition. (1994: 114)

Thus, hybridity “intervenes in the exercise of authority not merely to indicate the impossibility of its identity but to represent the unpredictability of its presence” (1994: 114). It is this unpredictability that underscores much of white anxiety about the ‘native’. Further, Kuan-Hsing Chen reads the anxiety of the coloniser as “nothing but a form of recognition” (1998: 23), that is, recognition of the ‘more’ hybrid status of the ‘native’ or colonised person. This ‘hybridity’ is dangerous because of the possibility of the unnoticed/unnoticeable ability of the colonised to challenge the prevailing status quo — in other words, the potential for subverting power relations.

To return to current discourses on multiculturalism, we can say that ethnic/diasporic minorities are consciously playing the multicultural game; by self-consciously re-enacting for the dominant community what the latter expects from them, and by feeding them what they want, either in the roles of native as ‘silent object’ or as native ‘informant’. In Chen’s reading, then, the minority ‘performer’ is seen to be operating “within a colonial system of representation and always reproduces a pre-existing frame of relations” (Chen, 1998: 23). In both Bhabha’s and Chen’s frameworks, then, the ‘native’ is, or has the potential to be, manipulative and
economically exploitative and, moreover, this dynamism is enabled by the essentially circumscribed identity category often imposed on ‘natives’.

A native informant, seen in this perspective, becomes the personification of ambivalence, because he/she can stand for all or nothing at once. On the one hand, the figure of the native informant is heavy with signification because of that clearly visible aspect of ethnicity, while on the other hand, he/she is at the same time possibly subverting that mode of signification by knowingly manipulating his/her ethnic visibility, thus leading to the pronouncement that “the effects of hybridity are always ambivalent” (Chen, 1998: 23). Following this, Geoffrey Brennan has noted that people become “culture bearers” (1993: 171-2), deriving value from their visible ethnicity, especially by being members in a multicultural society that needs representatives of various cultures to secure that sense of betterness. What this reveals about multicultural society is that it is predicated upon “an extrinsic relation between a White possessor and non-White possessed”, in a showy form of multiculturalism that is more about ‘having’ — that is, parading its cultural plurality — than about ‘being’ effectively multicultural (Hage 2000: 117-40). This display of cultures, in turn, is valuable for the exhibiting society not only because it alludes to the power of the ‘collector’ or ‘exhibitor’, but also because the culture on display is rendered an “ethnic object with no will”. As Hage explains,

All ethnic cultures within the White fantasy of the multicultural collection are imagined as dead cultures that cannot have a life of their own except through the ‘peaceful coexistence’ that regulates the collection. (2000: 163)
While the multicultural celebration of difference in Australia is seen “paradoxically like a mourning ritual” (Hage, 2000: 164), the staging and re-enactment of ethnicity has value for the dominant community, because the conditions of diaspora, or of being an ethnic minority, lend themselves readily to commodification. This ‘value’, according to Arjun Appadurai, “is accelerated or enhanced by placing objects and things in unlikely contexts”, a situation that he refers to as “the aesthetics of decontextualisation”, which is coterminous with “commoditization by diversion” (1986: 28). In other words, the result is an accrual of benefits derived from the fact of being dislocated or displaced; cultural alienation has its socio-economic advantages. Whether as ‘object’ or as ‘informant’, these roles are exploitative forms of ‘self-ethnicisation’, even when “externally instigated, articulating and confirming a position of subordination in relation to Western hegemony” (Ang, 2001: 33), thereby restoring and maintaining the current dominant status quo. Appadurai’s “commoditization by diversion”, however, manifests itself in many guises, not all of which are empowering to the ethnic minority — even when it is a popularisation of ethnicity, as in the ‘Hapa’ example — as this dissertation will now illustrate.

In his book *White Nation: Fantasies of White supremacy in a multicultural society* (2000), Ghassan Hage shows how multicultural societies, underpinned by a largely white majority whose dominance is unchecked, are anxious to preserve that status quo. This is regardless of whether the white majority are engaged in eradicating the voice of the ‘ethnic other’, or whether they are happily welcoming them under some conditions that the former feel entitled to set (Hage, 2000: 17). The similarity
between these two camps is the way that their debates have silenced and constructed
the ‘ethnic other’ into passive objects. Therefore, whether as white multiculturalism
or as white racism, the objective is to ‘contain’ the activities of the ‘ethnic other’.
‘Containment’, however, is eventually rendered a futile project because later
generations of the ‘ethnic other’ – or the new diaspora, as I shall be referring to them
throughout this dissertation – are increasingly participative in the process of
governing their new home countries. As Wenche Ommundsen has noted, the problem
with multicultural ‘containment’ is that, over time,

> the question of how much difference can be accommodated within
> multicultural nations before the political, legal, and social fabrics of
> the state become intolerably strained crop[sic] up with monotonous
> regularity at all levels of national and international debate. (2004: 81)

Unlike the first generation diasporas, the new diasporas are usually brought up in the
new countries as ‘assimilated’, because locally born. The commonly typecast migrant
— first generation, visibly ethnic and above all else, Third World-looking — can,
allegedly, “write only of the migrant experience in incompetent English” (Gunew,
1993: 50). So the expectation is that these migrants can and will “produce only ‘plain
story-telling’ and are incapable of having a playful attitude to language” (Gunew,
1993: 50). To some extent, this observation is not totally untrue, because many novels
written and published by the old diaspora were concerned with the recovery of their
histories, a recuperative project that was aimed at (re)telling the tales of the first-
comers to the new land, but usually written and narrated by the later generations.

The later generations, ‘assimilated’ to a certain extent, are consequently more
competent in English, less circumspect and more assertive, not only socially and
culturally, but also creatively and politically. This is not to say that the new diasporas have completely broken away from issues that mattered to the old diaspora. Rather, the old diaspora’s concerns have informed and have also been incorporated into the consciousness of the later generations, from which newer and more contemporary concerns have arisen. These contemporary concerns are a result of a history of racialisation and politicisation as experienced by the old diaspora, or a politicised consciousness-raising experience. Having been brought up as ‘assimilated’, the new diaspora now belongs and identifies with the culture of the new country, at the same time making their presence increasingly felt in local politics. Although “White multiculturalism cannot admit to itself that migrants and Aboriginal people are actually eroding that centrality of white people” (Gunew, 1993: 22), the accompanying effect upon the social, cultural and political landscape is that White supremacy is revealed as a fantasy, with multiculturalism and racism manifesting themselves as simply more sophisticated forms of the same fantasy.

That fantasy is analogised by Sneja Gunew, in her image of a dinner table conversation and a telephone communication (1993: 38-53) to further exemplify the ‘ethnic’ situation. Her analogy makes explicit the extent of the host’s power, whereby the category of the ‘host’ is synonymous with the dominant group of the host country, complete with the “politics of tolerance” (Hage, 1994: 19-34) and structuring of power differentials. It becomes animatedly clear who holds the balance of power by their ability to invite and/or tolerate the other, and by the other’s conforming to the role of invited or tolerated guest. At the same time, Gunew also demonstrates how
opportunistic ‘host’ figures such as “multicultural professionals” and “self-serving academic careerists” have manipulated the logic of tolerant multiculturalism to carve a niche for themselves. This illustrates Ang’s pronouncement that “[c]laiming one’s difference (from the mainstream or dominant national culture) and turning it into symbolic capital has become a powerful and attractive strategy among those who have never quite belonged, or have been made to feel that they do not quite belong in the West” (Ang, 2001, 11-12).

With respect to the “cultural, specifically literary, dimensions of the multicultural debate” (Gunew, 1993: 40), I want to highlight the observation that she makes about multicultural writing:

We are accused of concentrating on the same few writers and in the same breath are damned for trying to widen the group by working on bibliography – which comprise 900 writers [...] – a no-win situation. (1993: 51-2)

This statement illuminates the situation that many multicultural writers find themselves in because no matter how assimilated, something about them remains ‘different’, whether it be their visible ethnicity or their sometimes foreign-sounding names that may allude to deviations from mainstream narratives. The writing that these minority writers produce is therefore often subject to a different set of expectations and also judged by different criteria. In other words, the belief, by both whites and non-whites, is that non-white bibliographies and anthologies should be worked on by non-whites themselves because ‘interference’ from any white person can only imply either a white, language-based racist attitude or a white multicultural anxiety about loss of control. Both kinds of attitudes are underpinned by the same
white fantasy, which ultimately leaves the ‘ethnics’ in charge of their own cultural affairs, in order to circumvent accusations of racism arising from the dominant white sector. Here, I want to draw attention to the conference, Writing Thru Race: A Conference for First Nations Writers and Writers of Colour (Vancouver, 30 June — 3 July 1994), which sparked off an extensive public debate because of the exclusion of white writers. Originally intended as a conference about writing, the public attention on the racial/ised focus of the conference signalled the inability of dominant white culture to conceive of themselves as similarly racialised, or racially categorised, as other minority groups. In other words, to include ‘white’ writers would imply the equal visibility of ‘whiteness’ as a racial group (Kamboureli, 2000: 90-91). Moreover, the ‘intervention’ of white writers, if included, could also be seen as a symptom and manifestation of anxiety on the part of dominant culture about its loss of control over the multicultural situation.

On the other hand, perhaps in less angst-ridden circumstances, this practice of putting ‘ethnics’ in charge of their own cultural affairs in other countries has met with some degree of success. To attest to this is the growing popularity of ethnic-produced cultural events, where, free from any dominating white influence, there is an increasing tendency towards subverting ethnic norms and expectations. In other words, the act of holding up one’s own minority culture for critique or for comic ridicule can and perhaps should only be undertaken by minority ethnic persons themselves, and to a lesser extent, by members of other minority groups. This practice, however, is based on a social memory that has reified and stereotyped
certain common or popular ethnic practices and traditions, and then draws upon those ‘ethnic discourses’ for populist endorsement. Still, by moving away from normative perceptions about ethnic diasporas, these public acts of subversion attempt to challenge stereotypes while also highlighting the contingencies upon which those stereotypes are based. In transcending those static categorisations and conceptualisations, new and radical types of diasporic identities and histories can be constructed and narrated into the national space.

From the cultural/creative spheres of writing and performance, socio-economic benefits can be derived, which leads to the perception of multiculturalism — even if tokenistic — as ‘valuable’; as opposed to the feeling or anxiety about multiculturalism experienced as ‘loss’. Hage shows how, as part of the Australian Labour Government’s discourse of economic rationalism, multiculturalism — when identified as a source of economic efficiency — provides “an economically exploitable resource”. Consequently, multiculturalism easily translates into the “marrying of cultural value with economic value” (Hage, 2000: 128). This is simply another manifestation of the “multiculturalism of having”, in other words, putting a price tag or imposing economic value on visibly ‘different’ persons, cultural practices and/or commodities.

Another way in which multiculturalism can maximise ‘economic efficiency’, Hage continues, is by creating conditions which include migrant labour in the national economic space, but at the same time exclude migrant workers from the social space.
The migrant, thus marginalised, is further reified as commodity, whereby surplus value is derived from pure objectification of his/her labour. This inclusion-exclusion dialectic, however, operates only to push and to maintain those migrants into a marginal space, not totally outside of the national space but also not incorporated in any way into the social space. The main benefit of positioning them in that liminal space is to devalue their labour to such a point that it becomes economically viable for the usually white employer.

In these ways, white multiculturalism shows itself to be complicit in sustaining class boundaries, with a racially/ethnically driven distinction of labour, based on the white supremacist fantasy. The power relations in this situation are highly contingent upon race and ethnic markers as status symbols, however, in this case signifying an obvious lack thereof rather than empowerment. What this section aims to demonstrate is that Appadurai’s “commoditization by diversion” is, of course, profitable — depending on who holds the greater balance of economic as well as cultural capital or power. In the race-and-class example of migrant labour, the unnamed majority of white employers stands to gain. However, in the earlier example of ‘native informant’, it becomes a matter of how assimilated that ‘native’ is, and how well the ‘game’ of multiculturalism is understood. This section has shown that multiculturalism, while actually a form of white supremacist fantasy, can nonetheless be manipulated by those who possess enough social skills and cultural, as well as economic, capital to advance their cause and situation, if the game is ‘read’ and interpreted accurately enough. The ‘authenticity’ of one’s ethnicity can therefore be
‘planned’, to paraphrase Trinh Minh-Ha (1989), and orchestrated to the requirements of the situation. This is because the dominant culture has already ‘prescribed’ a certain form of ‘otherness’ (Chow, 1991: xvi) for ethnic minorities to inhabit. These absolutist readings of ethnicity become essentialised and adhered to by the same minorities who have no desire to challenge the system under which their migration had been approved. This is yet another tactic in the arsenal of methods with which to reify and stereotype ethnicity, while those ethnics remain marginalised in their own minority enclaves, trapped by the dominant, mainstream cultural perceptions of them.

The ‘game’ of multiculturalism has shown that it is possible to break out of and away from these stereotypical readings of ethnic minorities, by subverting dominant expectations and prescriptions of ‘otherness’. These practices fall precisely into a pattern of what Chow calls ‘self-ethnicisation’, which is

self-dramatisation [taking] the route of self-subalternisation, which has increasingly become the assured means to authority and power. (1993: 13)

Ethnicity becomes an enabling trait for opportunistic players of the multicultural game, riding on the short-term benefits that membership of a marginalised group can offer. This involves exploiting institutional handouts and social welfare programs while making overt displays of one’s marginalised status — manoeuvres that go unchecked by a multicultural society that is possessive and anxious about displaying and exploiting its cultural plurality. Thus, Kamboureli has observed, “[s]elf-fashioned authenticity can easily become a straitjacket that is not that different, either ideologically or structurally, from the social attitudes that make diasporic subjects
Other to their host societies” (Kamboureli, 2000: 4). Her statement prefigures, and even alludes to and critiques, those forms of ‘prescribed otherness’, ‘planned authenticity’, ‘self-ethnicisation’, and (especially Ang’s) ‘strategically fabricated performance’ that have come to represent new and subversive modes of representing and employing minority subject agency.

This section has accounted for forms of superficial, tokenistic multiculturalism that manifest themselves in different ways, in many places. These ‘gaming’ or ‘boutique’ versions of multiculturalism are, however, opposed to a strong or critical version of multiculturalism that, as advocated by the Chicago Cultural Studies Group, minds its proximity to the historical present and its different obligations to the variety of publics in which it circulates. (1992: 553)

In other words, strong multiculturalism calls for not only a ‘double consciousness’ but a *multiple* one that takes into account: firstly, historical and present events; secondly, recognition of other marginalised minority groups apart from one’s own; finally, the responsibility of *proprietary* rather than temporary and tokenistic mediation of difference.

It is relevant here to refer to Kamboureli’s call for the adoption of a ‘multicultural critical idiom’, which “attempts to interrogate the diverse forces that comprise the representation of diasporic subjectivities” (2000; 37). As she elaborates,

A multicultural critical idiom operates as an active transaction between past and future, between (ancestral) origins and host (or birth) countries, between political realities conceived at the same time but in different ways. To ensure that the routes of this transaction are not blocked by abstract determinations of history and identity formation,
or paid only lip service by some discourses and institutions that are merely hospitable to ethnic difference while recoiling from political change, a multicultural critical idiom cannot afford to lose sight of the meaning and function of diaspora: dissemination. (Kamboureli, 2000: 37-8).

It is in this same spirit that boutique multiculturalism, or “lip service” multiculturalism, is critiqued by Stanley Fish, who argues for the importance of valuing “difference in and for itself rather than as a manifestation of something more basically constitutive”.

Whereas the boutique multiculturalist will accord a superficial respect to all cultures other than his own, a respect he will withdraw when he finds the practices of a culture irrational or inhumane, a strong multiculturalist would want to accord a deep respect to all cultures at their core, for he believes that each has the right to form its own identity and nourish its own sense of what is rational and humane. (Fish, 1997: 382)

Strong multiculturalism, or a multicultural critical idiom, demands not only unwavering commitment but also sustained engagement and investments over a considerable period of time, making it at odds with the machinations of globalisation and economic pragmatism. Therefore, it is unlikely that those institutions, genres and media will ever materialise for strong multiculturalism to gain a foothold. This means that we will now have to contend with the ongoing displays and exploitations of ethnicity in a climate of “commoditisation by diversion”, where categories of difference can be contained, commodified and subsumed by an easy generalisation, as well as popularisation, that maximises economic efficiency, under superficial multiculturalist rhetoric.
The issue of containing and consuming culture has often been discussed, and I shall now turn, again, to Sneja Gunew and Ghassan Hage for their images of multiculturalism as a ‘feast’, or an enriching fair. By making multiculturalism out to be a form of popular culture, Gunew and Hage show how the commonality of food “has long been the acceptable face of multiculturalism” (Gunew, 1993: 41), with “migrant cultures” providing “cultural enrichment” through the “soft” options of food, music and dance, which are manifestations of popular culture, thereby offering “one of the seemingly benign representational systems” of multicultural difference (Gunew, 1999b: 147). However, when it comes to the cultural sphere of writing, or literary production, the stakes are somewhat different. As this chapter has shown, ‘multicultural writing’, or works by non-white, ethnic-looking writers, are subject to fluctuating and/or arbitrary sets of criteria and expectations. Moreover, there has now been a trend towards narrative forms that break away from the historical-recovery and cultural-recuperation modes of story-telling set by earlier writers. The emerging narrative forms are usually by members of the new diaspora, concerned not only with race and ethnicity, but also, and more importantly, attentive to the pressures and demands of their present environment and anxious to represent themselves in a different way. This is a difference that is a variant of the erstwhile theme of ethnic difference that had preoccupied the old diaspora. The writings of the new diaspora are concerned with contemporary issues of the new millennium, while at the same time bearing traces of old diaspora concerns such as racial/ethnic consciousness and forms of racism, or simply illustrating the effects of racialisation, as part of their upbringing and consciousness.
In continuing with her critical appraisal of literary production by ethnic migrant communities, Gunew offers the analogy of food as a metaphor for literary production, demonstrating how these similar practices of cultural production allow the dominant culture to consume the other’s food, which also generates a series that leads to ingestion followed by abjection. As a consequence, the tacit rational appears to be that one need not engage with the other in any dialogic sense. Therefore she points out that, “the insistence on invoking food [or literature] whenever multiculturalism is represented in a positive way is not quite so benign as it may first appear” (Gunew, 1999b: 151).

Whatever forms these new diaspora narratives take, their difference is definitely marked in terms of content. Amidst the celebration and consumption of the intertextual forms of ‘difference’, these new diasporic writers — whether as ethnic minority ‘natives’, or as ‘silent object’ and ‘informant’ — play a crucial role in determining the perpetration of existing power relations within the dominantly white hegemonic structure of racial categorisation. Ethnicity is still being commodified, albeit in different forms and sometimes by different groups, hence presenting to the dominant culture an image of the ethnic/native as an exotic ‘other’. The difference is that the new and relatively better assimilated diaspora now has the cultural, sometimes economic and political, capital as well as agency to present itself as ‘different’ in a more progressive and multi-dimensional way. The new direction is a
result of what I shall be referring to as a transitional and transformational consciousness.

Transitional Diasporic Ethnicities/Identities

This type of diasporic consciousness is a highly politicised one which enables the diasporic subject to be “critically aware of the ‘hyphen’ and of its rootedness in more than one history, its location in the present as well as in the past” (Radhakrishnan in Mishra, 1997: 354). The doubleness of diasporic identity is highlighted in the hyphen that locates the diasporic subject, spatially and temporally, as existing in-between two cultures, for instance, Chinese-Canadian, Chinese-Australian, which constitute the subject of this dissertation’s analysis. The former term that precedes the hyphen usually denotes a place and time from which they came, such as the idealised homeland in the case of first-generation diasporas. The latter term, following the hyphen, signifies their sometimes problematic location in a different present. The hyphen that simultaneously separates while joining both terms therefore performs a double function, which I shall be referring to as a ‘disconjunction’; constituting and identifying a break (disjunction) while also forming a connection (conjunction) between two disparate cultural entities. As Bhabha has remarked, “[h]ybrid hyphenations emphasise the incommensurable elements — the stubborn chunks — as the basis of cultural identifications” (1994: 219). Hybrid identities are therefore formed out of the dual process of displacement and correspondence, rather than of simple appropriation, in the act of translation (Papastergiadis, 1997: 278). From this double function, an interstitial space is created, in which the dialectics of separation
and unification are played out and against each other, giving rise to another equally significant consideration — the future of diasporic trajectories, or, the matter of ‘where you’re going’. 27

The ‘disconjunctive’ hyphen, as a middle term, not only encapsulates the double aspect of diasporic subject identity, but it also stands for the liminal space and time that diasporic subjects inhabit, forming the basis upon which ‘diasporicity’ is experientially negotiated, and from which its future trajectories can be charted.

Bhabha has referred to this as the “third space”, an “unrepresentable” space which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew. (1994: 37)

In other words, this third space is, and also represents, the site in which discursive practices can be disrupted and where history and culture can be reinterpreted. These possibilities mean that the space is charged with the potential to unsettle static, essentialist and totalitarian conceptions of “national culture” or “national identity” with origins firmly rooted in fixed geography and common history. (Ang, 2001: 34-5)

Like Bhabha, Ien Ang similarly attributes to this space a subversive and destabilising potential, while reading into it unlimited creative possibilities, in terms of the trajectories along which diasporicity may unfold. Ang points out that “diasporic imagination is steeped in continuous ambivalence” and this is an ambivalence that “highlights the fundamental precariousness of diasporic identity construction, its positive indeterminacy” (Ang, 1993a: 4; italics in original).
The implications of that “precariousness” and “indeterminacy” manifest themselves in a “changeability of the meaning of Chineseness [or diasporicity] as a marker of and for ‘identity’” (Ang, 1993a: 10). Constant shifts in markers of identity, which also affect race and class, point to the arbitrariness of meaning (and meaning-making), and the inherent transitionality and transience of diasporic experience, imagination and identification. The productive potential and ‘disconjunctive’ capacity represented by this transitional space is a result of its being ‘in between’, as Bhabha reminds us,

\[
\text{it is the ‘inter’ — the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space — that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. (1994: 38; italics in original)}
\]

It is from this hybrid space that “culture bearers” are enabled and empowered to articulate cultural difference “as a hybridity acknowledging that all cultural specificity is belated, different unto itself” (Bhabha, 1994: 58; italics in original). In other words, cultural differences, when seen as arbitrary and highly contingent, contribute to the hybridity of that space, providing it with productive and “positive indeterminacy”.28

The hybrid space is a space fraught with tensions; it is ‘disjunctive’ because the historical past and the immediate present are at stake in the charting of diasporic futures. Put differently, traces of ‘where you’re from’ are constantly framed by ‘where you’re at’ and vice versa, which could evolve into a gridlock concerning the unfolding of diasporic trajectories and the growth and development of diasporic consciousness. Moreover, the transience and impermanence of this constantly evolving space adds pressure to the demands of striking of a balance between ‘where
you’re from’ and ‘where you’re at’, in the representations of various traces and
aspects of diasporicity. While the future is envisioned as an idealised space and time
in which ‘progress’ can be made and improved upon, the complexities already present
in the here and now often challenge more progressive constructions of diasporic
experience and identity. The collective impact of the hybrid space is therefore critical
in terms of the ways in which diasporicity gets represented, rewritten and
reinterpreted.

While all these concepts denote a positive sense of empowerment, they emanate as a
result of the ambivalence that is inherent within the notion of hybridity. The hybrid
‘third’ space, whether ‘real’ or conceptual, harbours within itself indeterminate and
syncretic elements that contribute to its productive dynamism. That is to say,
indeterminacy accounts for much of the disjunctive instability within concepts, which
enables their affirmative potential. Indeterminacy, however, is not always or
necessarily a source of empowerment. As it has been noted in the consciousness of
multicultural game players, the instabilities and ambivalences that give rise to
indeterminacy can also mean that “culture bearers”, because personifying
ambivalence, may stand for and signify all or nothing at once. The duality integral to
this concept of hybridity and indeterminacy now works to its detriment, immobilising
the concept because both sides demand equal representation, and consequently
depriving the concept of its potential effectivity, rendering it static.
Culture bearers, whether because of ‘prescribed otherness’ or ‘self-ethnicisation’, often carry the “burden of the meaning of culture” when the collective consciousness and social memory of both dominant and minority groups adhere to previously set paths of homeland idealisation. The result is therefore the inevitable marginalisation of minorities and preservation of the dominant group’s power. The situation is no better when both dominant and marginal groups engage in reciprocal forms of cultural and economic exploitation in a climate of tokenistic multiculturalism. All of these demonstrate that those aspects of hybridity and indeterminacy that are charged or associated with being positive and productive are not always and equally accessible to different members of diasporic groups — such as first generation diasporas, especially those in refugee circumstances. Put in another way, diasporas do not derive the same types of empowerment from the same sources, partly and simply because diasporic peoples, even within the same community, do not have equal access to those sources. For some, the sense of ‘disjunctiveness’ may be more representative of diasporic experience than for others.

Because empowerment associated with hybridity and indeterminacy is not equally accessible to all members of diasporic groups, the onus is therefore upon those already or adequately empowered — such as later generation or new diasporas — to make sense of the ambivalence inherent in a transitional social reality. In other words, the logic of ambivalent ‘transitionality’ reveals itself as inherently predisposed towards those diasporic subjects already in a position of privilege and access. These members of the diaspora are better equipped with the requisite social and cultural
skills as well as economic and other forms of capital necessary to forge newer and more productive readings of culture and history, so that collective normatizations can be destabilised, and differences interpreted anew. For instance, the sense of exclusion commonly associated with diasporic experience and narratives can be drawn upon, in creative ways and in an empowering and enabling manner, to highlight historical contingencies that in turn expose certain prejudicial assumptions or conceptualisations underlying particular cultural normatizations and stereotyping practices. In this newer and more radical ‘disconjunctive’ and transitional space where cultures and their perceived norms are destabilised and stripped of claims to authenticity and purity, “in this hybrid gap, which produces no relief”, cultural essentialism and hierarchy become non-issues, and the diasporic subject “takes place” (Bhabha, 1994: 58). As R. Radhakrishnan illustrates,

the diasporic location is the space of the hyphen that tries to coordinate, within an evolving relationship, the identity politics of one’s place of origin with that of one’s present home. (1996: xiii)

This hybrid space, highly unstable and discomforting, even alienating, is also where the subject’s transitional consciousness evolves. This is the space in which traces of ‘where you’re from’ are constantly framed by ‘where you’re at’, an evolving process that displaces fixed notions and memories, and which challenges easy resolutions and reconciliations.

The diasporic subject’s “willingness to descend into that alien territory” (Bhabha, 1994: 38) makes this transitional consciousness a positively charged one, much like
Ien Ang’s notion of “productive indeterminacy”. According to Radhakrishnan, this is a form of consciousness that would

insist on a fundamental difference between hybridity as a comfortably genuine state of being and hybridity as an excruciating act of self-production by and through multiple traces. (1996: 159)

Two forms of hybridity are distinguished here, which incisively illuminate the transitional and ‘disconjunctive’ nature of that space. Theorisations of hybridity which often revolve around the first type, as ‘a comfortably genuine state of being’, usually stand as abstract concepts upon which notions of empowerment are often constructed. These reconciliatory notions, being largely idealistic and imaginary, also have implications and manifestations — real and actual material effects — on diasporic subjects who possess varying levels of agency, privilege and capital. This form of hybridity is often also invoked in the many writings that identify, even idealise, diasporas as being progressive and potentially “being part of a world-historical political/cultural formation, such as ‘China’, ‘Asia’ or ‘Africa’, which may be able to turn the tables on the West, at least in the imagination” (Ang, 2001: 12).

The concept of hybridity — which involves ‘an excruciating act of self-production’ and “expressions of extreme pain and agonising dislocations” (Radhakrishnan 1996: 159) — is often depoliticised to the extent that the unrepresentability of hybrid space becomes a convenient diversion. This depoliticisation, moreover, is often a function of social and cultural elitism being too far removed from the more ‘disconjunctive’ grassroots experience of hybridity in its less positively charged forms. An additional point that Radhakrishnan makes is that “[all] hybridities are not equal”, which further
problematises the situation for diasporas, often said to embody and inhabit hybridity. This statement therefore prompts the question, “Under exactly which hybrid condition is the diasporic subject constituted and located?” That is, when more than one hybridity presents itself, “which hybridity are we talking about?” (Radhakrishnan, 1996: 160). And consequently, when the hybrid subject speaks, “who is being spoken for?” (Radhakrishnan, 1996: 161). This brings us to the second form of hybridity, identified as ‘an excruciating act of self-production by and through multiple traces’, which considers the more intricate and complex interweaving of trajectories that constitute diasporic subjectivity and identity formation. This more unsettling and discomfiting form of hybridity more often resonates with the experiences of diasporas, the majority of whom may not have access to social, cultural or economic privileges and capital, and who are more frequently confronted with the inequities, disparities and excesses of living with increasingly aggressive forms of globalisation and cultural pluralism.

The hybrid space, which is also a liminal space constituted by indeterminacy and transitionality, poses several difficulties, one of which is the fact that it is ‘unrepresentable’. While it functions mainly at a conceptual, hence abstract, level, the transitional space nonetheless affects and influences perceptions and conditions of diasporas. On the one hand, it offers an active mode of diasporic subjectivity and agency that is coextensively reconciled to the many differences of diasporic experience, while on the other hand it remains constantly and critically reflexive of the differentiated minutiae of everyday, diasporic life. Consequently, diasporic
subjectivity and consciousness are, at least, necessarily double, broken down into their multiple components and various trajectories. Above all, the hybrid space is charged with having to maintain a certain ‘coherence’ to enable the ongoing questioning, challenging and revising of diasporic consciousness. In other words, this entails

acknowledging the imperatives of an earlier “elsewhere” in an active and critical relationship with the cultural politics of one’s present home, all within the figuraiity of a reciprocal displacement. (Radhakrishnan, 1996: xiii)

Again, we find traces of ‘where you’re from’ intersecting with ‘where you’re at’ in a continual process of transforming diasporic consciousness. The double consciousness of being diasporic has been articulated by Paul Gilroy in his theorisation of what he calls the “Black Atlantic”, a “rhizomorphic, fractal structure of [a] transcultural, international formation” (1993: 4). Gilroy explores W. E. B. Du Bois’ concept of “double consciousness” as a way of approaching and conveying “the special difficulties arising from black internalisation of an American identity” (Gilroy, 1993: 126).

Extending that consciousness to my discussion of diasporas in general, we can similarly say that the difficulties facing most diasporas is the continual internalisation, whether voluntary or not, of an external, superimposed identity that is often alien to their racial ethnicities. This is in addition to, and also frequently at odds with, the ‘reality’ of lived and actual diasporic experiences — in other words, the daily business of living in/as diaspora, whether comfortably or disconjunctively — that constitute much of the diasporic subject’s cultural identity formation. Gilroy also
examines Richard Wright’s description of Du Bois’ “double consciousness” as “double vision” (Gilroy, 1993: 161), highlighting the internal conflicts and divisions in the black diasporic subject. The concept of ambivalence is not only felt by both Du Bois and Wright, it is also manifest in their writings. Contemporary diasporic experience has seen the addition of another aspect of diasporic consciousness that takes it a level above the double; that is, diasporic experience and consciousness are undeniably multiple. The pressures facing diasporas are not only those of having to make sense of a past in order to reconcile with the immediacy of the present, but also to conceive of and chart a progressive future that will be significantly influenced by how negotiations between past and present are performed. The proliferation of several and different types of hybridities means that theorisations of diasporas will, necessarily and constantly, be destabilised; its indeterminacies will therefore have to be harnessed in increasingly productive and creative ways. Therefore, it is important to heed Ang’s call for

a critical diasporic cultural politics [that] should privilege neither host country nor (real or imaginary) homeland, but precisely keep a creative tension between ‘where you’re from’ and ‘where you’re at.’ (Ang, 2001: 35)

Avtar Brah’s concept of ‘diaspora’, which “places the discourse of ‘home’ and ‘dispersion’ in creative tension, inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins” (1996: 192-3; italics in original), shows itself to also fit in with Ang’s notion of diasporic cultural politics. The multiplicity of diasporic conditions, experiences, subjectivity and consciousness, agreed upon by major cultural theorists, is a crucial factor in the conceptualisation of diasporicity
because of its potential to challenge and resist static and totalising accounts of
diasporas.

The way diasporic experience is constituted — around notions and concepts of
doubleness, ambivalence, indeterminacy, and so on — shows not only the
heterogeneity and diversity within diasporas but also the constantly changing
experience of being in diaspora. Although diasporic consciousness is transitional and
multiple, there is a danger in homogenising diasporas based on those characteristics.

Radhakrishnan reminds us that

the politics of solidarity with other minorities and diasporic ethnicities
is as important and primary as the politics of “representations of
origins” [and that] diasporic communities do not want to be rendered
discrete or separate from other diasporic communities, for that way
lies co-optation and depoliticisation. (1996: 177)

However, what needs also to be expanded is that “relational space” for the
“heterogeneously but relationally diverse subaltern/oppressed/minority subject
positions in their attempts to seek justice and reparation for centuries of unevenness
and inequality” (Radhakrishnan, 1996: 177). As Brah points out, while “the politics
of solidarity with another group is one thing … the self-organising political
mobilisation of the group itself is quite another” (1996: 8). Herein lies the importance
of keeping minority groups distinct, if not differentiated, because it would be, again, a
violation of their unique identity if their different politics, political causes and
particular histories were homogenised and collapsed into the one category,
manageable and sometimes all-encompassing as this may be. Concurrently, “the
politics of solidarity” must also be maintained, so that diasporic communities do not lose their critical mass.

Yet, it has to be noted that even in politicised situations, the possibilities of constructively and positively exploiting the diasporic condition remain largely unfulfilled, misrepresented and even misconstrued. Aligning oneself (carelessly) with the political causes of disenfranchised diasporic groups for empowerment can lead to the misrepresentation, or manipulation, of diasporic subjectivity and subject constitution as being impaired. In other words, political consciousness-raising within the diaspora can also lead to an invalidation of the conditions of diaspora when oppressed groups seeking justification and redress find the terms of their oppression appropriated and the importance of their causes diminished. This is where effective planning of future trajectories is needed to circumvent those opportunistic manoeuvres. Drawing upon Gayatri Spivak’s “strategic essentialism”, effective and constructive planning involves “the strategic use of a positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (1993: 3). To put it to use as a “mobili[s]ing slogan or masterword”, the strategic use of essentialism activates certain subject positions out of theorisations that have been, or are easily, rendered static. This is important where theorisations about the future of diasporas are concerned. The transitional diasporic consciousness can draw upon particularly appropriate diasporic identifications and representations to strategically present its political causes for greater effectiveness and more equitable representation. This is bound to have
significant consequences in the development of diasporic futures and conditions, in addition to the social and cultural well being of the host nation.

The potential for socio-cultural, even economic and political, change that is embedded within and represented by diasporas now brings the present discussion back to the anxieties invoked by the transitional quality of diasporic consciousness: because it is always dialogic and evolving, it is also shifting, mutable and transient. However, it is also precisely because diasporic consciousness is dialectically constituted and multiple that the transformations enabled by and from this space can be empowering to diasporic communities. While this kind of theorisation may seem to fall into a pattern of idealising certain spaces and/or discursive practices over others, I want to re-emphasise the point that levels of mobility and of access to capital resources and other privileges are not equal for all members of the diaspora. Therefore the vicissitudes of diasporic consciousness have to be seen as specifically derived from particular socio-historical and political contingencies of being positioned in discrete configurations of race and class ideologies. For the subject of such a consciousness, this means not only being internally divided and conflictual, but also that its position and location are the result of various trajectories that combine, after performing “an excruciating act of self-production by and through multiple traces”. The diasporic subject of such a hybrid and evolving, even alienating, space is continually displaced, as social and cultural formations are invariably destabilised. This defamiliarisation is but the result of the creative tensions that constitute ‘hyphenated’ diasporic identity and its conditions of existence.
From the three types of consciousness outlined in this chapter, no one particular ‘model’ of diaspora emerges that will sufficiently account for the range of contemporary diasporic experiences. One obvious benefit of the transitional diasporic consciousness is its mindfulness about the dangers of reductionism implicit in the homeland idealising consciousness, and to the exploitative manipulations available to superficial multiculturalism. Yet, this is not to say that homeland idealism and multiculturalism are without merit. Firstly, it is crucial to see homeland idealism as an invaluable reminder of cultural history and historicity, while functioning as a powerful and useful mechanism in the form of collective social memory and other processes of memory making. Secondly, in a climate of tokenistic multiculturalism, diasporic communities that choose to engage themselves in this way with their host society are also making a statement, even if inadvertently, about the type of active agency that they have as well as the extent of their political involvement in (arguably) more culturally plural societies. What is important about these categories is how they have alluded to and articulated underlying concerns and issues facing diasporas, problems that have been exacerbated by the phenomenon of globalisation, made more urgent in an environment of cultural dislocation where homeland memories are tenaciously held on to.
Notes

1 Brah also points out that the “notion of ‘economic migrant’ as referring primarily to labour migrants was always problematic, not least because it served to conceal the economic proclivities of those who were likely to be placed outside such a definition, for example industrialists or commercial entrepreneurs” (1996: 178).

2 Kuan-Hsing Chen notes that assimilation, “as the archetype of a colonial cultural imagination, has proved to be an oppressive, violent, and impossible operation” (1998: 20). Bauman describes assimilation as an “anthropophagic” annihilation by “devouring them and then metabolically transforming them into a tissue indistinguishable from one’s own” (1997: 47). More recently, Peter S. Li (2003) has examined the use of integration and assimilationist discourse in Canadian policy statements and immigration debates to endorse a conformity model of assimilation in integration discourse.

3 The type of nationalist rhetoric to which I am referring is explained by Ernest Gellner in his Nations and Nationalism: “nationalism is a theory of political legitimacy”, based on the principle “that the political and the national unit should be congruent” (1983: 1).

4 In this work, Sassen provides a comprehensive analysis of the complex relationship of gender, migration, and information technology to the phenomenon of the global city.

5 Gellner identifies, as authoritarian narratives, “some traditions of social thought” such as, “anarchism, Marxism – which hold that even, or especially, in an industrial order the state is dispensable” (1983: 5). Globalisation, as advanced, sophisticated industrialisation, epitomises those processes contributing to the state’s dispensability, even obliteration.

6 As Bauman says, “[t]he typical modern strangers were the reverse of the State’s ordering zeal. What the modern strangers did not fit was the vision of order” because The semantic under- and/or overdetermination of the strangers corrupted neat divisions and blurred the signposts. Their mere being around interfered with the work which the State swore to accomplish, and undid its efforts to accomplish it. The strangers exuded uncertainty, where certainty and clarity should have ruled. (1997: 47).

7 This is taken from Ghassan Hage (2000). I shall be elaborating on the ‘fantasy’ nature of white multicultural societies later in this chapter.

8 Many critics have pointed to the ‘subversive’ and disempowering effect that the concept of ambivalence introduces into grand narratives and totalising discourses. On the one hand, the ‘openness’ inherent to such a concept has been criticised for feting apolitical versions of diversity, rendering the subject the subject a free-floating signifier who stands for all and nothing at once.

On the other hand, Pnina Werbner observes that ‘ambivalence’ “is often substituted for hybridity in (post-)colonial/diasporic discourse” (1997: 16), which can be potentially undermining because, as Aijaz Ahmad has argued, “hybridity fails to move beyond the ephemeral and the contingent; thus it masks long-term social and
political continuities and transformations” (Werbner, 1997: 21). See also Aijaz Ahmad (1995).

9 Ambivalence here becomes twofold: that which governs the nation’s drive to exclude its perceived ‘others’, compounded by the ambivalent supplementarity of the diasporic community’s status.

10 Sassen also notes that “[m]odern nation-states themselves never achieved spatiotemporal unity, and the global restructurings of today threaten to erode the usefulness of this proposition for what is an expanding area of sociological reality. The spatiotemporality of the national, upon closer inspection, reveals itself to be composed of multiple spatialities and temporalities that are at best organizable into something approximating a spatiotemporal order — one, for instance, that can now be distinguished from the global” (Sassen, 2000: 215-6). It is, therefore, only when confronted by the loss of stability represented by moves towards globalisation that the nation state is seen, in response and in retrospect, as relatively ‘unified’.

11 It is useful here to recall/draw upon Smaro Kamboureli’s definition of ‘displacement’ as “a fall into a history with which we are not quite familiar, an affirmation of desire, a gesture towards the otherness that already resides within us” (2000: 14), echoing Bhabha’s pronouncement that the ‘other’ “is never outside or beyond us” (1990b: 4).

12 See Ghassan Hage (Winter 1994), for a working critique and deconstruction of the politics of tolerance. David Theo Goldberg also remarks that, even though liberals “may admit the other’s difference, may be moved to tolerate it”, they are nonetheless “moved to overcome the racial differences they tolerate and have been so instrumental in fabricating by diluting them, by bleaching them out through assimilation or integration” (1993: 7). Goldberg draws on Susan Mendus’ statement that tolerance “presupposes that its object is morally repugnant, that it really needs to be reformed, that is, altered” (Mendus, in Goldberg, 1993: 7).

13 Charles Taylor’s famous essay, “The Politics of Recognition” has been a frequent source of debate over the multiculturalism issue, and has also been widely critiqued (see, for instance, Cynthia Willett (ed) (1998)). More recently, Smaro Kamboureli (2000) has engaged lengthily with Taylor’s essay. Some of her charges against Taylor include, firstly, the questionable positioning of the ‘other’ as an object of study; secondly, the implicit ‘us’/‘them’ (paradigmatic) distinction drawn between “our philosophical boundaries” and “how we do things here”; and finally, the hospitality extended towards the ‘other’ which positions him (Taylor) as “a host to their parasitic existence” (2000: 114).

14 Yet, we have to note that the cultural capital derived from being ethnic is available only to those who understand the language of popular culture, that is, young and fashion-conscious. Therefore, this sort of ‘cultural capital’ does not accrue easily or automatically to the older generation, or to the ‘old’ diaspora. In the same passage, the response by another character goes, “[b]ut wearing a Chinese badge doesn’t really get you any bonus points.” Alongside the inference that ‘Chineseness’, or cultural identity, externalised and now commodified, is something that can be ‘put on’ and also discarded at will, lies also the implication that while it may be fashionable to “be
ethnic”, ethnicity per se does not easily or smoothly translate, and is also fast losing its claims to, cultural capital.

15 See Mossop, Michelle (2001). The article reports that “[p]eople of mixed European/Asian ancestry are enjoying a sudden elevation to star status, especially in the media and fashion worlds.” However, the article also acknowledges that, in the aftermath of Canada’s 2001 census, the idea that racial realities can be categorised has become a contentious issue for those who are of mixed race.

16 The current popularity accorded to persons of mixed race, especially those incorporating Asian/“Oriental” elements, is suspiciously similar to the evolution of fashion trends, the passing and/or demise of which spells a return to marginalised minority status.

17 On the ‘fakeness’ of experience, see Brah (1996, 11), who argues that “experience does not reflect a pre-given ‘reality’ but is the discursive effect of processes that construct what we call reality”. However, the question then follows, “how do we think about the materiality of that which we call real?”


19 In the substitution and conflation of hybridity and ambivalence, as pointed out by Werbner, it can become easy for racism to take on an “essentially ambivalent” quality, which then further conflates the distinction between racism and ethnicity, and “between essentialising discourses of otherness and multicultural identities. All is hybrid” (Werbner, 1997: 16). While ‘hybridity’ may be seen and/or experienced as “an empowering, or transformative force”, there has evolved a trend in references to hybridity as an idealised, whole-some state/condition, which threatens to rob the term of its processual and energising potential. Nikos Papastergiadis addresses this in his distinction of two types/levels of hybridity: “it refers to the constant process of differentiation and exchange between the centre and the periphery and between different peripheries, as well as serving as the metaphor for the form of identity that is being produced from these conjunctions” (1997: 274). See Werbner (1997) and Papastergiadis (1997).

20 See Perreaux, Les (2001). The article reports that, “When the members of a hiring committee at the University of Regina laid eyes on Lana Nguyen in 1998, they became so excited at the prospect of hiring a female, visible-minority engineering professor that they immediately gave her a job, one year before an opening was available”. The article goes on to detail how Ms. Nguyen had exploited “her position as a woman in a male-dominated field to forestall questions about her qualifications”, which were found to be fake. The university’s complicity in this act of ‘duping’ can be attributed to several factors, the most notable (and relevant to the present discussion) of which was the fact of Ms. Nguyen’s minority status.

21 In many Western societies, as numbers of non-white migrants increase, names that once sounded exotically different may become increasingly common; for instance, the surname ‘Nguyen’ has overtaken ‘Smith’ in the telephone directory of Sydney in 2003/4. Wenche Ommundsen also observes that identifying minority writers by their names was not always easy as
The names themselves were not always reliable indicators of ethnic origin; some writers had anglicised their names and others had changed their names through marriage. (2004)

22 I refer to Smaro Kamboureli’s analysis of the conference and critique of the media debate in *Scandalous Bodies* (2000).

23 I refer to the acclaim of the film *East is East*, and the success of *The Kumars at No. 42* as an illustration of the self-critique of an ethnic community by itself, alongside its critique of mainstream society. However, the fact that these forms of entertainment are so well-received also demonstrate the dominance of “boutique multiculturalism”, which is multiculturalism intended to fulfil a niche role in the marketplace of exoticism created by a persistently dominant monoculture. In this model, the multicultural — or the foreign in general — is “presented” to the English-speaking world […] solely as a personification and crystallisation of a foreign culture. (Birns, 2004: 88)

24 In *White Nation*, Hage shows how the lack of a mainstream political language has led to the experience of white multiculturalism as loss. Coupled with “the discourse of Anglo-decline” (2000: 20), the political language that emerges is one of “a home-grown Australian neo-fascism”.

25 Ien Ang makes the same point when she observes that, “since there seems to be a Chinese restaurant in virtually every corner of the world [therefore] ‘everybody knows Chinese food’” (2001: 23). As Annette Shun Wah and Greg Aitkin have similarly observed, “[i]ndeed, what Australian town or suburb is complete without the local Chinese restaurant?” (1999: 7).


27 This concept of a future tense is derived from, and also supplements, Paul Gilroy’s discussion of diaspora (1991).

28 The use of ‘hybridity’ in this productive sense draws upon its positive feature, which is the acknowledgement “that identity is constructed through a negotiation of difference, and that the presence of fissures, gaps and contradictions is not necessarily a sign of failure” (Papastergiadis, 1997: 258). Yet, there is also the need to acknowledge that ‘hybridity’ has had a “dark past”, and was used to serve as “a metaphor for the negative consequences of racial encounters, or a set of mercurial
metaphors” (Papastergiadis, 1997: 258). The use of ‘hybridity’ in contemporary discussions of race, culture and ethnicity, therefore can be seen as derived from its historical associations with colonial and supremacist ideologies, but has since transcended those limitations resulting in its appropriation by racial and cultural discourses that disembedded the term from nineteenth-century discourses of scientific racism.

29 It is often the case that diasporic subjects who are better positioned to access socio-economic privilege usually find themselves more empowered to engage in linguistic- and code-switching, and are often found to experience that transitional consciousness of the diasporic condition as ‘a comfortably genuine state of being’. This segment of the diasporic community is often represented among the elite intelligentsia who can and do champion the causes and concerns of their less well-off compatriots. However, the point to note is that the insistence on fundamental differences between the two forms of hybridity can only be articulated by those with socio-cultural and (some) intellectual capital, while many other diasporic groups and individuals may experience even more disparate forms of ‘hybridity’ that exceed the current conceptual boundaries being discussed.

30 However, this form of hybridity is also not without its critics; for instance, Aijaz Ahmad (1992) argues that the politics of hybridity is too often caught up with the local and contingent and therefore fails to effect any stable and sustained structural reforms. Ella Shohat (1992) has also identified the key attributes of the politics of hybridity — its emphasis on multiplicity, uncertainty and ambivalence — as its main liabilities because of the constant highlighting of ambiguities, contradictions and blurring of distinctions.


32 This is similar to Spivak’s stance on the possibility of representing the subaltern; because any representation of an authentic consciousness is always premised on “contestatory replacement as well as an appropriation (a supplement) of something that is artificial to begin with — “economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life”” (1993: 71).


34 “Self-production” in this instance, I would argue, relates also to the process of self-definition, and re-redefinition, for persons suffering from trauma or post-traumatic stress disorders arising from the disconjunctive, that is, disruptive and dislocating, experience of migration. I discuss the process and attainment of self-definition as being crucial to the migrant subject’s recovery from migration trauma later in this dissertation. See chapter 6, “Floating Lives: Chinese-Australians Represented”.
CHAPTER 2
Theorising the Chinese Diaspora

It is the aim of this chapter to advance critical analysis of the Chinese diaspora as a particular and specific group that differs from other diasporas even as in my theoretical model I build upon general theorisations about diasporas. For this purpose, therefore, I shall be elaborating on differences about the Chinese diaspora that set them apart from more generalised conceptualisation of diasporas. Apart from the work of Ien Ang,\(^1\) there has been inadequate attention paid to the Chinese diaspora especially in terms of the ‘descent’ or ‘re-migrant’ pattern (“huayi”) as outlined by Wang Gungwu (1991: 4-12). An examination of the ‘descent’ or ‘re-migrant’ diasporic patterns would entail close analysis of relations between Chinese diasporic communities and their respective host countries, with particular attention to the modes and levels of engagement between these diasporic settler groups and the receiving society. Much of the writing and theorisation on the overseas Chinese tend to view them as migrant communities that continue to maintain loyalties to the homeland, ‘China’, and therefore construct themselves as extensions of the ‘Chinese empire’.\(^2\) This represents a massive oversight with regard to the complex network of movements and presence of diasporic Chinese in the latter’s adoptive countries as well as the multiple and historical affiliations they have forged outside of the homeland. A study of the centrifugal movements and outlook of diasporic Chinese, who have been in motion for two centuries, will also unveil processes of shape-
shifting, disembedding and re-embedding into the wider global and cultural fabric of
their homeland and adoptive countries.

The Chinese community is itself inherently diverse, whether in the homeland or
outside of it. Lynn Pan, in her *Sons of the Yellow Emperor: The Story of the Overseas
Chinese*, hints at the *internal* differentiations, even levels of discrimination, operating
within Chinese communities, whether inside or outside China:

> Of the Chinese town where my parents had settled, the Hakka speakers
> were the most numerous but not, in the opinion of us newcomers from
> Shanghai (the New York of China), the most superior. In fact, we
> rather looked down on them. To consider ourselves a cut above
> Chinese from other parts of China is a Shanghainese habit. (1990: xiii)

*The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas* also informs us that, “Chinese culture is
richly varied, contradictory and protean. Selected fragments may be used to build a
new identity, but the new identity is not the old one, and to claim that it is would be a
pretence” (Pan, 2000: 23). Within China, there appear to be at least five ways of
conceptualising and differentiating Chineseness: according to administrative
divisions, by geographical boundaries (according to “drainage basins and economic
integration” (Pan, 2000: 20)), by differentiating between China proper as the “inner
territories” and the periphery as the areas “beyond the borders”, by differentiating
between core and periphery in terms of cultural transformations, and lastly, by
linguistic differences, that is, in terms of dialects spoken. While these different
conceptualisations of Chineseness appear to be largely based on territorial notions of
geopolitical divisions, it is the aspect of cultural and identity differentiations and
transformations outside of China that this dissertation is most concerned to explore
and examine. Moreover, the different conceptualisations of Chineseness that point to an already heterogeneously constituted community in the homeland foreground as well the further degrees of differentiation that can be found in the overseas communities.

In Ang’s work, there is conspicuous concern with deconstructing “the essential Chinese subject to carve out a space for overseas Chinese people in which they can claim their own hybrid sense of identity as Chinese without having to apologise that they are not pure and authentic” (1993b: 19). This indicates a conceptual shift away from genealogical and territorial notions of Chinese cultural citizenship while interrogating the ‘fixedness’ that influences perceptions about Chineseness. Ang’s notion of ‘hybridity’ attached to such a conception of Chineseness is therefore rigorously opposed to conjectures of ‘purity’ and ‘authenticity’ that are grounded in essentialist understandings of identity, and seeks to refute cultural affiliations that closely correlate with territorial, geo-physical or even linguistic proximity. One of the effects of such a conceptual shift is to show how the meanings of ‘Chineseness’ and of being Chinese vary significantly from place to place and by patterns of settlement (Brooks, 2004: 29). Ang’s proclamation, that

if I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent. When and how is a matter of politics. (2001: 36)

demonstrates the extent to which ‘Chineseness’ is also largely a function of — that is, both a result of and response to — the social, historical, political and cultural contingencies and various modalities governing much of overseas diasporic Chinese experiences.
“The nineteenth century, the age of the great migrations, saw the dispersal of the Chinese across the world on a scale unprecedented in Chinese history” (Pan, 1990: 57). Beginning with an analysis of where most Chinese migrated to, this chapter will deal later with the impact of Chinese migration in those receiving societies. Overseas Chinese can be divided into three categories, in descending order of geo-physical proximity to the homeland. Firstly, there are those who locate themselves “in the neighbouring region where the Chinese first went and continued to go”; secondly, there are “those who are scattered among developing countries around the world in small numbers”; and finally, there are “those who have moved to the industrialising West, especially the recent exodus to the migrant states of North America and Australasia” (Pan, 2000: 12). This categorisation of diasporic Chinese is underscored by a privileging of geophysical proximity to the homeland ‘centre’ and, moreover, suggests a perceived weakening and/or erosion of Chinese culture and identity the further away one moves from China. This hierarchically structured conceptualisation of Chinese identity, or ‘Chineseness’, has deeply influenced the perception of overseas Chinese, especially those settled in western countries, and has also significantly affected their attempts at negotiating and constructing a Chinese cultural identity and citizenship. A deeper and more comprehensive understanding of diasporic Chinese identity would have to begin with, and include in its study, the historical contexts and precedents of Chinese diasporic movement.
The basis for many instances of migration was largely economically motivated, either for trade and business or for employment, all of which constituted efforts towards improved prospects and living conditions. The ubiquity of Chinese trade and labour diasporas gave rise to the common perception of Chinese migrants at purely functional levels, that is, as a people who rely heavily on performing primary economic roles. In Pan’s study of the overseas Chinese, she finds a classic 19th century picture of the Chinese trader “encountered in country after country in Nanyang [Southeast Asia]” (1990: 128). Pan also reports a British observer’s notes, in 1898, that “‘In the most secluded hamlet ... and in the deepest jungle, wherever men gathered together’, there would the Chinese be, ‘doing the chief share of the work, and taking the largest slice of the profits’” (1990: 128). The Chinese “capacity for hard work and their physical power of endurance” (Pan, 1990: 129) had ensured that they became virtually indispensable to the building of modern cities and nation states. In spite of their accomplishments overseas, diasporic Chinese, even those in the ‘nearby’ region of Southeast Asia considered to be closer to China, found themselves alienated from the homeland, which had embarked on new nationalistic policies, especially after 1900 (Wang, 1991: 19). The distinction between ‘homeland’ Chinese and ‘overseas’ Chinese thus had the effect of creating a more or less hierarchical relation between diaspora and homeland, implying a patrilineal and genealogical economy (Gopinath, 1995: 304-5). In this equation, the diaspora was regarded as being at a disadvantage because of their ‘away’ status and therefore marginalised from the ‘homeland’ centre.
With large numbers of overseas Chinese in the South East Asian region — the *Encyclopaedia* puts the figure at around 80 per cent of Chinese who live outside China\(^5\) — the presence and dominance of Chinese culture is more strongly felt in these environments compared to, for instance, the relatively white-majority countries of North America and Australasia. However, even within the Southeast Asian region, definitions of Chineseness and Chinese culture are themselves evolved and transformed from already mixed and sometimes conflicting notions and experiences of Chineseness in the homeland.\(^6\) These differing constructions of Chineseness are evidenced by the various ways of referring to the Chinese language, even in predominantly Chinese countries in Asia. For instance, Mandarin in Singapore is known as the ‘language of the Chinese’ (*huayu*), while in Taiwan it is known as the ‘national language’ (*guoyu*) and in China, ‘the common language’ (*putonghua*).\(^7\) Although the reasons for these distinctions are politically significant within the respective spheres of each country’s governance, they nonetheless present a potential source of confusion for such ‘native’ speakers of the language. For relatively smaller communities of Chinese in more industrialised Western countries, the ways and meanings of being Chinese will be even more differentiated, in an environment where their ethnicity is marginalised and sometimes rejected.

The common experience of being displaced from the homeland is a unifying point with which many diasporic communities and individuals world-wide can identify because displacement significantly affects relations between diasporas and their homeland and host country. On the one hand, issues such as difficulties with or
trauma of assimilation and integration into the new environment and also preservation of homeland ties and memories bear heavily upon the consciousness of homeland idealising diasporas. The difficulties surrounding assimilation and integration are frequently further compounded by immigration discourse, which, as Canadian sociologist Peter Li has pointed out, “refer[s] to the desirable way by which newcomers should become members of the receiving society” (Li, 1998: 1). Yet, the same societies that endorse these conformity models of integration at the same time allow and encourage ethnic minority migrant groups to maintain and preserve their cultures under the aegis of exhibitionist-style multiculturalism. The overall effect for receiving societies is the sustaining of “a fantasy of total power, a yearning for complete control” (Hage, 2000: 162), in the creation of a ‘collection’ of different ethnic cultures that then have to be categorised and regulated. For minority diasporic groups this often translates into the performance of hegemonically sanctioned cultural differences, that is, differences that are displayed within the permissible boundaries of official multiculturalism rhetoric. These performances, while strategically presented, also imply an active self-regulation by and within the performing ethnic group that now has to mind its overt displays of cultural citizenship.

For many diasporas, displacement often involves having to confront a new set of challenges by the new environment in terms of self-representation and political constitution at group and individual levels. Because of their minority status, diasporic communities are often excluded from mainstream political discourses and consequently relegated to peripheral spaces of the host country’s national narrative.
Inequality, alienation and discrimination frequently characterise the experience of being diasporic because minority groups and individuals are often marginalised from mainstream political discourses. This also has the effect of restricting their attempts at self-representation, as well as attempts to dismantle stereotypical conceptions about their communities and cultural identities. Historically entrenched practices of exclusion and silencing of minority groups also have had a profound and enduring impact on their future generations who, according to Lien Chao, “cannot gain a more respectable identity in today’s society unless their collective history is recognised as part of [the country’s] experience” (1997: 93). Although individual histories may shed some light on the community’s profile, these narratives are often represented as exceptions to the rule and do not significantly challenge or subvert mainstream and stereotypical perceptions of the minority group. The result is often a perpetuation of these minorities’ already marginalised status.

Within the diasporic community, transformations in its internal composition are bound to occur with time, owing to shifts in migration patterns and changes in birth and death rates. As these changes are necessarily part of any diasporic condition and its evolution, a study of the Chinese diaspora is therefore unlikely to radically depart from certain normative depictions and theorisations of diasporas. However, the Chinese experience represents a distinctive case study when it comes to the issue of racial and ethnic difference, because of the very visible difference in their appearance. This is similarly the case for many non-white and non-European (especially Asian-
looking) migrants who are frequently represented in stereotypical and caricatured ways because of easily perceptible corporeal differences.

Since the late 19th century, stereotypes of Chinese migrants have centred upon the image of ‘chinaman’, owing to the high concentration of bachelor migrants in western societies. Moreover, strong connotations of disease in the ‘Yellow Peril’ have depicted the Chinese community in a negative light and this has allowed the dominant culture to construct Chineseness and Chinese people as inferior, unsanitary and undesirable.9 This negative stereotyping is in spite of the fact that Chinese immigrant labourers had contributed significantly to the ‘foundational’ pioneering projects in those white settler nations, and had in fact performed nation-building roles in their adoptive countries. The overseas Chinese workers’ highly noted “capacity for hard work and their physical power of endurance”, coupled with “a furious sense of opportunism” (Pan, 1990: 129-130), have gradually evolved into ‘laws’ of pragmatism which have prevailed over discrimination hardships and obstacles that prevent their smooth transition into the new environment. While this description is intended neither to generalise nor essentialise the Chinese diaspora, those traits are, from this perspective, hallmark characteristics of Chineseness that go a long way towards explaining the enduring presence of Chinese in countries that have historically and systematically engaged in racial persecution and discrimination of minority Chinese diasporic groups.
The Chinese Difference

Unlike European or white-looking migrants who experience relatively little difficulty or trauma when attempting to merge with mainstream western societies or to insert their cultures into the grand narrative of the nation state, the Chinese are constantly confronted by the fact of their own corporeal difference.\(^5\) As a highly visible minority group, the fact of ‘difference’ had always been inscribed or imposed on persons of Chinese descent. This is particularly true even for later-generation diasporic Chinese who have, to some extent, ‘assimilated’ with the mainstream culture. These members of the new or later generation of Chinese diasporas, although recognising themselves as citizens of a white society, are nonetheless distinguished by their hyphenated identities in which the term ‘Chinese’ performs a differential function that positions them as ‘other’.\(^1\) The *hyphen* in “Chinese-Canadian” and “Chinese-Australian”, for instance, carries the weight of their dual cultural and national identities, signifying the common or middle ground upon which two cultures exist, sometimes uneasily, alongside each other. By the same token, their dual cultural citizenship status indicates that these later-generation Chinese diaspora identify as ethnic Chinese over whom China has no claim. For the relatively assimilated later-generation Chinese diaspora, discrimination often constitutes a major part of their diasporic experience because of the degree to which they are physically marked in terms of ethnic visibility. This is the point where the Chinese diasporic experience, whether of first-generation migrants or their more assimilated descendants, differs significantly from the framework of general theorisations of most other diasporas.
The Chinese in Canada and Australia have had a long history of being discriminated against and excluded from mainstream society, since their presence in these countries dates back to as far as the mid 1800s. For these Chinese diasporas, the experiences of exclusion and discrimination have served as constant and continual reminders of their own difference and deviance from mainstream cultural norms. However, in considering the differential process of ‘othering’ to which the Chinese diaspora had been subjected, the characteristics of endurance and pragmatism stands out most distinctively in describing Chineseness. These are some of the traits that have enabled Chinese diasporas in white settler nations to overcome prejudice and other obstacles and to survive hostile conditions. That survival has entailed an extremely cautious and circumspect positioning of their cultural identities alongside their adoptive countries’ nationalistic narratives and mainstream cultural practices. In fact, a crucial element in ensuring the survival and development of Chinese diasporas in white nation states has been the strategic and ambivalent ways in which they position themselves within the grand narrative of the nation state. The wariness with which the Chinese diaspora orchestrates its positioning within their host countries is, first of all, a prudent reaction to the history of discrimination meted against them. At the same time, that watchfulness also signals the widespread recognition, as Smaro Kamboureli has observed, that “ethnicity is an ambivalent concept, a cultural synonym both of Otherness and of incommensurability” (2000: 94). As an overt signifier of difference, ethnicity is often invoked by mainstream discourses to reinforce perceptions of otherness as an unstable, unpredictable and threatening presence. The need for diasporas to carefully negotiate and articulate affiliations with
the host country is a response to the mainstream’s deep-seated beliefs in the cultural incommensurability of different and different-looking ethnic groups with the host culture. However, although the ambivalent quality of diasporic group constitution represents a challenge to their smooth integration with the host country, it has nonetheless enabled the strategic forging of multiple affiliations across national, geopolitical and cultural-ideological borders based on similarities and shared experiences with other minority diasporic groups.

For the Chinese diaspora, the ambivalence of ethnicity has meant that their need to practise and assert their cultural citizenship and identity is often perceived as different and deviant from mainstream cultural norms. In the face of discriminatory practices, the response has been to engage in protective and protectionist, sometimes defensive, modes of self and group preservation. However, this affirmation and negotiation of cultural identity is often tempered by a watchfulness concerning the politics of the host country. In other words, the politics of ‘where you’re at’ sometimes precedes the need to articulate ‘where you’re from’, because the need to fit in with the host country’s national imaginary is crucial to the survival of the diaspora. In these instances, the positioning of the diaspora into the host country may take the route of selectively articulating only those aspects of their cultural identity that ‘fit in’ with the politics of ‘where you’re at’. The end result is often a vicarious and cautiously shifting definition of Chineseness dependent on the ‘performance’ of its minority group status within the larger context of a white settler nation and its politics.
Migration Patterns: Out of China

To understand the ambivalent positioning by which the Chinese diaspora gained a foothold in their adoptive countries, we have to look, firstly, at the emigration phenomenon at the beginning of Chinese diasporic movement. From the 1100s to the 1910s, overseas migration occurred for a number of reasons. The major factors were, firstly, Chinese developments in naval, maritime and commercial interests; secondly, China’s increasing interactions with Southeast Asia; and thirdly, the phenomenal growth of the Chinese population, causing a strain on the country’s resources. The fourth factor was the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the West. One of the effects of industrialisation was to shift the outlook of Chinese migration, from being mostly regional movements to becoming global and larger scale, international movements, heading for European and American markets in need of labour. At the same time, Western expansion took on an aggressive turn, resulting in wars with China; the Opium Wars, the first from 1840-42 and the second from 1856-60, led to (among other things) the ceding of Hong Kong Island to Britain. This had the effect of hastening the migration process for ethnic Chinese already wanting to leave, and creating incentives for others to seriously consider migration. Lastly, China’s own internal crises (of warlordism, revolution and civil wars) from as early as the 13th century, which saw the fall of the Song dynasty, were also inducing mass departures from the homeland. The Japanese invasion in 1937 and the Communist victory in 1949 were largely responsible for driving out large numbers of Chinese to distant and safer countries (Pan, 2000: 53). By then, large-scale international migration had already been in motion for at least a century. The 1989 Tiananmen incident/massacre,
as a more recent example of internal dissent in China, caused large numbers of Chinese to leave the country, seeking refuge and residency in more liberal, democratic and humanitarian western countries.

In China, the southern provinces of Fujian and Guangdong (Canton) were tremendously benefited by their coastal location, which also meant that the majority of Chinese migrants tended to be “mostly people from the two maritime provinces” (Pan, 2000: 17). In comparison, “few went from the Mandarin-speaking areas in northern China, and practically none at all from the western or far western provinces” (Pan, 1990: 17). This had the inevitable effect of shaping the social, cultural and linguistic tendencies and affiliations of diasporic Chinese overseas, with a large number of overseas communities speaking either Hokkien or Cantonese, indicating a linguistic affiliation/genealogy with the provinces from which they or their ancestors came. Moreover, since “migrants go where they are likely to find their own kind, the overseas communities evolved as places of strong linguistic affinities — Hokkiens with Hokkiens, Teochius with Teochius, Hakkas with Hakkas” (Pan, 1990: 17). Away from their “cultural or national centre”, Chinese migrants “came overwhelmingly from [Fujian] and [Guangdong], both peripheral areas”, which were also “cultural borderlands, places of in-migration by northern Chinese” (Pan, 1990: 13). These southern coastal provinces, regarded as colonial outposts of the Chinese empire, tended to also be marginalised in terms of their relations with the cultural and political heartland of China, Beijing, located in the far north. Therefore, in considering the experiences of the Chinese diaspora in their settler societies, it is not
unusual to uncover *internal* modes of differentiation and discrimination operating within those overseas communities.

**Migration Patterns: Worldwide**

Outside of China and during the post-world war II period, events in the world at large also had an impact on patterns of international migration as well. Firstly, Asian societies, particularly the Chinese, were growing in affluence; migrants from China and the neighbouring regions tended to be wealthy and/or educated entrepreneurs and capitalists. When previously the migration patterns had been largely male-dominated, creating the racial stereotype of ‘chinaman’ bachelor migrants, 20th century migration patterns had seen an increase in the number of female migrants, thus redressing the sex ratio imbalance. This shift also brought about changes to the overall demographic of overseas Chinese communities, resulting in the growth of the diasporic Chinese community and its population. Secondly, Europe was undergoing its own transition from being a source of migrants (to North America and Australasia) to being a recipient of migrants (from Africa, the Middle East and Asia).14 Although the flow of migrants into European countries did not increase significantly, the opening up of the European continent meant that it became a feasible destination for sojourning diasporas to migrate there temporarily, as well as being a ‘stopover’ point for non-returning diasporas venturing from one destination to another. Thirdly, the relaxation of restrictive immigration policies in white settler nations — such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States — beginning from 1950 led to increases in Asian migration to those countries. Pan notes that
In the late 1950s, migrants from Asian origins accounted for less than 8 per cent of the migration to the United States and around 3 per cent of that to Canada and Australia. By the early 1990s, these proportions had increased to about 48 per cent of the annual immigration to Canada, 38 to the US and 46 per cent of the immigration to Australia. (Pan, 2000: 59)

In 1990 alone, some 91,000 Asians entered Canada while 56,000 entered Australia (Pan, 2000: 60). These figures, however, do not reflect the diversity of ethnic groups that identify as Asian, an oversight that has been remedied in the 2001 census conducted in both Canada and Australia which now recognise Chinese migrants coming from other predominantly Chinese countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore.

The increases in migration reflect not only the trend towards more relaxed immigration policies and controls but also the adoption of multiculturalism in Canada and Australia. Canada’s official 1988 Multiculturalism Act and Australia’s National Agenda for a Multicultural Australia functioned as government policies that recognised and supported ethnic minorities. These policies represented attempts to dispel images and notions of racism in their respective countries, and were instrumental in drawing larger numbers of migrants from Asia. Although recent debates surrounding multiculturalism have highlighted and revealed it to be a problematic discourse,¹⁵ the endorsement of multiculturalism as official national rhetoric has nonetheless proven useful and effective in attracting migrants, especially Asians and ethnic Chinese, to both countries.
Patterns of post-world war II Chinese migration had largely been dominated by international trading needs and labour shortages in countries around the world. However, this was the continuation of a trend which began as early as the mid 1800s, as discussed earlier. With regards to the trends in Chinese migration, William Safran makes the noteworthy observation that their sojourning patterns did not always have a final or absolute end-point. According to Safran,

> after the end of the war in Vietnam, many ethnic Chinese, while perhaps continuing to maintain a homeland myth, did not go “home”; instead they went from a less attractive diaspora to a more attractive one. (1991: 89)

In other words, even when the homeland situation had relatively improved and achieved some form of stability, many Chinese did not attempt to act upon and materialise the dream or myth of return, creating rather the phenomenon of chain migration. The dream of return became and remained a myth that now served more to facilitate group cohesion and to foster a sense of cultural solidarity, while simultaneously feeding the concept of chain migration. This concept of chain migration is especially tenable in the case of the Chinese diaspora because of their prioritising of the search for better conditions and opportunities. Economic migration is seen as a necessity in the process of realising dreams and aspirations of a better life and improved circumstances, therefore patterns of relocation are not regarded as unusual in the pragmatic scheme of constant material upgrading. In this contemporary scenario, the homeland may have ceased to be a “place with which they can identify politically, ideologically, or socially; or because it would be too inconvenient and disruptive, if not traumatic, to leave the diaspora” (Safran, 1991: 91; emphasis mine).

The myth of homeland and return therefore functions only in a mythical capacity,
facilitating group cohesion and solidarity rather than encouraging any real efforts to return.

In countries where diasporic conditions have become more attractive, such as in Singapore where the reconstituted Chinese community has been able to form government and dominate the economy, the Chinese diaspora have been empowered to practice and assert their cultural citizenship, and therefore also maintain at least social affinities with China. However, in countries such as North America, the diasporic condition may be one in which political, ideological and social affinities between homeland and diaspora have deteriorated. As Safran points out, this is an environment “where legal and political disabilities have been removed and economic opportunities have expanded, so that the knowledge of the Chinese language and the connection with Chinese culture have become weak” (Safran, 1991: 89). In these majority-white societies, the desire to be accepted and assimilated into the host culture has also meant the erosion of Chinese culture in order to facilitate economic and social mobility. This is especially so for first generation migrants who often carry strong signifiers of cultural difference — such as foreign accents and distinct patterns or specific modes of cultural consumption — that have to be concealed or discarded because those signifiers could impede their socio-economic mobility in the new environment.
In addition to these practices and markers of cultural citizenship, Wang Gungwu’s research (1991) has highlighted some important considerations about the attitudes of overseas Chinese towards China and vice versa. According to Wang,

Another critical point to note is the attitude towards China of all those who may be counted as Chinese in one way or another, whether they are aliens or local citizens of part-Chinese or Chinese descent. It has become clear that very few such Chinese are interested in returning to China to live. This is only partly because of the fact that returning to China had almost always been an irreversible act. More important is the fact that China does not welcome them back. It may still want them to remit funds to assist relatives in China, but it recognizes that Chinese who have lived abroad all or most of their lives are unlikely to settle easily in China. Equally important is the realization among most of those who have settled in countries which are more or less capitalist that they could not do well in a planned socialist society. (1991: 293)

These sentiments from both China and the overseas Chinese appear to mutually reflect the incommensurability of both parties when considering the prospect of returning to the homeland. However, it is worth noting that while China does not welcome back its overseas Chinese, it nonetheless “may still want them to remit funds to assist relatives in China”, ultimately recognising and appreciating the economic value of its diasporas and their contributions. On their part, Chinese diasporas, perhaps because of their reluctance to return, mitigate that sense of reluctance by giving financial support to the homeland, thereby attempting to also placate those ‘left behind’. This reciprocal and beneficial relationship between the homeland and its diaspora — financially rewarding for the homeland and psychologically compensative for the diaspora — may, however, lead to a cynical perception of homeland-diasporic ties that can be economically rationalised. In other words, the relationship between homeland and diaspora, being easily measured by the
amount and flow of remittances, also lends itself to financial and psychological exploitation by either party.

**Global positionings**

The perception of the Chinese diaspora as a constantly sojourning community is often the result of factors emanating from within the homeland and overseas community as well as events and phenomena that unfold at the international level. On the global scale, the movements of trade diasporas and labour migration constituting the bulk of early Chinese migration have resulted in the creation of a vast network of Chinese diasporic communities all over the world. Especially in labour-scarce countries, the cheap labour offered by coolie labourers has placed them strategically in the workforce of many newly industrialising and western economies. Their efforts and contribution, although then largely unacknowledged, were crucial to the development of infrastructures in the newly developing countries. At the same time, these diasporic communities were gaining critical mass in the demographic landscape. The cheap labour of Chinese migrants had initially been the reason for their mass employment in the pioneering projects of white settler nations. An estimated three million coolie labourers left China between 1801 and 1925 (Pan, 2000: 61), with some 17,000 from Hong Kong and southern China heading for work on the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in 1880-84, while about 3,000 were recruited to work in agriculture in Australia. The influx of Chinese into Australia grew after the discovery of gold in 1851, eventually comprising, in 1861, 60 per cent of the population in the New South Wales gold fields and 25 per cent in Victoria. When completion of the CPR in
Canada and the decline of gold fields in Australia signalled the end of these countries’ need for Chinese labour, the surplus of cheap labour that was still available thus entered into direct competition with the local white workforce. The economic threat represented by the Chinese community of coolie labourers, coupled with the visibility of their ethnic and cultural difference, therefore sparked off large-scale discriminatory actions and legislation against Chinese, and also fuelled the growth of anti-Chinese sentiments in both countries.

The Chinese in Canada found themselves prohibited from certain professions and forms of employment such as law and pharmacy (Pan, 2000: 237), and relegated to domestic and menial or service-oriented jobs generally disdained by whites. This had the effect of keeping the Chinese at the entrance level in the Canadian job market for a long time (Li, 1988: 7). In Australia, fears of competition for gold turned to fears of cheap Chinese labour; therefore legislation was passed, following a successful anti-Chinese seaman’s strike in 1878, to restrict Chinese workers in the furniture trade (Pan, 2000: 274). What these restrictions meant for the highly pragmatic Chinese settler migrants was simply that they had to relocate themselves into alternative, niche occupations; Chinese in Canada turned to work in restaurants, laundries and service occupations, while Chinese in Australia turned to market gardening and restaurant work. In the wake of strong anti-Chinese sentiment and legislation, the Chinese diaspora have had to continually reposition themselves in the national narratives of their host countries, exercising an extreme degree of caution and pragmatism as well as becoming increasingly circumspect in their relationship with the host country. As a
marginalised and clearly visible minority ethnic group in a white nation state, the
Chinese diaspora has nonetheless managed to strategically insert themselves, albeit
peripherally, into their mainstream white societies. This is nowhere more evident than
in the Chinatown enclaves that have emerged as a significant feature of major urban
cities in contemporary North America and Australia.

**Chinatowns**

The Chinatown communities in major urban centres of the western world are a further
distinguishing feature of the Chinese diaspora because of the overt signification of
culture and difference that they embody. While other diasporic communities have had
equally long histories of settlement and establishment, their presence has not been as
pronounced as the Chinese by way of setting up such spatially familiar and
recognisable configurations of community and kinship structures that Chinatowns
have come to be known for. These enclaves represent the “core of Chinese
concentration [that] may be found in many of the world’s big cities where the Chinese
are settled” (Pan, 1990: 296). Some diasporas such as the Jewish, Palestinian, Arab,
Indian, black and/or African have established religious institutions in the forms of
mosques, temples and churches, while the Chinese have their Buddhist and Taoist
temples. However, these architectural features have not been marked as prominently
as most Chinatowns have, in the physical, cultural and psychological landscape of the
host country.
In her description of Chinatowns from London to Manila to Calcutta, Pan observes that, “[u]rban Chinatowns are much what you would expect, and the perennial sights — the Chinese restaurants, the Chinese grocery shops and the Chinese gateways — are familiar enough to us all” (1990: 298). Her statement reveals a rather ubiquitous common-knowledge type of perception towards Chinatown, reflecting an easy familiarity and comfortable acquaintance that exists between Chinatown and its visitors. As an important cultural landmark, Chinatown encompasses, at one level, nearly the entire infrastructure and networks that represent the early diasporic Chinese community. Native-place associations, clan associations or clansmen organisations, secret societies and even triad organisations, and the Chinese Benevolent Associations all worked towards effectively organising the community and representing the group’s concerns. At another level, and also because of these sub-group formations, Chinatown stood not only as a replica of the homeland via its architectural design but also as a place of refuge from the hostilities of the host society. In other words, because its organisations and inhabitants were relatively united in their experiences of racial discrimination and rejection by the host country, Chinatown physically and symbolically represented an almost self-sustaining community distinct from, yet encompassed by, white society. The effect, though, was one of isolation for the Chinatown community, because they were ruled by the Chinese Benevolent Association which were directed by elderly, self-made men of a traditional cast of mind [who were] all-powerful, but powerless too, for it would have been beyond their range to urge the interests of their people outside the confines of Chinatown. The last thing they wanted was to engage with the larger world, the world of city politics and administration — for so long as the Chinese community kept itself to itself, so long as the Chinese looked to the
traditional associations for all their needs, these men ruled the roost in Chinatown. (Pan, 1990: 306)

The increasingly circumspect relations between Chinese diasporas and their host countries was now compounded by strongly introverted beliefs about how the Chinese community was to function and sustain itself. While diasporic communities generally have a network of kinship ties and social or cultural affiliations as coping mechanisms to facilitate adaptation in the new environment, Chinese networks were largely embodied by Chinatowns which, in turn, emerged as significant landmarks on the physical and cultural landscapes of their respective countries.

The early Chinatowns in the mid 19th century usually comprised only boarding houses and produce stores that catered to a predominantly sojourning community whose mentality was to return to China after accumulating some wealth in the foreign country. As these sojourning patterns gradually gave way to increasing settler migrations, diasporic Chinese eventually moved away from Chinatowns into urban areas. However, the stigma that attached to pre-1970s Chinatowns continued to dominate western perceptions which perceived these sites as unsanitary and morally derelict dwellings, full of vice and crime such as illegal gambling and opium smoking (Lin, 1998: 174-5). With the adoption of official multicultural policies in both Canada and Australia in the 1970s, as well as the rise of the tourism industry during that period (Mak, 2003: 1), Chinatowns in these countries were refurbished and promoted as tourist attractions, signifying efforts that demonstrated the countries’ commitment to multiculturalism. Anna-Lisa Mak’s study of the transformations of Sydney’s Chinatown reveals particular insights concerning the creation of a ‘Chinatown
atmosphere’ and a tourist attraction that would be “internationally identifiable as a Chinatown” (Mak, 2003: 2). The use of ceremonial archways that featured prominently in Chinatowns around the world, as well as “antiquated ‘traditional Chinese’ symbols to represent the Chinese community” (Mak, 2003: 3) were intended to reclaim a common Chinese heritage that could instantly be identified as ‘Chinese’ by non-Chinese people. However, these reconstructions of ethnicity had the effect of essentialising and reducing Chineseness into stereotypical notions of the community, while obscuring its complex heterogeneity and internal differentiations. In other words, this was a demonstration of the “power of white Australians to define and fashion Chinatown in conformity with their European image of a Chinese race”, and to render it a site of orientalised fantasy (Anderson, 1990: 138).

The transformation of Chinatowns in these white nation states from ethnic ghetto to treasured ethnic neighbourhood reflects first of all the shifts in dominant white attitudes towards Chinese, as well as changes emanating from within the Chinatown communities. Chinatowns in Canada stand as cultural landmarks and designated tourist zones (Chao, 1997: 13), while in Australia they have been promoted as Chinese ‘cultural’ precincts to attract tourists and non-Chinese visitors (Pan, 2000: 280; Mak, 2003). Secondly, in tandem with the cosmetic transformation of Chinatowns beginning in the mid-1960s, the introverted and introspective characteristics of the Chinese gave way to a more integrated entry of ethnic Chinese into the wider community. Although “not exactly a breaking of ethnic barriers” (Pan, 1990: 306), this marked an important step in the process of claiming national and
political citizenship for diasporic Chinese. Much of this integration work can be attributed to the efforts of “young, better-educated Chinese [who took up] the cause of the disadvantaged in Chinatown, setting up institutions to match — the Basement Workshop, the Free Health Clinic, the Food Co-op, and so on” (Pan, 1990: 306). The result was that

> Old moulds were broken, as people began to look beyond Chinatown. There were now alternatives to the clan and native-place associations; there was the Chinatown Planning Council ... And the Chinese leaders of these new organizations were sitting with Jews, blacks, Italians and Puerto Ricans on the committees of community associations sprouting up all over the Lower East Side. (Pan, 1990: 306)

With more Chinese beginning to engage with the wider community outside of Chinatown, this paved the way towards better-informed understanding and representation of the Chinese community that challenged earlier stereotypical depictions. However, the dominance and visibility of Chinatown and its symbolism have also clearly marked the presence of Chinese diasporas in specific ways that differentiated them from other diasporic groups, as well as influencing the relationship between the Chinese and their host countries. Wenche Ommundsen has noted that, in Australia, Chinese-Australians have “called for a greater exposure to contemporary Chinese cultural production, but complained that mainstream Australian society, as well as local Chinese community organisations, were stuck on Chinese culture of the dragon dance or “Chinatown” variety and less open to contemporary forms” (2004: 92). This situation is an indication of the extent to which certain highly visible cultural formations have been stereotyped and reified in mainstream white society, resulting in monolithic conceptions of Chineseness by a host culture unable to imagine ethnic minorities in more fluid or progressive and
alternative ways. Under these conditions, diasporic Chinese have had to carefully redefine and renegotiate articulations of Chineseness in their relations with a predominantly Anglo-centric national imaginary and socio-cultural discourse. Often the result is an eventual fossilising of particular aspects of ethnicity, leading to the promulgation of racial and ethnic stereotypes.

**Differentiations through Racialisation, Class and Gender**

From the mid 19th to the mid 20th centuries, early Chinese migration was predominantly male and tended to congregate in the culturally familiar settler enclaves of Chinatown. This made it relatively easy to cast gender-based and racially motivated stereotypes about the community as a result of the prevailing demographic situation. The racist image of ‘Chinaman’ first arose because of the economic threat that male Chinese labourers posed to the white working classes, therefore efforts were made to depict and categorise the Chinese as inferior and undesirable. This had the effect of alienating the Chinatown communities from local society, and to cause their withdrawal and retreat into the more comforting confines of their ethnic community groups. Among their compatriots, Chinese tended to dwell even more strongly on the homeland while commiserating among themselves about the difficult and harsh conditions they found themselves in. In this situation, for these displaced diasporic persons, ‘where you’re from’ seemed to be a more favourable, hence idealised, place than ‘where you’re at’. Moreover, the conflation of internal differences within the Chinese community into essentialist and stereotypical notions of ethnicity, which became embodied in references to Chinatown, gave rise to further dissent from the
Chinese community. Yet, in spite of such common and unifying experiences of racism and discrimination in new and hostile environments, the Chinese community was nonetheless internally fragmented by vast disjunctions and differentiations in their diasporic experiences. These differentiations can largely be expressed in terms of racialisation, class and gender disparities.

**Racialisation**

Experiences of discrimination, exclusion and ‘othering’ are common elements in the narratives and consciousnesses of Chinese and other ‘different-looking’ migrants into majority white societies. These pressures from mainstream society constantly challenge diasporas by inscribing ‘difference’ upon their lives on account of their visibly different bodies. However, while early and later generation diasporas are both subject to these processes of racialisation, the experience of racial discrimination is somewhat different for each group because of the different timing and circumstances of their entry into white society.

First generation Chinese migrants who came to white settler nations seeking opportunities and employment usually encountered racism as a new experience to be dealt with. The early Chinese diasporas came from “a homeland that was politically independent and in which their culture predominated and flourished” (Safran, 1991: 89); thus the institutional and systematic forms of racism and discrimination meted out by their destination countries were considered to be new and foreign experiences. These migrants’ negotiation of the racialisation process, which involved coming to
terms with rejection and persecution, were further exacerbated by their ongoing attempts to carve out an existence in an unfavourable and inequitable environment. Under discriminatory legislation which prohibited their entry into certain professions, early Chinese migrants turned to whatever employment options were available to them, usually service industry and menial jobs. This explains the large numbers of Chinese-operated laundries and the ubiquity of Chinese restaurants in many white settler nations, as Pan has observed,

For much of the Western world, Chinese food is the first channel through which an interest in Chinese culture develops, and even if one does not actually know any Chinese, one is sure to have been to a Chinese restaurant, or heard of Peking Duck or Chow Mein. (1990: 316)

Yet, due to discriminatory regulations and racial prejudice, for instance, within white Australian society, Chinese were generally forced either to operate their own small family-operated business or to work for other Chinese who owned such businesses (Tan, 2003: 9). The hostile environment of a majority white society meant that Chinese had to maintain a low profile in their respective countries, usually by retreating into their Chinatown enclaves, then perceived as ‘dirty’ and disease-infested ethnic slums.

The early Chinese immigrants’ experiences of race relations in their host countries were profoundly shaped by the impact of racial discrimination and prejudice. The effect was an enduring one that carried over to later generations of local-born Chinese. Although the latter were educated and skilled in the local system and English language, they were often subject to the same prejudices as first generation
Chinese migrants. Childhood experiences of later-generation Chinese diaspora were therefore indelibly marked by the environment in which cultural difference was inscribed in their lives on account of their Chineseness (Tan, 2003: 1). For later generations of the Chinese diaspora, there also came the realisation that “being of Chinese descent positioned them as ‘different’ and ‘other’” in their own countries (Tan, 2003: 1). This was further compounded by experiences of growing up in Chinese households which similarly perceived being Chinese as a disadvantage and thus sought to obliterate as many visible aspects of their Chineseness as possible. For migrants, the desire to be accepted and assimilated into majority white societies has meant succumbing to the pressures to conform to the dominant culture’s way of life. This usually translates into the erosion of their ‘different’ cultural practices, such as changing eating habits, speaking only English, giving up Chinese traditions and practices and even converting to Christianity (Tan, 2003: 5).

In a social and cultural climate wherein ‘difference’ was not positively valued, assimilation for migrants has resulted not only in the erosion and obliteration of their ‘different’ cultural practices but also the adoption of a critical watchfulness and rigorous self-policing about their racially marked visibility. Often, this was done to combat stereotypical images and biased representations about themselves as being ‘dirty’ and ‘prone to disease’, a carry-over from perceptions of the early Chinatowns as ethnic slums and ghettos. Under these circumstances, although later generations of the Chinese diaspora may perceive themselves, and eventually gain recognition by the host nation, to be fully legitimate citizens of the state, the formative experiences
of racial discrimination, both in overt and subtle forms, have nonetheless disrupted their sense of cultural and national identity and belonging. These later generations of the Chinese diaspora also often found themselves ‘inheriting’ their predecessors’ peripheral existence, in other words, marginalised by the country of their birth and compromised of and/or denied their legal and political birthright. However, the persistent and enduring presence of the Chinese diaspora in majority white countries lays testimony to the tenacity of their migrant aspirations and also the strategic and ambivalent manner in which they have successfully positioned themselves in relation to the host society.

For the new diaspora, being born into and growing up in a racially discriminating environment meant having to acquire techniques of self-protection at a very early stage in their lives. In Gerd Baumann’s study of a multi-ethnic urban neighbourhood in London, he unveils some of the dualistic and tandem operations of ‘dominant’ and ‘demotic’ discourses in the lives of such minority ethnic groups in a predominantly white environment. The ‘dominant’ discourse reifies community and culture as essences “by demarcating currently accepted divisions between South Asian British settlers, based upon religious affiliation and nationality”, while the ‘demotic’ discourse “transgresses these divisions in a sited interaction” (1997: 17-18). Of particular relevance to the present discussion is the use of ‘demotic’ discourse by young South Asians to create a shared popular culture across these major divisions, fusing their identities as South Asians through popular cultural aesthetic forms. They intentionally subvert the normative boundaries of ‘community’ set by their parents. (1997: 18; italics mine)
The negotiation of cross-cultural alliances appears less reticent in the younger generation of the diaspora, who draw on ‘common-sense ideas’ “to objectify culture, community, ethnos and even ‘race’ as self-evident homologues, while at the same time being aware of remaking, reshaping and re-forming these very terms in other contexts” (Baumann, 1997: 18). In other words, the hegemonic discourse of majority white society can be appropriated by the ethnic minority group to facilitate, on the one hand, a more integrated entry into the wider community, and on the other hand, to seek out and establish multiple cross-cultural alliances. In the process, real and imposed limitations on racial differences and categorisations, experienced by first generation diasporas, are transcended. This is symbolised by the efforts of the younger generation and English-educated Chinese diaspora to engage with the wider community outside of Chinatown and to more fully integrate with their adoptive countries. To the older generation diasporic Chinese, however, these efforts may represent a contravention of those ethnic boundaries and therefore have the effect of further fragmenting the diasporic community according to their perspectives about integration and multi-ethnic affiliations.

Within the Chinese diasporic community itself, other internal modes of differentiation operate to considerably set the later generation diaspora apart from their early migrant predecessors. Because of their native-born status and education in the local system and language, usually resulting in the deterioration or loss of Chinese language skills, the new diasporas are often regarded as culturally ‘inferior’ to China-born Chinese. These China-born migrants who still maintain a strong identification with their
homeland culture, too, consciously set themselves apart from white mainstream society as well as the local-born Chinese, and furthermore insist upon differentiating themselves this way. Implicit in this distinction lies the assertion of cultural superiority, which positions local-born Chinese as less ‘pure’ and ‘less Chinese’ because the latter were less conscious and keen about practising or upholding modes of cultural representation as defined by the early Chinese settler migrants. The local-born Chinese diaspora therefore had to contend with twofold racism — firstly the white racism of mainstream society, and secondly the internal racism from their own ethnic community — which created an overwhelming sense of cultural inferiority or ‘cultural cringe’.

The experience of being a native born diasporic Chinese in a white settler nation was not only inscribed with cultural inferiority from both the dominant society and their ethnic group, but also underscored by insecurities about minority status. Because of legislation excluding them from certain professions and arenas of political, social and cultural engagement with white society, the growing up experiences and narratives of native-born diasporic Chinese are often marked by ambivalence about their position in the narrative of the nation state — in other words, their sense of belonging — as well as their relationship with the ethnic community. Not fully accepted by their racial community, and moreover marginalised by mainstream society, later generations of the Chinese diaspora have had to seek new cultural affiliations and formations that they could identify and fully participate in and truly claim as their own, rather than belonging to neither minority nor mainstream cultures. The
The evolution of new forms and articulations of diasporic identities is often played out and developed on the peripheries of both mainstream and ethnic communities, resulting in the celebration and endorsement of marginalised hybrid identities. This is especially signified by the proliferation of cross-cultural identities and identifications in popular cultural forms. With these cross-cultural alliances taking shape and place in the ‘local’ environment, racialised hybrid identities were also further empowered by discourses of multiculturalism that had begun to circulate from the mid 1970s. For many visibly different diasporas, multiculturalism’s celebration of ‘difference’ meant, finally, some measure of acceptance and acknowledgement, although mediated and superficial, by the dominant white culture.

**Class**

The desire to be accepted and assimilated into the mainstream society of their adoptive countries is perceived as a necessity by many diasporas. The experience of assimilation, however, introduces another disjuncture within the diasporic community because the diaspora is fragmented according to different levels and modes of assimilation. Here, issues of wealth and class often play a pivotal role in determining the success or ‘completeness’ of the assimilation process. Assimilation meant not only that the diaspora could see themselves as full citizens of the state, individually and collectively validated by their local governments, but it also evoked promises of “access to a secure world of comfort, affluence and, most importantly, the possibility of upward mobility” (Ang, 2001: 9). In other words, citizenship was envisaged as having economic benefits and other rewards. However, this is also where the
diasporic community is deeply fissured along the various avenues of economic advancement, because there are those who are able to attain some level of social and economic mobility to propel them upwards, and those who are not. Therefore, despite having some binding and shared experiences of being a marginalised minority, the diasporic community is not immune to the internal class divisions that have characterised many societies in modern capitalist market economies.

In western societies especially, this division is marked by differences in the education and language between members of the same ethnic community. The shift from speaking mainly Chinese, as mother tongue and homeland language, to English in Anglophone societies has empowered the English-educated to assert their presence in their local society. However, while language and education may have enabled the later generations of the Chinese diaspora to accelerate the assimilation process, the older Chinese diaspora find themselves now doubly dispossessed by that same token. First or early generation Chinese migrants are on the one hand territorially displaced because of the lack/loss of homeland, and on the other hand are culturally and linguistically out of sync with the mainstream society of their adoptive countries. Furthermore, in their claims of cultural superiority — such as firmly holding on to traditions, cultural origins and the homeland language — they are, in effect, limiting their engagement and relationship with the English-speaking and/or white society and thereby reducing the possibilities for social and economic advancements.
Early Chinese diasporic movement tended to be dominated by labour and economic migration and had as one of its main aims the improvement of personal circumstances, opportunities and living standards. These aspirations which loomed large on the agendas of most diasporic communities and individuals were however thwarted by prejudice and discrimination in the host country, which consequently prevented any easy transition into the social, political and economic functioning of mainstream white society. This effectively denied the diasporic community any possibility of upward social and economic mobility, while imposing an artificial ceiling on the group, by keeping them at entrance-level jobs usually within the service industry. For the Chinese community, already confined to the racially designated, ethno-cultural space of Chinatown, such prohibitive measures against their participation in the country’s economy meant economic exile and material hardships. The coolie labourers who had left China in search of opportunities thus found themselves still among the poor and discriminated working class in the new countries. The hoped-for levels of privilege and upward mobility usually associated with labour and economic migration were not only denied, but the Chinese community also found itself ‘trapped’ within the lowest and denigrated ranks in their host country’s social, cultural and political hierarchies.

To ensure economic survival, the Chinese community had, first of all, to work around the constraints imposed upon them. By turning to and later capitalising on the available options of service industry jobs, diasporic Chinese in western countries have emerged as a dominant presence in these sectors of the economy, and creating a sub-
economy usually within the Chinatown labour market. The ubiquity of Chinese restaurants and Chinese food in contemporary western societies perhaps demonstrate a diligent pragmatism by the minority group under restrictive conditions that had aimed to curtail their presence and growth. The expansion of the service industry in rapidly modernising and industrialising economies indicated that there was increasing demand for entrance-level job seekers. This has resulted in the eventual incorporation of the working class ethnic minorities into the national economy at various low-level jobs. For newly arrived and unskilled immigrants from China, their entry into the economy of the new country is often mediated by the local Chinatown societies, which provided some accommodation and employment. Chinatown therefore functioned relatively well as a self-enclosed sub-economy within the nation state, as a socio-cultural formation sustained largely by its migrant population. The services and amenities provided by Chinatown, however, contributed in turn to its being perceived as an ethnic ghetto. In the 1970s, with the adoption of official multiculturalism in Canada and Australia, Chinatown became transformed from ethnic ghettos into cultural precincts and tourist attractions, gaining greater value and recognition. Chinatown’s economic value came to be recognised not only in terms of its contribution to the national economy but also in terms of the revenue it accrued from being a cultural and tourist attraction. While such acknowledgment may have incorporated the diasporic Chinese community within white society’s economic functioning, their position was nonetheless defined relationally and purely on the basis of their difference from the mainstream. In other words, although Chinatown may have been perceived as ‘assimilated’ into the wider community of majority white
society especially in terms of commercial and economic value, it still stood out as ‘difference’ and was marketed as such in order to attract some significance. The revenue that poured into Chinatown through commerce and tourism did, however, raise the fiscal status of its inhabitants and eventually led to a gradual elevation of the community’s economic profile.

The transformation of Chinatown from ghettos to commercial zones meant that it became increasingly congested as the numbers of residences and businesses grew. For old and new diaspora alike, upward socio-economic mobility was usually marked by their departure from the city centres around which Chinatown was usually located, and into slightly lower density and white-dominated residential areas. This move represented one of the first steps in the assimilation process, by crossing the spatial barriers or territorial zones that designated racial boundaries and entering into other urban areas, which signified for the Chinese minority increased desegregation and greater acculturation with the local society. The new diaspora, because of education and language skills, were usually more able and empowered to make the move towards assimilation — a process which eventually benefited the community as a whole — or to seek out multi-ethnic alliances with other minority groups. Moreover, their immersion in a western education inevitably led to a firm orientation towards their immediate society, which encouraged their aspirations to upward mobility and an augmented profile and representation in the local social, economic and political arenas. Where Chinese had previously been prohibited from entering into certain professions, the new Chinese diaspora were now enabled by their education to do so,
upon the removal of those discriminative measures. The elevation of the Chinese community’s educational and economic standing therefore resulted in the subsequent creation of different classes, especially seen in the solidification of a middle class. Also, with the eventual abolition of racially discriminating and exclusionary immigration policies, Chinese migration to white settler nations gradually increased and included more skilled, educated and/or wealthy migrants, a pattern that changed the social and economic demographic of the Chinese minority in those countries.

As the internal class structure of the diasporic Chinese community became more diverse, so too did their economic relationship with the mainstream society evolve according to those changes. While the working class, non-English speaking/educated diaspora generally still remained on the periphery of white societies, the upwardly mobile sector were able to benefit from economic developments and opportunities both locally and globally. The impact was a further widening of the gulf separating these groups, with deep class divisions internally fracturing the diaspora and possibly giving rise to resentment and dissent within that community. The situation becomes exacerbated especially when globalising forces and escalating labour and economic migration combine to produce stark distinctions within the diaspora. Internationally, the social, cultural and economic traffic that constitute globalisation not only destabilise national and territorial boundaries but also create and perpetuate further inequities of wealth, asset and resource distribution around the world. This relates to Ien Ang’s note that it is an exaggerated simplification to theorise the privileged status of ‘diaspora’ as “a metaphor for transnational formations characteristic of the
globali[s]ed, presumably post-national world” (2001: 76). Moreover, the ‘privileged’ position of diaspora is clearly, again, a reductive generalisation when considering the various mechanisms of exclusion and discrimination that function to keep certain diasporic groups in highly exploitative conditions. Although global migration may facilitate multiple diasporic community formations that have the potential to overcome and transcend national and territorial boundaries, the consequent formations are not always/necessarily experienced as liberating; that is, privileges do not naturally accrue to or within diasporas.

With advancements and transformations in the machinations of global capital flows, many nation-states have been complicit in adopting and perpetuating new forms of oppression that have arisen from the globalising process. Immigration policies that previously discriminated on the basis of racial categories have now incorporated a subtler approach that differentiated migrants according to their economic background, thereby facilitating the migration process for upper class migrants who are already more privileged and mobile socially and economically. Under these policies, Chinese migrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan have dominated the business immigration programmes of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, while Hong Kong and Taiwan migrants accounted for nearly two fifths of all the entrepreneurs who entered Canada during the 1980s (Pan, 2000: 59). The speed at which capital flows from one country to another is most clearly signified by the ease with which middle and upper classes of migrants gain entry into their destination countries. This also signals a situation where race, according to Fred Wah, “can be modified, to a degree, through class”
These circumstances, however, present yet another challenge to diaspores, especially for working class migrants who are automatically excluded from the circle of economic privileges and benefits that are extended to the middle and upper classes of migrants. In addition, the inequitable aspects of globalisation are often manifest in the systematic exploitation of working class migrant labour, often via the sweatshop industry, when these migrants encounter difficulties gaining employment because of their marginalised status. This situation clearly parallels the conditions under which white settler nations, from the mid 19th century onwards, had maintained strategies of racial stratification for economic benefits. Put differently, both early and modern white societies have similarly engaged in practices of racial discrimination to ensure a constant supply of cheap labour from their already disenfranchised migrants. In this regard, racialisation or racial discrimination and economic rationalism mutually and necessarily feed off each other in encouraging and perpetuating nationalistic fervour.

The relationship between older, unskilled, less or uneducated Chinese diaspores and mainstream white society is usually a starkly inequitable one, while the higher educated and skilled segment of the diaspora tend to be positioned, in comparison, on a more equal footing with the contemporary white society. The process of merging with the narrative of the nation state, often envisaged in terms of capital and material gains, by incorporating oneself into spheres of economic participation, does not in any way constitute a shared experience for the Chinese diaspora. To this extent, the
new diaspora, aided by education and language, can be said to be riding on the
benefits derived from the labour of the old diaspora.

**Gender**

One of the distinctive features of early Chinese migration was the fact that it largely
and predominantly comprised only bachelors.\(^{21}\) This was a fact commented upon in a
lecture given by Dr. Stanford Lyman in 1962,\(^{22}\) who, in comparing the “differences
between the Chinese and Japanese settlers”, pointed out the patterns of familial and
community organisation peculiar to each group:

> The Chinese, living according to their traditional customs, left their
> wives in China, but returned home on visits occasionally and sired
> children. Only a minority of the early Chinese brought their wives to
> the New World and thus the procreation of a second generation in
> America was delayed. The Japanese, in contrast, brought wives early
> from Japan and rather quickly produced offspring. (n.p.)

Many Chinese who migrated as coolie labourers did not bring their wives because of
the nature of their work. Moreover, with the imposition of head taxes on migrants
coming into countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, female migration
became a very expensive and therefore unfeasible option. In North America where
Chinese Immigration Acts were passed (1882 in America and 1923 in Canada),
exclusion laws prevented the admission of any more Chinese into the country even if
they could afford the head tax. In Australia, the Immigration Restriction Act was
passed in 1901, which severely curtailed the entry of Chinese into Australia. These
restrictions on entry by Chinese into white settler nations effectively created a gender
imbalance in the early Chinese communities. In Canada, there were 2790 males for
every 100 females (or about 28 Chinese men for every Chinese woman) in 1911,
while in Australia, the disparity was greater, with 61.5 Chinese men for every Chinese woman in 1901 (Pan, 2000: 235, 275). In 1947, the Canadian immigration restrictions were relaxed to allow for family reunion, while in Australia, this did not happen until 1957. As a result, for almost a century since the beginning of Chinese migration, Chinese populations in western countries remained generally ‘bachelor societies’. When the discriminating immigration policies were later removed, the sex ratio of Chinese communities gradually reached a balance in the mid 20th century. This had a positive effect on the social and economic functioning of Chinatown because of the revival of a sense of community owing to the increase in its population, due to increased migrant arrivals and growing birth rates.

The arrival of Chinese women into white settler nations, however, brought with it further levels and forms of discrimination, this time from within their own community. Chinese women were doubly marginalised, with no form of recourse available to them because they were living in a predominantly male and traditionally patriarchal society that was already segregated from the mainstream white society. That is, with Chinese men already discriminated from mainstream society, Chinese women were rendered even more invisible and made easy targets for sexist practices from within their own community. Among the Chinese, women were the most disempowered and dispossessed of any resources, cultural or economic, with which to articulate their diasporic experiences. Migrant Chinese women’s entries into white societies were usually as wives and daughters, or some relation, of men; that is, the official recognition of them was only in their capacities as men’s subordinates.
However, discrimination of Chinese did not attempt to distinguish the sexes; the derogative label of ‘Chinaman’ was equally applied to Chinese women in its full racist force.

With the Chinese community largely confined to Chinatown ghettos and service-oriented jobs, Chinese men often found themselves employed in professions traditionally perceived as ‘women’s work’, such as cleaning and domestic services, or the service and hospitality industry. This might have had the effect of changing some conservative opinions of these occupations as being the sole preserve of women, but sexist attitudes still prevailed within a predominantly patrilineal and paternalistic community. For Chinese men wealthy enough to afford a wife and her passage from China to the new country, including the exorbitant head tax, the presence of Chinese women simply became a matter of reflecting their economic status and social standing in the community. As Gayle Rubin, in her frequently cited essay, “The Traffic in Women”, points out:

If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it ... If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage ... it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges — social organi[s]ation. (1975: 174)

According to Rubin, women were positioned merely as facilitators of male relationships and functioned as props that enhanced kinship formations and community building. However, women in Chinese diasporic communities were denied even this role, firstly because they were too few in numbers, therefore the
conditions for their ‘circulation’ among men were not possible. Secondly, those who removed themselves from the conduit of exchange were usually prostitutes whose actions and occupations earned them the vilification of the community. This constrictive structuring of the Chinese community, based on oppressive gender relations, had severe ramifications when considering its minority position within the larger, dominant white society. Several works of fiction and non-fiction have revealed the dangers of being a single Chinese woman in predominantly male Chinatown bachelor societies; for unhappily married women, there was no escape from oppressive relationships because they were usually not recognised as individuals (having usually derived their identities from relationships with men) while single women often found themselves working in the sex industry.

In the process of ‘othering’ Chinese from mainstream white society, however, there also occurred a further differentiation between perceptions of male and female Chinese. Orientalist notions of foreign-ness had led to Chinese being ambivalently positioned as mysterious, exotic and desirable within popular cultural discourse in white societies, so that Chinese women were constituted and perceived as submissive and extremely feminine and therefore appealing to popular masculinist imagination and fantasies (Tan, 2003: 1). This was largely a result of the negative opinions of Chinese males who were thus seen as undesirable, weak and emasculated. However, these traits appeared to benefit the popular appreciation of Chinese women in white societies, especially when compared with Anglo-Saxon women. Chinese women, because of their generally diminutive stature and smaller physical features, appeared
less aggressive than their western counterparts and more feminine, even thought to be weak, and therefore had greater appeal to the white male imagination. For these reasons, being Chinese in a white society was less of an impediment for females than for males, “due to the treatment of Chinese females frequently being tempered by popular (Orientalist) notions of Chinese females as exotic and alluring” (Tan, 2003: 3). The unequal perception and treatment of Chinese males and females indicate that the same attributes, when applied to both sexes, resulted in the favouring of females while males were made more ‘vulnerable’. The differences between Chinese males and their western counterparts became more pronounced because of the former’s physique that was, in white societies, constantly measured against popular notions of an ideal westernised male type.23

The discrimination meted out by white society against Chinese was paralleled by the treatment of Chinese women by their community especially when they married non-Chinese. Because of the patriarchal underpinnings of Chinese society, women were regarded and treated as commodities in the exchanges of gifts in male relationships. Therefore, by marrying a non-Chinese, a Chinese woman would be seen as removing herself from the conduit of Chinese patriarchy. Moreover, she was seen to have committed the grave misdemeanour of transgressing racial boundaries — acts that were deemed to be highly disruptive and detrimental towards Chinese kinship and community formation. As Rey Chow explains,

By giving themselves, such women enter social relationships as active partners in the production of meanings rather than simply as the bearers of those meanings ... the crossing of patriarchal sexual boundaries crosses another crossing, the crossing of racial boundaries.
The women of colour are, accordingly, the site of supplementary danger — of the dangerous supplement (Jacques Derrida’s term) — par excellence, adding to the injustice of race the revolt of sex (and vice versa), and substituting/transforming the meaning of both at once. (1998: 69-70)

With Chinese males being negatively perceived in western society, the agency of Chinese females in removing themselves from the community’s marriage and kinship networks perhaps exacerbated the already severe crisis in Chinese masculinity and therefore intensified misogynistic attitudes within the community.

A major consequence of cultural and racial miscegenation was often social ‘exile’ from one’s ethnic community. Eurasian offspring of mixed-race parentage were especially disadvantaged in not only being deprived of recognition in white society, but also rejected by the Chinese community because of their mixed-race identity. Mixed-race relationships during the period of racial segregation were not only rare but also tended to be stigmatised among the Chinese community, because of the diaspora’s experiences of discrimination that then influenced their attitudes towards other, and especially white, cultures. The growing up experiences of mixed-race offspring, because native-born and partly Chinese, sharply differed from those of native-born ‘pure’ Chinese, who were at least identified and accepted by the Chinese community. Moreover, western societies, during the periods of discrimination and exclusion, had no means with which to classify or categorise mixed-race people, because of rigid codes of adherence to racial distinctions. The inability or failure of prevailing discourse to accommodate hybrid identities is reflected in the terms
crudely used to designate mixed-race people, as ‘half-breeds’, or in the native
Canadian context, ‘metis’.

The gradual shift in perceptions and attitudes in contemporary white society, marked
by the adoption of multiculturalism, has also caused a remarkable about-turn in the
social status of minorities, especially the mixed-race group. As bodies upon which the
inerradicable markers of cultural hybridity are inscribed, their corporeality now stand
as testimonies to the country’s multiracial background and multicultural ethos. This is
especially the case in Canada where ‘Hapa’, meaning mixed-race people (of part-
Asian heritage), have been making substantial cultural gains so that they now
constitute a significant presence in popular mainstream media. For them, legal and
political recognition has meant greater social, cultural and economic participation in
the national imaginary and narrative of their nation states. However, their
incorporation into local white society has not been without its cost to the minority
group, some of whom, especially women and homosexuals, are still marginalised by
the mainstream as well as their ethnic groups.

Conclusion

The experience of being a diasporic Chinese in white, western societies, while similar
in some aspects with other diasporas, is first and foremost distinctive largely due to
the processes by which their cultural difference and racial identity have been
subjected to discrimination and the extent or degree to which they have been
‘othered’ by the mainstream. This is largely attributed to the visibility of racial
markers, imprinted on the physical body, which engender various significations and interpretations of ‘difference’, thereby foreclosing many of the possibilities for meaningful participation and integration with majority white society. In this aspect, the Chinese diasporic community shares with many non-white minorities the experiences of marginalisation by mainstream community and also the internal self-regulation of displays and practices of cultural citizenship. This often takes the form of obliterating certain aspects of their cultural identity that are deemed as not ‘fitting in’ with the dominant culture, while selectively putting forward other aspects considered to be more ‘acceptable’ in and to the country’s socio-political frameworks. Indeed, the basic desire of many migrants to be accepted and assimilated into their adoptive countries has meant that, in some instances, minorities too are complicit with the production and promulgation of certain stereotypes of themselves (Khoo, 1999). Therefore, their incorporation into the body politic of the white nation state is often on the basis of those differences that perpetuate precisely their position as an ‘absolute’ other, rather than on the basis of the gains advanced by policies such as multiculturalism and relaxed immigration controls.

However, when it comes to the later generations of new diasporic Chinese, the processes of racialisation are modified to some extent because local-born Chinese tend to perceive themselves as full and legitimate citizens of the state, and therefore envisioning their future as inextricably bound to events and developments that unfold on the local, national sphere. The elevation of the Chinese community’s social and economic status in majority white societies is certainly a direct effect of the
empowerment of the new diaspora through education and language. This is also true of most diasporas which have settled into their host countries and whose later generations appear to have transcended previously impervious racial and economic boundaries. However, the stratification of race and gender is still used as a tool in some contemporary societies for labour and economic exploitation of newly arrived and visibly different migrants. To a certain extent, the appreciation or cultural and commercial popularity of minority ethnicities in some multicultural countries is simply an extension of the commodification and profiteering of racial difference.

The Chinese diaspora’s experience in dealing with long-term effects of exclusion and discrimination has led to the keeping of a low community profile and occupying lower-level positions in the culture and economy of white society. Eventually weaving themselves into the fabric of their adoptive countries, diasporic Chinese are however still perceived and positioned as ‘outside’ of the mainstream because representations of Chineseness are constantly and largely mediated by stereotypical images in popular culture and media. The familiarity of many non-Chinese with Chinatowns and Chinese food, for instance, usually indicates a superficial engagement with Chineseness, especially with its status as a foreign and exotic ‘other’, and ultimately highlighting its difference from the mainstream.

The careful and strategic insertion of Chinese bodies and narratives into the broader frameworks of white nation states has usually involved their economic functioning, in the form of the alternative Chinatown sub-economy, operating alongside and on the
periphery of the national economy. To further ensure their survival in hostile environments, significant traces of their ethnicity have often been obscured and obliterated. While this points to the pragmatic nature of the Chinese “capacity for hard work and their physical power of endurance” (Pan, 1990: 129), it also unveils the extent to which ambivalence has shaped their position in and relationship with their adoptive societies. Ambivalence, as a mode or technique of self-preservation, exemplifies the law of pragmatism, and “posits no clear domination and calls for no clear opposition” (Shohat, 1992: 107). This clearly ties in with the position of many marginalised and minority groups lacking in critical mass to effect any real social and political changes, but also too pragmatic to endanger any gains that their community might have made to improve their relationship with the mainstream. For the Chinese diaspora, this means that although later generations may identify and affiliate themselves with the white nation state, the collective history and experience of the racial community is still largely tempered by the vicissitudes of their subjective and historical experiences. In the highly circumspect relationship between the Chinese diaspora and their adoptive countries, these conflicting aspects of their existential conditions give rise to a split, or multiply fragmented diasporic consciousness.

In terms of class and gender differences, the Chinese diaspora functions much like any other heterogeneously constituted community, differentiated by various levels of socio-economic privileges as well as by gender distinctions. As Chapter 1 has shown, members of the same diasporic community can and do find themselves having contrasting experiences of being in diaspora as a result of differing economic
conditions, with some being more empowered than others to articulate and advocate the causes and concerns of their diasporic communities. Moreover, as this dissertation’s analysis of narratives from Canada and Australia will demonstrate, the categories of gender and race or cultural conditioning are very often differently inflected depending on the socio-economic status of various diasporic individuals. These disparities are commonly found in diasporic communities who, having been already marginalised from the mainstream culture of their host societies, find themselves having to become increasingly circumspect about representing and exercising their sense of cultural citizenship, in addition to and in accordance with socio-economic status. These categories of gender, class and cultural conditioning, although significant, nonetheless represent only some of the divisions that categorise and differentiate diasporic communities internally; diasporic communities are often also subject to a further and more complex intermingling of variables that effect subtle as well as dramatic shifts in identity, cultural citizenship and consciousness. Thus, in addition to the multiply fragmented diasporic consciousness of the individual, the collective consciousness of the diasporic community becomes even more disparate and heterogeneous. These different categories of race/racialisation, class, gender and cultural conditioning often work together in various ways and combinations to produce particular diasporic subjectivities and consciousnesses, resulting in increasingly hybrid diasporic culture and identity formations.

The Chinese diaspora exemplifies what Paul Gilroy calls the double consciousness inherent in diasporic peoples, a condition arising from “being both inside and outside
the West”, which “affects the conduct of political movements against racial oppression and towards [minority peoples’] autonomy” (1993: 30). Moreover, internal divisions not only differentiate the Chinese diaspora from other diasporic groups but also point to the diversities within Chinese diasporic experience that cut across other distinctions such as class and gender. Still, as transnational socio-cultural formations, diasporas are capable of overcoming the constrictions of national boundaries, the means through which people can imagine and align themselves beyond “an oppressive national hegemony” (Ang, 2001: 76). However, the internal disjunctures within the diaspora that lead to shifts, redefinitions and transformations of diasporic identity also mean that they cannot be imagined or even idealised as a community bound by any singularity of purpose and intent. As Avtar Brah points out, while “the politics of solidarity with another group is one thing … the self-organising political mobilisation of the group itself is quite another” (1996: 8). \(^{24}\) Minority groups therefore have to be kept distinct because of the very different histories and trajectories of their evolution and relationship with homeland and host country, and to collapse those distinctions would be a violation of their respective and inherent cultural differences. In addition, the Chinese diaspora, a heterogeneous and internally differentiated community, stands as a particular and specific group that differs from other diasporas, owing to its visible minority group status and the circumspect positioning and display of its cultural citizenship. This is especially in majority white societies where ethnicity is marginalised and sometimes discriminated against, leading to a greater differentiation in the ways of being Chinese and of defining Chineseness. Consequently, perceptions and representations of Chineseness have to
be understood in terms of the broader and more complex negotiations of diasporic cultural identity politics that develop within the context of the white nation state. This chapter thus locates its study of Chinese diasporic consciousness, identity politics and cultural citizenship within the development of internal divisions as well as external pressures that fragment the community. In fleshing out the racial, class and gender divisions of the diasporic Chinese community, this analysis of the instability of diasporic cultural identity and citizenship marks the attempt to release the diasporic subject from the prison-house of culture and history, and moreover resists the “strictly inwardlooking, monocultural and monoperspectival history” of Chinese culture and identity (Ang, 2001a).
Notes

1 For instance, see Ien Ang (2001) and Ien Ang, Sharon Chalmers, Lisa Law and Mandy Thomas (eds) (2000).
2 See, for instance, Lynn Pan (1990); Wang Gungwu (1991). More recently, the publication of Pan (ed.) (2000) *The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas* puts paid to the notion (and sentiment) of an essentialist and genealogical understanding of Chinese identity. Described as “essential reading for all those who can trace their roots to China” (back cover description), the study locates ‘China’ as the ‘centre’/‘core’ of Chineseness, petering out in its sections to less densely Chinese-populated regions and ending with chapters about the Indian Ocean and Africa.
3 In *Sons of the Yellow Emperor*, Pan describes:
   In the blazing noonday sun, the hot air would steam like a sodden blanket. The place would look listless and deserted, but for a plume of smoke from a solitary, rickety hut. Those who found their way there would know the hut to be the *kedai*, the little general store selling every imaginable thing from dried fish to pots; and here sitting naked to the waist outside it, with tiny rills of sweat running down his sun-brown back, was the *towkay*, the Chinese who owned it. (1990: 128)
4 Wang suggests that the new nationalistic policies from China may have been a defensive Chinese response to “aggressive colonial and imperialist policies”, “to protect the Chinese abroad from cynical Western policies” (1991: 19).
5 As in the case of Singapore “where ethnic Chinese can form independent government and Malaysia where they are the largest minority” (Pan, 2000: 12).
6 To use the example of Singapore, Beng-Huat Chua outlines the use of ‘Asian values’ (given the absence of a national culture) in the government’s campaign rhetoric in its attempts to combat “the supposed deracinating effects of Westernization and “Western values”” (1998: 194). Subsequent debates on ‘Asian values’ highlighted, therefore, “the discursively constituted character of the so-called Chinese ‘race’” (Chua, 1998: 195). Wang Gungwu also notes that, soon after 1900, ‘Chineseness’ became “measured against original cultural values in China” (1991: 19; italics mine). See also Leong (2001), for a discussion of the linguistic permutations and various constructions of Chineseness in Southeast Asia.
7 See Allen Chun (1994).
8 The ‘problem’ with such a “fantasy space”, as Hage goes on to elaborate, is that “the collection ‘kills’ everything that exists within it. That is, all its elements can have no being of their own, but merely a being derived from the limited life-giving logic of the collection”. In this exhibition of ‘dead valued others’, ethnic cultures are therefore imagined as dead cultures that can only exist through the ‘peaceful coexistence’ that regulates the collection (2000: 163).
9 The racial and racist stereotype of ‘Chinaman’ (with a capital C) was invented to categorise the Chinese as a human machine, as Sir Begbie explains: “They do, and they do well, what white women cannot do, and do what white men will not do”; “they are generally abused, and yet everybody employs them” (Royal Commission 1885, p.77, in Lien Chao (1997: 8)). See also Alison Broinowski (1996).
Gish Jen’s *Mona in the promised land* (1996) gives an anecdotal account of the perceptions by Chinese in America of their ‘outsider’ status: “First of all, they don’t like the word minority . . . They say they were never a minority when they were in China, and why should they be a minority here” (52). This, however, is not to deny or obliterate the fact that most/all migrants do experience some form of trauma or difficulty when assimilating into a culture where they find themselves a minority.

See Carole Tan (2003). Tan’s article describes the ways in which ‘difference’ was used as an ‘othering’ tool that marked and marginalised Chinese-Australians from mainstream Australian society.

I am grateful to my supervisor Vijay C. Mishra for highlighting this point.

The *Encyclopaedia* records the growth of the Chinese population from around 140 million in 1740 to 430 million in 1850 (Pan, 2000: 53).

In the ageing European societies, falling birth rates meant that its labour forces had to be supplemented by migrants; when previously European migrants used to meet the labour needs of North America and Australasia.


This is to the extent that the Singapore government has attempted to “Confucianise” the society, or at least its overwhelming Chinese majority population, and draw out the possible consequences for the political development of Singapore towards greater democratisation, based on traditional, “shared” values (Chua, 1995: 147-150). See Beng-Huat Chua (1995), Chapter 7.

Chinese eventually dominated the supply of fresh vegetables in Australian cities and towns (Pan, 2000: 275).

For instance, many Chinese growing up in Australia from around the 1940s to 1960s were subject to their parents’ “obsessive concern with being ‘puritanically clean, Victorian clean’ due to [their] fear of being seen as ‘dirty’”, and also “recall having to dress up in their Sunday best every time they were seen in public” (Tan, 2003: 6).

Such as ‘East-meets-West’ types of films — for instance, Hollywood films starring well-known Chinese actors, eg. Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan and Jet Li to name a few. However, these actors do not embody the hybrid form of identity associated with native-born Chinese in Western countries, and have also done much to re-affirm and perpetuate existing stereotypes about Chineseness and its martial arts forms.

See Khoo (1999) for a brief discussion on the significance of consumption practices in Asian-Australian and Asian-Canadian literatures and films. More recently, the 13-part documentary series *Chinese Restaurants* by Toronto-based filmmaker Cheuk Kwan about family-run Chinese restaurants around the world — an icon of the Chinese diaspora — examines the intersecting narratives of immigration, displacement and belonging, the meaning of ‘Chineseness’, the significance and politics of food and history in Chinese diasporic history.

Married Chinese men who migrated without their families were also referred to as married bachelors. The majority of the Chinese male population in Canadian and Australian Chinatowns found themselves discriminated against and lacked opportunities. Therefore, as the prices for bringing in family or a bride became
increasingly prohibitive, many Chinese men remained single and continued living in Chinatown rooming houses in Australia and Canada, becoming a generation of ‘old uncles’ to the children of families who prospered after exclusionary laws were lifted (Khoo, 2003).

22 As part of the University Extension Series produced by the Extension Department of the University of British Columbia in co-operation with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

23 See, for instance, Kam Louie (2002); Greg Leong (2000); Alison Broinowski (1996).

24 More specifically, as Jamrozik, Boland and Urquhart have noted, Politicisation is a traditionally dangerous path for immigrants, because legislation regarding residency status in Canada and Australia often included clear stipulations about ‘neutral’ political records. That is, the desirable immigrant has no history of protest or arrest, and while awaiting permanent residency or citizenship papers, he or she could be deported for participating in workers’ protests or rallies. (1995: 92)
PART B

THE CHINESE DIASPORA IN CANADA
CHAPTER 3

‘What makes a good ‘Chinese-Canadian’ novel?’ Internal/ised outcasts, authentics and bananas in Disappearing Moon Cafe and Banana Boys

This chapter proceeds to address more closely the negotiations and inflections of Chinese diasporic identity in the context of Canadian literary production. Having established the types of diasporic consciousnesses in Chapter 1 as well as the internal group differentiations in the Chinese diaspora in Chapter 2, this chapter concentrates on the historical, political and socio-cultural conditions in Canada to examine two Chinese-Canadian texts and their articulation of diasporic consciousness and national and cultural identity. By looking at the example of the Chinese in Canada, this chapter, and the dissertation in general, proposes to undertake a non-unified and non-unitary reading of the Chinese diaspora. In analysing the narratives of the diaspora, it is also argued that the story-telling mode encapsulated by the novel form emphasises not only the politics of cultural representation but also exemplifies modes of literary and cultural production that signify broader engagement and participation in social and political debates by racial minorities in white multicultural societies. The story-telling mode, as part of the politics of representation, is also a function of modes of representation, and as such, is indicative of the empowerment and healing of racial minorities that have been denied cultural and, to a certain extent, political self-representation. At the same time, these forms of cultural documentation have to be considered in their formal and aesthetic dimensions, which add further to the importance and complexities of the text.
In highlighting the inherent and internal diversity and ambivalence of Chinese diasporic communities in white societies, several concerns about and within the communities are brought to the fore. Firstly, because there exist many varieties of Chineseness to begin with, references to race and ethnicity inevitably fall short of addressing the complex variations and internal differentiations pertaining to the group. Yet, the notion of Chineseness as a relatively homogenous, even autonomous concept exists as a popular and familiar concept in western societies that have reduced Chineseness into ubiquitous and easily recognisable forms such as ‘Chinatown’ and Chinese food. For instance, as Chapter 2 has shown, the prominent architectural features of Chinatown that have become symbolic of and synonymous with Chineseness were initially meant to appeal to non-Chinese people and visitors. Consequently, modes of cultural production by minorities (whether as architectural forms or literary works) often interpellate viewing and reading subjects within an already established or easily recognisable cultural identities and structures. Moreover, for minority Chinese communities in majority white societies, the desire for acceptance and assimilation has meant a complicit perpetuation of such stereotypical forms and depictions of their ethnicity, thereby problematising efforts and attempts at infusing racial identity with newer, radical and alternative meaning and signification. At the same time, the community is rife with internal differences that parallel and even mirror the discrimination and hostility meted out by majority white racist society. This chapter looks at the disjunctures in Chinese diasporic experiences in
Canada to set the context for analyses of diasporic identity formation and negotiations of cultural minority citizenship and belonging. Further, it is argued that, while multiculturalism and race politics certainly affect diasporic subjectivity and consciousness and also influence the development of diasporic cultural production and representation, racial minority writers can and do exploit in their own ways the opportunities for seeking and creating alternative histories, narratives and identities.

The conceptualisation of diasporas and diasporic narratives are often aligned with the evocations of imagined homelands, thereby positing an hierarchical and supplementary relationship between the diaspora and its homeland as well as the adoptive country. When visibly different diasporic migrants’ bodies and narratives appear to destabilise or threaten the stability and coherence of the host’s (imaginary) unified national narrative or body politic, the frequent recourse is to reify those visible forms of ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’, thereby positioning diasporic bodies as ‘exotic’ and thus excluded. In this process of cultural ‘othering’, racially marked minorities are perceived as culturally incommensurable and even at ‘war’ (Bauman, 1997) with the majority host culture. Consequently the strategies often employed to deal with those differences usually involve either assimilationist practices that gradually erode and elide distinctions, or entail prohibitive and punitive measures to keep foreign bodies at bay. The production of cultural ‘others’ is therefore aligned with the conceptualisation of diasporas along its homeland idealising consciousness, and the effect is to emphasise the matter of ‘where you’re from’ over the immediacy of the present circumstances surrounding ‘where you’re at’. This type of
conceptualisation overlooks and obscures much of the diaspora’s current
engagements with local society and participation in the political environment.
However, in focussing on the ‘here and now’ a broader agenda may emerge, which
takes into account the historical presence of the Chinese diaspora in their adopted
countries and also examines their negotiations of diasporic identity within the context
of articulating cultural and political citizenship and belonging.

In many societies where cultural pluralism is a lived reality, the treatment of
different-looking minority groups often serves as tokenistic representations of
multiculturalism. This is especially so in countries where multiculturalism functions
as official state policy, so that the existence and accommodation of cultural diversity
gestures towards a ‘multiculturalism of having’ rather than a ‘multiculturalism of
being’ (Hage, 2000: 140). Under these circumstances, cultural differences and
diversity are ‘appreciated’ and ‘valued’, albeit within a “discourse of enrichment
[that] places the dominant culture in a more important position than other migrant
cultures”. In other words, migrant cultures are posited as “existing for” the dominant
Anglo-Celtic culture (Hage, 2000: 121). Therefore, despite the accommodation,
tolerance and sometimes apparent valorisation of diverse ethnic cultures,
multiculturalism in effect engenders and extends the gulf between the dominant host
culture and its ethnic “parasitic” others while simultaneously influencing and
regulating the behaviour and performances of those others. This state of relations is
not only disempowering and disruptive to ethnic and diasporic migrants in terms of
their negotiation of cultural and national affiliation and of diasporic consciousness
and identity formation, but also elides and obscures the complex and sometimes irreconcilable differences within diasporic communities.

The combined forces and advances of multiculturalism and globalisation have led to reconfigurations of international and institutional structures and processes of trade and cultural exchange (Lim and Dissanayake, 1999: 1). As a result, diasporic communities and their movements have increased due to the “transnationalisation of production through a ‘new international development of labour’” (Dirlik, 1994: 62). However, the rejuvenated modes of transnational capitalism are also responsible for producing and magnifying a range of discriminatory practices based not only on racial and ethnic markers but also differences in gender and socio-economic profiles. These differences and discriminations are manifest in the growing disparities of diasporic experience, evidenced by the contrasts and contradictions within diasporas. For instance, the apperception of a refugee or ‘fresh off the boat’ (FOB) migrant is bound to deviate sharply, even become polarised, from that of the fifth-generation local-born and assimilated Chinese Canadian. Yet, references to ethnic minorities nonetheless exhibit the erstwhile tendency to homogenise the group’s internal differences and to represent them as a more or less integrated and unified whole. Theorisations of diasporas therefore also neglect or obscure the fact that modes of exploitation and discrimination operate within and among the diaspora that perpetuate the abuse and marginalisation of their own members.³
A study of the history of Chinese labour and economic migration at the global scale uncovers a vast range of inter- and cross-cultural associations and amalgamations that effectively demystify and gradually destabilise the rigidity of racial and cultural boundaries. For Chinese in Canada, their presence in major cities and urban areas, especially Vancouver, has brought economic prosperity while reshaping the racial, socio-cultural and political milieu, so that they now represent a sizeable and significant portion of the population. This chapter will first establish the historical context of Chinese arrivals and presence in Canada to gain an insight into the types of diasporic consciousness and identity that are manifest in more contemporary cultural and literary productions of the diasporic community. Such an understanding is necessary for a close reading and analysis of the literary output by Chinese Canadians that speak to and about diasporic experiences ranging from migration to assimilation and multiculturalism. Issues of gender, cultural and national identity, negotiations of meaning as well as sites of resistance and cultural production are foregrounded in the diasporic narratives of generational and cultural conflict and continuity. This is not, however, to reduce the cultural politics of racialised ethnic groups to “first-generation/second-generation struggles [that displace] social differences into a privatised familial opposition” (Lowe, 1999: 63). Rather, this study of the Chinese in Canada seeks to illuminate those cultural practices that influence the negotiation and formation of diasporic identities via historical and familial frames of reference, and to undertake a non-unified and non-unitary reading of the diaspora.
Historical Contexts

The first or preliminary wave of Chinese migration to Canada began in the mid 1800s, when the majority of Chinese migrants were employed in gold mining along the Fraser River on the west coast of British Columbia. As the settlement of British Columbia was at the stage of infancy, there were prospects of employment for Chinese migrants in various construction projects. The building of the Canadian Pacific Railway (1880-84) later drew large numbers of Chinese from China as well as some who were already working in the United States. Many Chinese who came during this period lay claim to the ‘classic’ Gold Mountain (‘gum san’) experience that eventually translated into a ‘normative’ type of narrative which, over time, has informed the Chinese diaspora of their historical beginnings and initiation into Canadian society.

The periods of Restriction (1885-1923) and Exclusion (1923-47) saw the formulation of anti-immigration policies by the Canadian government, aimed at reducing the migrant population and entry of people that were considered undesirable. This involved “rejection of Immigrants based on racial criteria, exclusion via selective immigration policies, and ejection via individual deportation and group transportation” (Day, 2000: 8). These policies were aimed at creating and maintaining an ideal ‘white’ (Anglo) community, or one that was “assimilable” to an “English-Canada model”, and therefore admitted only white migrants of European origin who were perceived as being able to ‘fit in’ easily with the dominant culture. In addition, the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923, also known as the Chinese Exclusion Act,
clearly singled out the Chinese as the main racial community to be denied entry into Canada. These experiences of exclusion constitute an integral part of the history of Chinese diasporic experience in Canada, and have featured prominently in their narratives.

In 1947 the Immigration/Exclusion Act was amended to allow very restricted entry to limited numbers of Chinese, usually immediate family members of those already in Canada. This was a response to the post-war demands of Canada’s economic and socio-demographic structures, which saw the creation and expansion of employment opportunities for Chinese in Canada. During the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), the Chinese were acknowledged as an economic as well as physical necessity because of the cheap labour that they provided. However, in spite of the established presence of the Chinese since the formative years of Canadian history and their contributions to the pioneering and foundational work in the country, Chinese-Canadians were not recognised as citizens until after 1947. Peter Ward, in *White Canada Forever* (1990), details how the Chinese were perceived and treated by mainstream white society, who used their collective clout and pressure to effect government policies that denied the Chinese employment and even habitation. Politically disenfranchised, the Chinese were also disallowed entry into professions such as law and pharmacy and were segregated from the mainstream workforce by these discriminatory practices and legislation that kept them in entry-level positions. These avenues of employment tended to be low-paid, menial work that was shunned by much of the local white majority, with the most common occupations being
service-oriented professions such as hand laundries, grocery stores and restaurants. This sets the sociohistorical context that establishes Chinatown and Chinese service enterprises as an “indispensable component” (Chao, 1997: 88) of many diasporic narratives. The proliferation of Chinese restaurants in the western world, along with the symbolic presence of Chinatowns in the major urban cities, has provided an easy familiarity and ready reference to Chinese culture in an environment where they stand as minorities. However, this perception of Chineseness in popular imaginary is borne out of a climate of hostility and intolerance in which Chinese businesses stand as sites of struggle over the practice and affirmation of cultural citizenship. In some cases, these sites even functioned as locations for the individual and collective traumas of negotiating diasporic identity and sense of belonging to be played out. As Lien Chao has noted, “for Chinese Canadians Chinatowns still bear the stigma inherited from historical anti-Chinese racism. They bear the mark of a segregation that is self-imposed in order to avoid competition or conflict with the dominant groups” (1997: 13-14).

In 1947, after the Second World War and because of their war efforts, Chinese in Canada were constituted as political subjects. The Exclusion Act of 1923 was repudiated, and Chinese were effectively incorporated into the Canadian socio-political arena. This concession allowed them not only access to previously denied forms of employment but also recognised and affirmed their cultural and political citizenship status. In 1967, further amendments were made to the Immigration Act, which relaxed immigration controls thereby making it possible and feasible for
Chinese to enter Canada. Subsequent waves of Chinese migration now came from China as well as all over the world, including Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, even as far as Australia and Jamaica.¹¹

Before 1967, Chinese migrants first arrived under the sponsorship of those who already possessed citizenship in Canada, usually as family members, or illegally, by falsifying their ages, or passing themselves off as somebody else.¹² Later, with the relaxation of immigration controls and expansion of admissible categories, the number of arrivals increased especially those of independent migrants such as students and business people. The growth of the diasporic Chinese population in Canada also saw many Chinese taking on Canadian citizenship and settling into the country on a more permanent basis. The Chinese diasporic community’s gains in critical mass as well as political franchise were reflected in the overall increase in social and economic mobility of ethnic Chinese in Canada who were now accepted into a wider range of professions and employment. The growth of the community’s population, self-esteem and confidence were also essential factors that saw the emergence and development of diasporic Chinese literary consciousness and output, when avenues of mainstream media began to open up towards Chinese Canadian publications. In representing Chinese Canadian self-expression, these diasporic narratives at the same time reclaim community history by verifying and weaving ethnic voices and stories into the socio-historical fabric of Canadian society. The acknowledgement, if not acceptance, of Chinese history and presence in Canada marks an important step, by giving voice to a previously rejected and repressed
community because “the historical silence and invisibility of the community [will] affect contemporary future generations [who] cannot gain a more respectable identity in today’s society unless their collective history is recognised as part of [the country’s] experience” (Chao: 1997: 93).

Chinese Canadian immigration history began as early as the eighteenth century, in 1788 (Chao, 1997: 4), so that by the time the Canadian Pacific Railway was completed in 1885, the Chinese had been in Canada for nearly a century. Although they were virtually indispensable to the development of British Columbia and Canada, Chinese immigrants and their descendants were discriminated against and excluded from Canadian society. Meanwhile, the Chinese community that had an already established presence in Canada had also grown and evolved in multiple and disparate ways, thereby disabusing popular misconceptions of a homogeneous and unified racial group. That is, although Chinese Canadians had in common their shared racial identity and experiences of discrimination, these did not translate into similarities in negotiating diasporic identity formation and racial and cultural politics. Moreover, the rejuvenation of the Chinese community by newly arrived and younger migrants had negative, sometimes detrimental, effects as well. Many incoming Chinese youth found themselves locked in inter-generational conflict with the ‘old-timers’, Gold Mountain and CPR workers who had arrived before the 1923 Exclusion Act. Moreover, the political ideals of these groups within the community also tended to be polarised because of the rise of communism in China, which had captured the imagination and fervour of younger Chinese, while older Chinese supported the
more conservative Kuomintang. The political opposition of the Kuomintang and the Communist Party in China was played out in conflicts between older and younger diasporic Chinese who were similarly affected but vastly divided by events and developments in the homeland.

Another distinction in the Chinese diasporic community was the fact of one’s place of birth. Canadian-born Chinese had started the process of campaigning for full citizenship and reclaiming their legal and political birthrights, especially after World War II when some 500 Canadian-born Chinese were drafted into the Canadian armed forces (Pan, 2000: 240). Not only were they more politically involved and pro-active than their first-generation migrant predecessors, but Canadian-born Chinese were also equipped with the advantages of an English education and language skills, giving them a sense of confidence about their rights and entitlements as local-born citizens. For these reasons, the local-born were perceived as being ‘less’ Chinese by the older immigrants as well as newly arrived young migrants, who claimed a sense of cultural superiority, even ‘purity’, over the Canadian-born and English-educated Chinese, and especially over those who did/could not speak Chinese.  

The post World War II period first highlighted the internal diversity and conflicts within the Chinese community, because it marked the beginning of increased immigration of Chinese into Canada. At the same time, the Chinese diaspora too was growing in its composition and diversity, eventually becoming fissured by internal conflict and disjunctures. Yet, conceptualisations of diasporic Chinese still tend
towards a conflation of the different strands of their history into relatively
homogenous or monolithic-type narratives, manifest in the proliferation of stories
about the Gold Mountain and/or the CPR. This way of introducing the Chinese
immigrant experiences in Canada, although a necessary acknowledgement of their
historical contributions, has dominated the popular imaginary, mainstream media and
literary perceptions of Chinese Canadians. At the same time, it functions as a
distinguishing trope, if not stereotype, which prominently characterises Chinese
diasporic narratives via the routes and roots of archetypal Gold Mountain sojourners,
while neglecting the experiences of other Chinese — especially Chinese women —
migrants that do not fit into these standard/ising ‘models’.

It is important to establish the historical context surrounding the development of
Chinese Canadian literature for a deeper understanding of the background against
which more recent and contemporary publications resonate. The literary output of
diasporic Chinese in Canada reflects a specific historical experience that departs from
normative and generalised conceptualisations of diasporas that are preoccupied either
with homeland issues of belonging, or with the difficulties and demands of
assimilation with and integration into their present environment. However, this is not
to diminish the importance of those two concerns because they necessarily combine
to infuse the diasporic condition with an intrinsic potential to challenge and subvert
established norms, perceptions and boundaries of nation, culture, and identity. While
this may seem an idealisation of the diasporic condition, it nonetheless provides a
useful mode of exploration and analysis into questions of cultural and cross-cultural transformations and negotiations of diasporic identity and consciousness.

To give a focal point to the historical context established by this chapter I will be referring, first of all, to SKY Lee’s novel *Disappearing Moon Cafe* (1990: hereinafter cited by page numbers), and later, to Terry Woo’s novel *Banana Boys* (2000), to offer a textual analysis of these narratives that exemplify and engage the politics of diasporic cultural representation.

*Disappearing Moon Cafe*

SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is set mostly in Vancouver’s Chinatown, and spans nearly a century, beginning from 1892 to 1987, covering four generations of the Wong family. This novel is especially significant because not only was it “hailed as the first novel to deal with the experience of Chinese immigrants in Canada” (Romell, 1990: 58), but it was also “the first contemporary Chinese Canadian novel that has caught mainstream critical attention” (Chao, 1997: 93). In its blending of family genealogy and community history into one narrative space, the novel not only retrieves and reclaims historical voices and a collective memory silenced by over a century of institutional racism and neglect, but also re-reads and re-writes the community’s history from a female perspective. In so doing, the novel goes beyond the perfunctory acknowledgement and affirmation of diasporic Chinese contribution in Canada, to explore other marginalised histories and narratives within the diasporic experience. In fact, as Martha Addante argues, the perspective of the female narrator
Kae “challenges the notion of origins as traced through patrilineal lineage” by writing “the story of her mothers — the stories that are often forgotten or erased because they are incongruent and conflict with patriarchal history” (2002: 210). The novel therefore does not adhere to a chronological order of narration but rather shifts back and forth through the decades and uses different narrative voices, namely the first and third person, to recreate its version of Chinese Canadian history.

The novel draws upon a traditional Prologue and Epilogue structure to set the historical context for the unfolding of its family and community drama between 1892 and 1987. Memories of the Wong patriarch transpire from 1892 to 1939, focusing mainly on significant events such as the bone-searching mission of “dead chinamen” along the Canadian Pacific Railway in the interior of British Columbia. Gwei-Chang’s bone-searching mission, however, is interrupted when a near-death experience brings him first into contact with a half-Native, half-Chinese woman, Kelora Chen, who rescues him, and later the natives of her village. They are married in the Native tradition, but this life, too, is cut short when a letter arrives from his mother in China, summoning him back to the homeland to enter into an arranged marriage with Lee Mui Lan. When Gwei Chang returns to Canada, he finds that Kelora has passed away but has left a little boy, Ting An, at their old hut. Gwei Chang takes Ting An into his care and employs him in the family restaurant business, all the while keeping the secret of his paternity from the boy.
While Gwei Chang’s bone-searching work did not involve any railway constructing or gold mining activity, his mission of recovering the bones of the railway workers represents the novel’s acknowledgement of the historical importance of that era and of the contributions of Chinese labourers in those pioneering projects. The significance of railway and mining work has to be given due recognition not only because of the large numbers of Chinese contract labourers recruited, but also because many of them died while carrying out the construction work. Moreover, when the railway work was completed, there was not a single mention of Chinese workers in the history of the CPR — workers who were “immediately abandoned and targeted by racism” (Chao, 1997: 7). In foregrounding the “bone-searching expedition”, the novel not only reinstates those neglected and excluded versions of Chinese Canadian history, but also protests the omissions of these experiences from mainstream Canadian history. Lien Chao reads the “bone-hunting” journey as “an educational experience necessary for contemporary Chinese Canadian writers, before they can set off to reclaim the experiences lived by the community ancestors” (1997: 94). The process of recovering their history will also engender individual validation for contemporary generations of Chinese Canadians because “they cannot gain a more respectable identity in today’s society unless their collective history is recognised as part of Canadian experience” (1997: 92). This clearly demonstrates how the task of writing from ‘where you’re at’ needs to be thoroughly grounded and informed by the history of ‘where you’re from’, so as to advance and empower the processes of negotiating and narrating diasporic consciousness and identity.
Although framed by a Prologue featuring a male protagonist, the novel proper begins its first chapter, “Waiting for Enlightenment”, with a female narrator Kae-Ying Woo and is set in 1986 (the ‘present’). Through Kae, the narratives of her great-grandmother Lee Mui Lan, from 1924 to 1950, and that of her grandmother Fong Mei, continuing into 1968, are presented. Fong Mei’s daughters Beatrice and Suzanne carry the plot development from 1938 to the present. The multiple narratives that intertwine shift the story back and forth between past and present; furthermore, given the predominance of female narrators, the scene is set for the fateful chronicling of the family’s melodramatic and eventful history.

Gwei Chang’s Disappearing Moon Café, “the busiest, largest restaurant in Chinatown” (24), is an important establishment because it positions him as “one of the privileged few who could hire his fellow Chinese” (75), thereby earning the respect and admiration of the community. Also, he was “the most admired and likeable businessman in Chinatown” (24), and the community “turn[ed] to him in times of trouble” (65). With his restaurant dining room being “the largest in Chinatown, perhaps the most beautiful in all of Vancouver” (32), it served also as a place of gathering for many Chinese, especially Gwei Chang and his friends, to reminisce, spending their time “huddled around the back-room dining tables in a tight clique of old men muttering softly about hard times and the old days” (33). In addition, the restaurant business serves as the focal point for much of the family drama to unfold especially around 1924, a year after the Chinese Exclusion act came into force. In another way, the Disappearing Moon Café and its Chinatown location
also bear the brunt of racial hostility from white society, functioning as sites of self-imposed segregation by the Chinese themselves to avoid conflict with the dominant culture.

For the Chinese diaspora, Chinatowns were a link to their homeland and ethnic cultural identities, not only because of the community of Chinese people, but also in the architectural constructions and designs that were ostensibly reminiscent of the homeland. From its description, the Disappearing Moon Cafe can be seen to cater to homeland memory and idealisation:

It was a nostalgic replica of an old-fashioned chinese teahouse, which accounted for its popularity not only amongst its homesick chinese clientele but also outsiders who came looking for oriental exotica. (32)

Interestingly, in Choy Fuk’s opinion, “except for the customers, his mother, and perhaps the cacti, there was nothing chinese about [the restaurant]” (32). The overt symbolism of Chineseness in the restaurant’s decor apparently served both emotional and psychological needs — namely homeland nostalgia and orientalist fantasies. At another level, this dual functioning also signalled a precedent to more contemporary and commercialising practices that are part of the current multicultural rhetoric. Put differently, the commercialisation of ethnic cultures and practices actually derives from earlier, even historical, acts of homeland nostalgia and idealisation. The replica of a Chinese teahouse, in its fulfilment of emotional and psychological needs of overseas Chinese who maintained strong homeland ties and affiliations, visibly and self-consciously denotes cultural ‘difference’. In pre-World War II Canada, such a move would only have reaffirmed the perceived cultural incommensurability of
Chinese in a western society. In more recent and contemporary discourses of cultural pluralism, however, these overt displays of race and ethnicity have been strategically manoeuvred to showcase and verify the country’s cultural diversities and its multicultural or multiethnic composition — that is, the multiculturalism of ‘having’. Indeed, in contemporary cultural politics, it has not only become acceptable but also profitable to emphasise ‘where you’re from’. However, this is still based on a practice of cultural ‘othering’ that “[allows] the Other an apparent aura” (Trinh, 1991: 186), and that does not exclude Chinese/Asians but rather includes them because of their ‘difference’.

A significant historical event highlighted in the novel is the successful boycott organised by the Chinese community in Vancouver against the “Janet Smith” bill in 1924, when the Chinese community were put in crisis after the alleged murder of a scottish nursemaid by one of their members, a house-boy. The effect of this bill, named after the murdered nursemaid, was to single-handedly criminalise all Chinese men resident in British Columbia. As the novel tells us,

Under the strain of bigotry, they were outlaws. Chinamen didn’t make the law of the land, so they would always live outside of it. In fact, it was a crime for them just to be here. (221)

In the interrogation of the house-boy by the Chinese community, the former is described as “A no-good chinaboy sniffing after white women’s asses” (76). This not only readily implies that “it is the house-boy’s race rather than his crime that was judged and sentenced by Canadian law” (Chao, 1997: 95), but also that the Chinese had completely succumbed to the racism of white society and had turned it inwards.
among themselves to condemn their own people. The hostility directed towards the house-boy was also symptomatic of an acute intolerance by the Chinese community towards mixed-race relationships and cross-cultural alliances. In the novel, the narration of an actual historical event recovers the excluded versions and voices of the Chinese at the time of the passing of the bill. By incorporating the Chinese perspective of the event, the novel is presented as a pseudo-historical text that illuminates more contemporary repercussions of historic and political decisions on the community.

The political hardships faced by the community also translated into individual and personal adversities for Chinese migrants. At the individual level, the migrant was “a hungry worker who sold his body for wages, who swallowed the bitterness of being cheated every day” (77). In the novel, Mui Lan complains: “That dead white devil! Cheating us all these years! Selling us tang people the leftover ice for full price. I’m sick of it!” (34). The deception and exploitation of Chinese “tang people” are manifest not only in below minimum level wages and entry-level jobs, but also in undervaluing business transactions that were tantamount to daylight robbery. As a community, the Chinese were aware of the stakes involved should they decide to protest their exploitation and therefore accepted that they

were like derelicts, neither here nor there, not tolerated anywhere; an outlaw band of men united by common bonds of helpless rage. (77)

Their sense of helplessness was further compounded by the fact that, by the time of the passing of the “Janet Smith” bill, many of these overseas Chinese
had already passed many-time-ten years over here. No more could they say, “I’ve seen too much of their white hate,” pack up, sell out and move back like so many other before them. More and more, memories of the old villages had faded into a vague distance, too far to retrace now. (70-71)

This is one of the major dilemmas facing diasporas who feel ‘trapped’ in the place ‘where you’re at’ because of its hostile environment, yet are unable to return to the homeland because “their roots had sunk deeper in this land, so deep that to pull up stakes would mean death” (71), or pose too great a disruption. This recognition marked a significant development in — and departure from — the homeland idealising consciousness of the Chinese diaspora, indicating an awareness of the myth of homeland return and its importance in facilitating social cohesion rather than the materialising of the actual journey back ‘home’.

One of the most important developments in the political history of Chinese Canadians is the successful campaigning for political enfranchisement of the community. In British Columbia, the Chinese were not given voting rights until 1949, two years after the Exclusion Act was revoked. This was largely because of the efforts of Chinese Canadians who fought in the Canadian military forces and also because China, “including many loyal overseas Chinese, had declared full-fledged war on Japan in 1937” (140). In the novel, Keeman returns from the war in 1946, “a survivor, a WW II veteran” — attributes which “qualified him for compensation” (147). (This compensation entailed not only the claiming of full citizenship from the Canadian government but also an engagement with Beatrice, the daughter of Fong Mei). The Chinese community, for their part, “welcomed its returning war heroes with as much
gusto and fanfare as any small town. They wanted to validate them as individuals again, precious because each young man was an important part of their small-town lives” (147). The importance of young men/people here cannot be undermined because the Exclusion Act had severely diminished the Chinese Canadian community, resulting in “a meagre number of young people — no new immigrant blood” (147). Keeman along with Gwei Chang represent significant influences and developments in the Chinese Canadian community’s history and relationship with their government and wider society. However, the novel leans more heavily on the narratives of the women for its impetus and plot development — as the narrator describes her project, “The Temple of Wonged Women” (209) — preferring to “romanticise them as a lineage of women with passion and fierceness in their veins” and uncovering the “simple truth beneath their survival stories” (145-6).

In its narration of Chinese Canadian history, the novel underscores the importance of representing women’s stories because, in addition to the racial vilification of the Chinese community, these women were doubly marginalised by an extremely sexist and patriarchal order. The isolation felt by Chinese migrants was experienced even more intensively by the women because of their very low numbers. The head tax imposed on Chinese immigrants in British Columbia rose from $10 in 1884 to $50 within a year, and increased to $100 in 1900, then $500 in 1903 (Chao, 1997: 10); as a result, very few Chinese women migrated to Canada. It was common for Gold Mountain men to be apart from their families in China for long periods of time, leading to estrangement as in the case of Gwei Chang and Mui Lan:
They stood together as husband and wife, but they weren’t close. Too many years apart after a brief marriage ceremony in the village between two shy, shuffling strangers who saw more of their new shoes than each other’s faces. After six months, the Gold Mountain guest was gone, and she was pregnant. The next time she saw him, they were both too old to start again. (27)

The reference to Gwei Chang as a “Gold Mountain guest” not only emphasises the estrangement between husband and wife, but also confirms perceptions of the sojourning, even non-returning, tendencies of early Chinese migrants because of the temporary nature of their return trips.

From a female perspective, the jubilant prospect of family reunion with her husband takes on a different turn when she arrives in Canada. For Mui Lan, her “most fervent hope” of landing in the Gold Mountains turns into her “worst nightmare”;

She arrived and found only silence. A stone silence that tripped her up when she tried to reach out. Gold Mountain men were like stone. She looked around for women to tell her what was happening, but there were none. By herself, she lacked the means to know what to do next. (26)

In a foreign environment, Mui Lan’s sense of identity becomes completely derived from her relationship with her husband; identified only as “A merchant’s wife”, she “relied heavily on him for her identity in this land” (28). Mui Lan thus gradually evolves into, as the narrator describes, one of the “ungrounded women, living with displaced chinamen, and everyone trapped by circumstances” (145).

Although Mui Lan holds domestic authority as well as manages the restaurant and is therefore seen to be wielding considerable autonomy, Addante describes her (after Luce Irigaray) as a “useful Athena” who serves the patriarchal order or those “who
spring whole from the brain of the Father-King, dedicated solely to his service and that of men in power” (2002: 205). As a woman who had been subjected to a patriarchal order that subjugates and exploits women, treating them as commodities whose value depended on their reproductive function, Mui Lan herself turns against the women in her family and community, becoming an accomplice — in fact, “a tyrant” (31) — to the same order, thereby perpetuating the misogyny. Her yearning for a grandson, a “little boy who came from her son, who came from her husband, who also came lineally from that golden chain of male to male” (31), betrays a deeply ingrained sexism and servitude to the male patriarchal order. The purpose of having a grandson, we are told, was in order for her to secure “a share of that eternal life which came with each new generation of babies” (31), while the “the daughters-in-law who bore them were unidentified receptacles” (31). Mui Lan, having produced a son for the Wong family, had proven her ‘worth’ and therefore her “status in this great family [was] assured” (48), enabling her to escape her lowly existence and to turn against her ‘un-productive’ daughter-in-law.

Mui Lan, too, sees women solely in terms of their reproductive function, and therefore hires a mistress to bear descendants for the Wong family when her daughter-in-law fails to reproduce. In doing so, she establishes herself as “an accomplice to the patriarchal order which subjugates and exploits women because of their reproductive function” (Addante, 2002: 206). This explains why she is envious of the close bond between the two laundresses, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law who “each had a sleeping baby strapped to her back” (24). Not only do the
laundresses have the babies that Mui Lan so desperately desires, but they also “gave an impression of strength, as if they knew something that she didn’t” (25), because she had removed herself from the network and closeness of women in her home village and had now become associated with the trade in women. Ironically, in the novel it is the patriarch Gwei Chang that does not support Mui Lan’s “old-fashioned ideas” about acquiring a mistress for their son. His comment — “[a]fter thirteen years in this land, she still doesn’t understand the people here” (30) — reveals the extent of homeland nostalgia in Mui Lan and her desperate clinging to traditional customs and practices. As she declares about life in the village, “the customs were clear . . . A coldhearted mother-in-law would have thrown her [daughter-in-law Fong Mei] out the door a long time ago” (36). This is an idealised version of the homeland, including its traditional practices, that has been brought over into the new country and subsequently used to advance Mui Lan’s argument; this, in addition to her clout and status as the Wong matriarch, is used to significantly differentiate her from Fong Mei even though both women had entered the Wong family through arranged marriages. Through the homeland-idealising character of Mui Lan, the novel also highlights the exploitation of disempowered diasporic individuals (especially women like Fong Mei) by their own communities. In this instance, the relationship between Mui Lan and Fong Mei stands as one of oppressor-oppressed, as a result of their respective socio-economic positions.

Fong Mei, as an object of exchange in a patriarchal order, is bought by Mui Lan for the sole purpose of producing Wong descendants. In drawing our attention to the
representation of women as purely reproductive function and their status as objects, the novel also critiques these practices of female subordination by men as well as women. Although the narrator points out that “my great-grandmother was a woman too” (63), the former nonetheless discovers that women in traditional patriarchal systems often found themselves appropriating sexist double standards and “willingly ... [fuelling] the fire with which to scar other women” (63). Meanwhile, the benefits that accrue to men in these exchange systems were enormous. As the narrative unfolds, we see that, while it was principally Mui Lan who arranged the purchase of Fong Mei for her son, it is the Wong patriarch, or Fong Mei’s “Lo Yeh”, who receives the salutations from her family. In a letter from Fong Mei’s sister, everything refers to her “new father”, while her own “Father is just full of himself these days” (47). With the money from selling Fong Mei, her parents hosted a huge feast “in honour of [her] new family” (46), and “purchased one hundred barrels of store-bought brides’ cakes, twenty roasted pigs, sixty catties of liquor” (46), and even had enough money to buy some land for her eldest brother. Fong Mei’s family not only gains financially but also enjoys and luxuriates in the high regard of their community, where “[t]here hasn’t been a neighbour within ten li who hasn’t stopped by and commented on your Yeh’s [Gwei Chang’s] generosity” (47). These economic and political arrangements, although based on kinship and marriage, point to a total social system that upholds and benefits the male domination, commodification and routine exchange of women.
Fong Mei’s subsequent affair with Ting An represents a significant rupture to “the law or patriarchal order that depends upon the exchange and exploitation of women” (Addante, 2002: 204). As Addante elaborates,

By committing adultery, Fong Mei regains power over her woman’s body, over her sexuality, and makes herself available to a man who has not acquired her within a contract, but who is of her own choosing. (2002: 206)

In this instance, Fong Mei may have been oppressed by her womb because of its reproductive function upon which her worth and identity are derived; however, her womb also serves as “a means to rebel against a patriarchal order that exploits women and appropriates their reproductive labour” (Addante, 2002: 206). More importantly, Fong Mei’s adultery represents, firstly, the resistance to a patriarchal order of her cultural and domestic environment, and secondly, the resistance against the patriarchalisation of Canada’s social organisation and overall social production. As Himani Bannerji has observed, because of the perception of non-white women as “overly fecund” — leading to the “terror that they might change Canada’s racial composition” (2000: 69) — the patriarchalisation of Canada’s social organisation has forced upon white women the “role of reluctant breeders” because “they are of the majority culture and are thus held responsible for counterbalancing the “unassimilables” (i.e., non-whites)” (2000:69). The implicit demand for white women to reproduce more and for non-white women to reproduce less serves an overall mandate for women “to reproduce in keeping with the economic, cultural, and political ambitions of the state”, which is, fundamentally, the desire to “Keep Canada White” (Bannerji, 2000: 70). Fong Mei’s transgressions therefore challenge not only the restrictive confines and sexist attitudes of her immediate familial and community
but also defy the attempts by governing authorities to impose restrictive controls on racial organisation and production in Canada.

Within minority groups, however, internal modes of organisation have resulted in further forms of discrimination by the Chinese community. These inward-looking prejudices often involved the notions of cultural ‘authenticity’ and/or racial ‘purity’, evidenced in the novel by its description and treatment of persons such as Beatrice, Seto Chi and Ting An. The concern with cultural ‘authenticity’ had been largely confined within the community and evolved as a mode of differentiation between different generations of Chinese Canadians. Alienated by a racially hostile environment, the Chinese community had nonetheless created new forms of discrimination among their own, with China-born Chinese often being disdainful of later generations of Canadian-born Chinese. As shown in the novel,

Racial prejudice helped disconnect Beatrice from the larger community outside of Chinatown. Then, the old chinamen added their two cents’ worth by sneering at the canadian-born: “Not quite three, not quite four, nowhere.” (164)

In other words, in addition to the racial prejudice of white Canadian society, Chinese Canadians had to bear further the bigotry of their own community, even though they were of ‘pure’ Chinese descent. The claims to cultural ‘authenticity’ and ‘superiority’ by China-born Chinese could be seen as a defensive gesture against the growing confidence and assertiveness of the later generations. As Gwei Chang’s old friend admits, “What were we but ignorant labourers? Couldn’t hardly read or write in our own tang language, never mind theirs” (229). For China-born Chinese, the acknowledgement that they were illiterate in both Chinese as well as English placed
them in an extremely disempowered and vulnerable position in the new country. Although kinship could still be fostered among those who at least spoke the Chinese language, the lack of an English education meant that this group were often kept at entry level jobs and doing menial work. English-educated Chinese Canadians were better placed to exploit the social and economic opportunities of their environment and, in doing so, further widened the gulf between the Chinese-speaking and the English-speaking. This distinction also readily manifests itself in the different levels of wealth and class within the diasporic community and fuelling the resentment felt towards more privileged Chinese.

The notions of cultural ‘purity’ and ‘authenticity’ are also examined in the novel’s description of Seto Chi, the narrator’s “old nanny”— born to an overseas Chinese family in Malaya but, because of superstition, was adopted by a Hindu diplomat, and later made her way to Vancouver after the Japanese invasion of Malaya (now Malaysia). Although having lost touch with her ‘cultural base’, Chi nevertheless draws on culturally essentialist rhetoric to her advantage with the expression, “People from China just know!” (128). Perhaps because of the proximity of her birthplace, Malaya, to the ‘homeland’ China, Chi is able to claim some degree of ‘authenticity’ concerning her Chineseness. Moreover, as “[h]er features seemed unmistakably chinese” (129), she is able to ‘pass’ as a ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ Chinese person, which further enables her to exploit commonly held beliefs regarding ‘where you’re from’, even when her homeland was other than China. The novel’s portrayal of Seto Chi therefore exposes and redefines the expectations and assumptions of a ‘pure’ or
‘authentic’ racial and cultural identity that emanate from both mainstream society as well as the racial group itself.

For the narrator, Kae, it was a disappointment that Chi “wasn’t even pure chinese (as if that were important), and she had learned her chineseness from [Kae’s] mother, which added tremendously to [Kae’s] confusion” (128). Although Chi looked unmistakably Chinese, the ‘Chineseness’ of her features stand as empty signifiers that challenge and resist notions of ‘authenticity’ because they are in fact void of any deep and meaningful representations of ethnicity. Further, Chi’s Chinese features are at the same time overlaid by another set of cultural signifiers, which create a melange of identities that, while constituting a diasporic subjectivity, thoroughly problematises the notion of a singular place of ‘origin’ and shows up the multiplicity of diasporic trajectories. As the novel describes,

she had a long, well-oiled single braid down her back, she smelled of curry, and she barely spoke english at all except with a thick tamil accent. (129)

On finding out that “Chi didn’t come from China any more than I did” (128), Kae decides that her pursuit of ‘authenticity’ is a futile one. Yet the case of Chi illustrates how, among overseas Chinese and especially within the diasporic community, perceptions of ‘authenticity’ still strongly dominate the individual’s sense of cultural identity. In addition, the readiness with which Chi is believed to be an ‘authentic’ Chinese also exposes the complicity by both the diaspora as well as the mainstream white community in sustaining the myths of ‘homeland’ and the belief in unadulterated cultural ‘origins’.
The final character in this analysis of racial and cultural ‘origin’ is Ting An, on whose body the notions of ‘purity’ are contested. As the son of Gwei Chang and Kelora, he faces not only discrimination from mainstream white society but also the prejudice of the Chinese community. Because of Ting An’s mixed parentage, especially by parents of non-white and ‘undesirable’ races, Gwei Chang keeps the secret of Ting An’s paternity to himself. This, however, does not prevent the bias from being cast on Ting An anyway, since “[p]eople used to say that he was half-indian — his mother a savage” (54). Further, Fong Mei’s point of view — “Who did he think he was? Just because he had worked for her father-in-law so long, he seemed to think that he was part of the family” (50) — also reflects the suspicion and hostility of the Chinese towards Native peoples. Although Chinese were social outcasts in white Canadian society, they still maintained strong beliefs about their cultural superiority, demonising white people as ‘devils’ and simply identifying other non-whites as ‘barbaric’.

However, Ting An’s native born status not only meant that he “spoke english like a native speaker”, but also that he “got along really well with the devils” (113) and knew “how to deal better with ghosts” (35). In referring to non-Chinese as ‘devils’ and ‘ghosts’, the novel symbolically gestures to Ting An’s position in the Chinese community as a non-entity. The implication for Ting An, in other words, is that although hardworking, honest and well-liked, and also acknowledged as an asset to Gwei Chang’s business as well as family matters, he is still not fully accepted by the
Chinese community. His role and presence in the novel are often as silent worker and observer, not unlike a ghost himself. This is also the novel’s way of gesturing to the silence and repression of generations of Canadian-born Chinese who were of mixed parentage, as well as the “exploitation and mistreatment of the Native peoples by the rest of Canada, including sometimes the Chinese Canadians” (Chao, 1997: 96-7).

When Ting An decides to marry a non-Chinese woman — a “ghost wife” (231), a “blonde demoness” (232) — his decision prompts Gwei Chang to offer to “find [him] a real wife from China” (233). Gwei Chang’s offer is a reminder again of the cultural sensitivities surrounding interracial relationships, regarded as taboo in conservative Chinese communities. This systematic exploitation of women, in the practices of commodification and exchange between men, now introduces a hierarchical ordering according to the women’s geographical origins in order to increase their ‘value’ as objects. In Ting An’s episode, the exploitation of women can be seen as an adjunct to the mistreatment of Native Canadians by the Chinese community. Through his affair with Fong Mei, Ting An becomes responsible for producing the next generation of Wongs in Gwei Chang’s family. In this way, the novel recovers the lost kinship between Native Canadians and Chinese, first symbolised in Gwei Chang and Kelora’s relationship and now cemented in Ting An and Fong Mei’s affair, while affirming the need for cross-cultural affiliations and alliances among non-white minority groups with shared experiences of discrimination and disenfranchisement.
The importance of SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe* lies not only in its groundbreaking establishment of Chinese Canadian history and its insertion into mainstream narratives of Canada’s founding history, but also in attracting critical attention from the mainstream. These factors have combined to create greater awareness of Chinese Canadian history and to also foster receptivity towards these narratives, as seen in the publication of Denise Chong’s *The Concubine’s Children* (1995)\(^{22}\) and Wayson Choy’s fictional *The Jade Peony* (1995)\(^{23}\) as well as his memoir *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood* (1999).\(^{24}\) Yuen-Fong Woon’s historical fiction *The Excluded Wife* (1998)\(^{25}\) provides an exclusively female perspective by telling the stories of Chinese women affected by restrictive migration policies, especially the Chinese Exclusion Act, and addresses specifically the difficulties faced by women in China separated from their husbands who were in the Gold Mountains.

While these ‘historical’ narratives are often set in Chinatown, later novels are demonstrating a marked shift, away from notions of Chineseness, ‘authenticity’ and cultural identity, in terms of their geo-physical setting as well as thematic explorations of identity.\(^{26}\) This is a reflection of the increasing integration and assimilation of the Chinese into Canadian lifestyles not only because of the redevelopments to Chinatown that have created the urban sprawl of its members, but also because of the impossibility of remaining impenetrable to the local environment and its influences. Following the war, the redevelopment of Chinatowns in the major Canadian cities meant a relocation and dispersal of the close-knit community to other
neighbourhoods. Chinatowns became displaced — from functioning as important sites of Chinese cultural activity to their present status as tourist precincts and commercialised cultural landmarks. In the depopulation of Chinatown, from the 1950s to 1960, the movements of Chinese and their families to other parts of the city would necessarily involve and engage them more deeply with the wider local community. Moreover, the formalisation of multiculturalism as official Canadian ideology in 1970 effected a major redefinition of the position of ethnic minorities, the result of which was encouragement for Chinese to preserve their cultural heritage as well as claim Canadian citizenship.

In Lee’s novel, Gwei Chang realises that “Chinatown had grown” (80) and that “the old ways in Chinatown were fast disappearing” (79) when a whole new set of Chinatown leaders had stepped in. They were statesmen, smooth liars in good english. The white press loved their boldness. They wrote good letters, said the correct phrases. Even the new chinese consul worked better with them. (227)

While the community was rejuvenated by its population growth and progress in relating to the wider community, this also necessitated a redefinition of its standing in Canadian society. The effect of a revised diasporic consciousness, especially of early or first-generation migrants, would certainly influence the negotiations of cultural and political citizenship and articulation of individual and collective identities. From being Chinese immigrants in Canada to becoming Chinese-Canadian citizens, the creation of a hyphenated identity now marked the reinvigoration of ‘Chineseness’ and ‘Canadian-ness’ that thoroughly destabilises presumptions and assumptions about national and cultural identity.
Given the literary output of and attention now paid to Chinese-Canadian texts, the publication of Terry Woo’s *Banana Boys* makes an important and incisive entry into Chinese Canadian literatures, as this chapter will now be exploring. The transformations to the Chinese community and to Chinatown have usually been documented as significant historical events in Chinese Canadian texts. The regard given to *Disappearing Moon Café*, as an ‘established’ literary text that is regularly taught in university course and discussed in academic articles, has paved the way for greater attention and acclaim for writing by Canadians of non-white ancestry, and in this aspect, Woo’s novel takes up the investigation of the Chinese Canadian community’s transformation, particularly focussing on the contemporary diasporic relations and connections that they have among themselves as well as with their local and wider environment.

*Banana Boys*²⁸

Set in Toronto, Canada, this novel uses the confessional style of first-person narration to give a personal insight into the lives of its five protagonists, the Banana Boys. The novel comprises four main sections — “hi there!”, “neurosis”, “hysteresis” and “catharsis” — with each of the main sections subdivided into the personal narratives of each of the Banana Boys. The novel, in turn, is framed by a prologue and epilogue respectively titled “thanatopsis” and “kenosis”. It is extremely significant that the narrative begins with the death of one of the Banana Boys, as denoted by the opening chapter titled “thanatopsis”, and is initially narrated by Shirley, sister of Rick, the
deceased character. The novel ends with an epilogue titled “kenosis”, which refers to the process of “an emptying out, a distancing such that renewal, rebirth can take place” (374). The death of one of the Banana Boys that begins the novel’s exploration into the construction and development of the “Banana” consciousness also serves the purpose of deconstructing and demystifying the dominant stereotypes and archetypes of Chineseness and Asian masculinity. In this way, the narrative can be seen as laying to rest certain cultural tropes governing Chinese cultural identity that have dominated the popular imaginary in order to progress towards renewal and rebirth of the “Banana” identity as represented in the growth of each of the novel’s characters.

After being reunited at Rick’s funeral, the Banana Boys take turns recounting their individual and personal histories, shifting back and forth in time so that the sense of a chronological and ordered narrative is obscured. The emphasis, instead, is on each character’s personality developments, by using the first-person narrative mode to engage the reader’s sympathies and to enable a strong and vicarious sense of identification. It is important to draw the reader into the unfolding of the narrative because much of the novel is spent reflecting upon the angst, and pondering the question, implications and manifestations of ‘being Banana’. As the novel describes, “[t]o Luke, Dave, Mike, and Sheldon, it’s a curious predicament brought on by upbringing — growing up yellow on the outside, white on the inside” (back cover description). That is, while their appearance or skin colour is ‘yellow’, they are ‘white’ beneath that surface. Rick’s sister, Shirley, describes them in greater detail:

the Banana Boys didn’t really seem Chinese. Well, at least they didn’t act like it, mostly. They were all CBCs, Canadian-born Chinese,
“Bananas” — yellow on the outside and white on the inside. *Juk-sing*. Translated literally, the term means “hollow bamboo” in Cantonese. Hardly a flattering label, it’s based on a metaphor that compares Canadian-born Chinese to a cross-section of a bamboo – hollow on one end, hollow on the other, empty through and through. In the eyes of “real” Canadians and “pure” Chinese, whatever that means, *juk-sing* have no consistent culture, no substance, no essence. They stand between two groups, not quite Canadian, and certainly not Chinese, marginal and maybe kind of messed up, belonging to and accepted by neither. (Woo, 2000: 11-12; hereinafter cited by page numbers)

Her opinion finds validation from Mike, who agrees that “most Bananas are messed up in one way or another, but the thing [that Dave] tends to ignore is that our parents, the first generation Chinese-Canadians, are probably just as messed up, only in a different way” (275). It becomes recognised and acknowledged that the condition of being “messed up” applies not only to the Banana Boys but also extends to perhaps nearly all Chinese-Canadians, in different degrees and to varying effects. As a general consequence, Mike feels that

> Our image is really, really poor out there. In fact, it couldn’t suck any worse. The archetype for the Asian male is weak, unmasculine, unappealing, morally corrupt, and generally ignored — geez, why else do you never [sic] Asian guys in movies or TV shows, despite there being a half a billion of us on this planet? And if you ever see them, they’re in these ridiculously brain-dead stereotypical Chinaman roles like martial artists, mathematicians or Yakuza gangsters. (213)

It is here that I want to contextualise the evolution of the ‘Banana’ stereotype, drawing upon the development and transformation of Chinese diasporic consciousness in Canada as explored earlier in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. The cultural baggage that attaches to this stereotype — often a source of much anguish to ‘Bananas’ — carries not only the weight of racial discrimination and exclusion but also a whole host of gender issues in the Chinese diaspora. This chapter’s analysis of the novel therefore seeks to highlight the complexities of negotiating national and
cultural identity for later-generation Chinese Canadians, addressing not only historical biases but also contemporary manifestations of racial prejudice from majority white society as well as within the Chinese community.

The ‘Chinaman’ stereotype that has dominated Western perception and imagination of ethnic Chinese now serves as a counterpoint for the ‘Banana’ stereotype in that the ‘Banana’ locates itself as diametrically opposed to the ‘Chinaman’. That is, although both are, on the surface, virtually indistinguishable from each other, the ‘Banana’ is denied any claim to cultural ‘purity’ or ‘authenticity’ and is generally held in disregard and disdain by China-born Chinese. Conversely, the ‘Banana’, too, resents being identified with their China-born counterparts; as Mike says,

You’re born here. You’re raised here. You raise a family, earn the respect of your friends and colleagues. You work hard, play fair, shoot straight, pay your taxes — you’re a normal, productive member of Canadian society. And yet with a lone word from a single prejudiced freak, you are immediately degraded, grouped in with a fictional bunch of slant-eyed, yellow-skinned heathen Chi-nee who kowtow, do laundry, and serve chow mein.

It hurts.
I hate it. (185)

Yet, in spite of their ideological differences, China-born and Canadian-born Chinese share the similar ‘predicament’ of having their cultural identity and consciousness determined by their physical being, while the actual and more inward-looking processes of self-identification and personal negotiation of cultural citizenship and consciousness are markedly diverse for each group. Although both the ‘Chinaman’ and the ‘Banana’ stereotypes are nonetheless based on racist images of the Chinese as a cultural ‘other’ in majority white Canadian society, the ‘Banana’ exists as doubly
‘othered’ — to both white and Chinese communities. This double negation of identity — “not quite Canadian, and certainly not Chinese” — consequently marginalises them even more, resulting in disruptive and detrimental effects to their sense of identity and belonging.

The term ‘banana’, already implying racial and cultural ‘inauthenticity’ and ‘impurity’, now denotes in addition the failure of the visibly different person to adhere to hegemonic constructions of race and ethnicity. Moreover, the connotation of ‘fake-ness’ implicit in the assumption of cultural ‘impurity’ points to an undesirable type of syncretism, often associated with interracial relationships and mixed-race offspring who are frequently the target of prejudice by more conservative or ‘authentic’ Chinese. This form of discrimination, itself a defensive and protective stance, can nonetheless be seen as a manifestation of resentment towards the better-educated and more resourceful or privileged sectors of the diasporic community. Still, the alienation of Canadian-born Chinese by their own racial community not only disrupts their sense of cultural identity and belonging but also impacts upon their political citizenship and affiliation. The twofold discrimination that Canadian-Chinese often experience — exclusion from white society because of their “yellow on the outside” appearance and discrimination from their own Chinese community because of their “white on the inside” assimilated upbringing and identifications — creates the fertile breeding ground for being “messed up in one way or another”. Seen, on both sides, as culturally lacking and inferior, or as the novel describes, “empty” and “hollow”, Dave surmises that this is why
there are just so many of us, these bruised Bananas, *juk sing* — miserable, frustrated, alone, branded dysfunctional geek-losers, by others or themselves. (372)

The self-criticism and self-loathing experienced by Canadian-born Chinese function as wide-reaching repercussions of white hostility and discrimination that continue to be internalised by minority groups and are manifest in the group’s highly circumspect self-policing and extreme watchfulness about displaying or asserting their cultural citizenship.

To complicate the situation, there is no ‘home’ or homeland to which ‘Bananas’ can return when racist taunts are directed at them, as Mike explains:

> You think, “It’s so unfair.” You think, “What’s the point of it all?” You think, “Screw you guys, I’m going home.” Except that you are home. (185)

The unsavoury aspects of being ‘Banana’ therefore lie in the fact of their ‘in-betweenness’; as Rick says, “Bananas are the intersection — messed up, hypersensitized, marginalized, somewhere in between — and we all know that most car crashes occur at intersections” (182). Located in-between two cultures, the Banana Boys are constantly challenging and negotiating racial stereotypes and myths, especially those pertaining to Chineseness, while having to shoulder the burden of cultural baggage that attaches to their diasporic condition. Although they acknowledge that “racist myth and misconception . . . impacts all of us as yellows in this country” (205), the reality of their circumstances means that the label “yellow” neither congeals nor sits well with their sense of identity as “juk-sing” which they readily identify with. The myriad forms of cultural encoding that have been a constant
and overriding factor in identifying the Banana Boys as Canadian have also eroded their sense of affiliation with Chineseness. To this extent, Dave says that

I’ve been out of the culture loop for so long that I can’t even *fake* a good Chinese accent. Even trying, it comes out sounding like Russian or Scottish or something. (37)

What this position reveals is an underlying sense of vulnerability and the precariousness of being undeniably ‘in-between’.

When Dave admits that, “I’m not ashamed of my race . . . I just don’t like the problems it invariably causes” (43), his statement is not only a response to the pressures of a racially discriminative society, but also echoes his father’s complicit pragmatism when the latter “anglicised [their] family name from the weirder-looking Lo to the more anglicised Lowe, on the recommendation of one of our white neighbours” (37). In Mike’s situation, when he returns to his family’s restaurant after a period of estrangement, he confesses to feeling “a little weird, being the only White Guy in the place” (318-9). The extent of these identifications with white culture testifies to the assimilation efforts of the Chinese with the dominant culture, and in the process obscuring and obliterating as many traces as possible of their racial and cultural citizenship. The pressure and feeling of wanting “to be just like everyone else” (37) is a shared condition for both China-born and Canadian-born Chinese, resulting in comprehensive attempts at integrating as seamlessly as possible into the national and cultural fabric of Canadian life. This integration is represented by each of the Banana Boys’ declaration that they “grew up like any other Canadian boy” (53), “in the Real Canadian Way, whatever that meant” (43), so that they have
“become more Canadian than the average Canadian” (43). For Dave, this entails a love of classic rock and roll, an appreciation of hockey, a tasteful collection of colourful expletives, and the complete and unwavering devotion to beer (43), all of which also reflect and extend his father’s efforts at assimilation:

My dad, in hopes of making me more of a Real Canadian, named me after the competitive and emotional Leafs captain of the late sixties and early seventies, Dave Keon. Dad watched a lot of hockey and drank a lot of Labatt’s products when he first moved here, as if becoming a drunk and obnoxious Leafs fan would make him a better Canadian. (37)

Dave’s father, in these ways, tries to assimilate the family into a Canadian lifestyle by giving his son a Western name and also by embracing the dominant sporting culture, accompanied with immersing (by drinking) himself into a new Canadian subjectivity, simply to improve their ‘Canadian-ness’. Yet, in spite of all their efforts at assimilation, Dave nonetheless finds himself to be a victim of the ‘R’-word, beat up on a regular basis, subjected to racial taunts, general abuse, evidently because the sons of the local Hatfields thought I had slanty-eyes (I did?) and yellow skin (it was?). (37)

Dave’s growing up experiences, containing more racially abusive episodes than those of the other Banana Boys, represents one end of the spectrum of discriminatory and othering behaviour meted out to non-white minorities in Canada. Those experiences are testimony to Bannerji’s observation that “citizenship does not provide automatic membership in the nation’s community. Living in a nation does not, by definition provide one with a prerogative to “imagine” it” (2000: 66), much less enjoy it (Mishra: 1999: 47). This type of citizenship therefore accounts to a large extent the chronic inability of the Banana Boys to envision a collective racial and cultural
consciousness, leading to feelings and perceptions of isolation and estrangement from
their cultural as well as political identity.

Consequently, although they share the almost-unifying experiences of an assimilated
upbringing and also readily identify as “juk-sing”, the ‘reality’, according to Rick, is
that “[there] is no political solidarity” (178) because

Asians are the visible minority that will never be a single, unified
group in this country. We have no common interest or experience,
unlike the Blacks or the Jews or the Quebecois, who’ll always get
what they want because they are smart and we remain stupidly
divisive. We have no marketable demographic, so we will continue to
be ignored. (179)

The divisiveness of internal group politics is here identified as the stumbling block to
more cohesive and effectual representation for racial minorities, especially the
Chinese overseas communities. While this is valid to a certain extent, the wider socio-
cultural environment and its influences are also responsible for keeping minority
groups on the peripheries of white Anglo society. As Dave’s experience reveals, “the
sons of the local Hatfields” represent but one aspect of the wider social forces and
environment intent on keeping Canada white. Moreover, in the Banana Boys’ ready
identification with the label “juk-sing” — even though Mike confesses, “I don’t even
know what juk sing really means, beyond the literal translation” (283) — we see the
confirmation of their identities and consciousness as ‘other’ to both Chinese and
Canadian cultures. This form of identification represents the entrenchment of a social
reality that alienates, marginalises, and even persecutes those who do not fall into
neatly circumscribed racial and cultural categories.
With the adoption of multiculturalism as official national policy, Chinese Canadian — as well as other minorities’ — culture has been constituted as an alternative and fully legitimate cultural site. This has entailed the creation of new cultural forms and identifications that challenge previously conceived notions about the limits of cultural, racial and ethnic identity (Lowe, 1999). The acceptance and gradual proliferation of new and abridged cultural forms, however, have led to and reinforced the perception that ‘original’ cultures were being compromised or abandoned in the face of a new cultural politics of pluralism. The ‘dilution’ or ‘loss’ of their ‘original’ cultures often sees old diasporas resisting assimilation, often by directing their resentment and disdain towards the later/younger generations. Thus, the overall effect of multiculturalism upon minority groups has been experienced as a major redefinition and re-interpretation of their cultural identity and, sometimes, a breakdown of their sense of cohesion and affiliations within their respective communities. Nevertheless, multiculturalism has created opportunities for minority ethnic groups to preserve and practice their cultural forms and traditions while being encouraged to foster intercultural affiliations and alliances.

More recent narratives of the diaspora have tended to also reflect differences in the social and cultural milieu that give rise to a wider range of identifications about Chinese and Canadian identities. Woo’s novel therefore represents a significant contribution to the growing body of works by Asian authors in the West, especially in its depiction of the complexities surrounding contemporary representations of Asian/Chinese masculinity and subjectivity. In addition, the novel makes a rather
pointed statement and reaction concerning the popularisation of the generic ‘mother-daughter’ — or, as Yi-Lin Yu describes, “matrilineal” (2002: 215) — narratives that have captured mainstream attention and acclaim. As Tseen Khoo has observed,

While literature by and about hyphenated Asian masculinities is now only garnering serious theoretical attention, Asian diasporic women’s writing has developed into a recognisable body of work. More specifically, it is Chinese women’s stories that have become the most associated with ‘Asian women’s literature’. Characterised by authors such as Jung Chang, Amy Tan, and Maxine Hong Kingston, the most visible works are those written by Asian-Americans and distributed, in the main, by multinational publishers. (2003: 149)

The development of Asian women’s writing in Canada and Australia is therefore “partially eclipsed by the overwhelming amount of Asian-American publication and criticism, particularly along a feminist axis” (Khoo, 2003: 149). In addition, there are often “easy and often inaccurate generic categorisations” and stereotypical assumptions that Asian women’s stories are “necessarily ‘confessional’ narratives in the form of autobiography” (Khoo, 2003: 149), especially those depicting the victimisation of women under conservative patriarchies in China.

Hence, in Woo’s novel, Dave’s tirade against the commercialisation and popularisation of those ‘stock’ narratives can be seen as a vehement response to the prevalent stereotyping of diasporic experiences:

Lately, I’ve seen a lot of crap being published – books by these yuppie-baby-boomer-types, or these Gen-X entrepreneurial types. And oh God, if I read another dust cover describing a book about three generations of Chinese women escaping the shackles of bondslavery, I swear the oatmeal’s gonna hit the wall. (372-3)
The popularisation of books about “generations of Chinese women escaping the shackles of bondslavery” also serves as an acute reminder of the commercial success associated with being a ‘native informant’. As Dave tells us,

The Dave Lowe story isn’t an imperial Oriental saga involving dragons and phoenixes and ancestors long dead – if you want that shit, rent *The Joy Luck Club.*’ (37)

His reaction, more than simply revulsion in response to the inundation of narratives about the lives of ‘exotic’ others, is also a critique of the posturing of these ‘others’ who have taken up the role of ‘native informant’ to capitalise on the West’s fascination with its Oriental counterparts. In other words, the new cultural forms augmented and endorsed by official multiculturalism have now become recognised and accepted depictions of minorities that further reinforce and perpetuate cultural myths and assumptions about ‘otherness’. Woo’s novel draws on these stereotypes, using the Banana Boys’ experiences and relationships with various forms of cultural representations to convey the plurality of their diasporic consciousnesses.

The creation and exploitation of new and alternative cultural forms have consequently led to the new diasporas being perceived and positioned as increasingly ambiguous. While each of the Banana Boys has strong reactions about being stereotyped, especially when most of their lives have been spent actively resisting “the “Chinesey” thing” (43), they are nonetheless strongly committed to the cause of social justice for their racial community. Although Dave’s systematic evaluation of racial incidents appears extremely cynical, his attitude represents one aspect of the defence mechanism that racial minorities have had to adopt in order to survive a hostile
environment. For instance, a significant episode in which Dave finds himself confronting a grocery store clerk over the harassment of an elderly Chinese lady is recounted as follows:

Racial Incident Log. Incident: #894
Date: November 7th
Notes: Fair comeback. Decent but unclever use of swear words. Kind of makes you seem insecure, by mentioning proficiency with the English language. Felt queasy and uncomfortable afterwards, but suppressed desire to inflect physical violence.
Grade: B-
Comments: Good job, soldier! For that you get a Coke. (134)

This methodical ‘cataloguing’ of racial abuse indicates a desensitisation to racially hostile behaviour that has become a necessary and integral part of diasporic consciousness. As the Banana Boys tell us, beginning from as early as grade school, they have “heard enough cries of “Chink!” and “Slope!” to last [them] several lifetimes” (135). At the same time, these ineradicable experiences of racism also trigger another deep-seated response and vigilant defensiveness about their racial minority status. Following the grocery store incident, Dave concludes that

*I’m the only one allowed to rag on* [FOB Chinese immigrants]. Others need not apply. The Chinese criticize their own kind more harshly than any other culture; it’s a built-in form of self-monitoring. But if a goddamn cake-boy does it, well, that’s just racism, plain and simple, and watch out: I’ll be the first to rise up in their defense. In spades. (135)

This passage demonstrates that, while the Banana Boys may be ostracised and alienated from their racial group, their common experience of racism nonetheless serves as a significant and symbolic unifying point for the heterogeneous and fractured community. In the absence of political solidarity, as attested to by Rick, the practice of “self-monitoring” can instead be seen as a means of internal self-
regulation that also empowers the minority group’s representation and integration in white society. The process of “self-monitoring” can also be likened to Sneja Gunew’s analysis of a secret feast, “held not for outsiders but to weld insiders” (1999b: 155).

Gunew writes about “the migrant or multicultural text written for the community itself, not in the host language, such as English, but in the mother tongue”, so that

> Even when written in English, these “parasites” serve to corrupt the language from within — and so we have terms such as “literatures in the new Englishes” and “urban dialects”, acknowledging a new hybridity. (1999b: 155)

In Woo’s novel, the translation of particular Chinese expressions into English performs an act of ‘double-coding’, ‘welding’ cultural insiders to the narrative. Moreover, the novel also draws upon the genre of the Chinese ghost story and includes the figure of the Chinese enchantress/femme fatale (in Rick’s hallucinations and in the preface to the narrative). These specific and particular cultural forms and stereotypes serve as reminders of Chinese mythical folklore or frequently used racial and cultural tropes. In this manner, *Banana Boys* addresses different sets of readers in much the same way as SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, offering different and multiple ways of reading and experiencing the text.

In addition to presenting the alienating aspects of racial minority citizenship, the novel also advances a gender perspective that critiques the dominance of Asian women’s writing. The emphasis on Chinese masculinity in Woo’s novel highlights not only the divisiveness of racial minority group politics in a white-dominant society but also addresses the underrepresented and silenced perspectives and experiences of the new diaspora coming to terms with discrimination from various places. To this
end, the novel can be seen as an exploration and reflection of the question: “Where does the search for identity go when you’re not sure you have one?” (282). Yet, rather than “belonging to and accepted by neither”, the novel presents Chinese Canadians as both Chinese and Canadian, while foregrounding the angst and dilemmas surrounding the issue of their often-discriminated sexuality. Thus, although the ‘Banana’ condition is frequently dismissed and marginalised, the novel draws upon the still-evolving narratives of this heterogeneous minority group to exploit the potential of their transitional consciousness while infusing and extending the representation and negotiation of their diasporic identities. Moreover, because the narratives of the Chinese diaspora in the West are often overshadowed by the proliferation of Asian women’s writing in America, “the thing that they call Asian America is a strange and irrelevant place to [them]” (282). As Dave says, “God knows a Banana hates stereotypes” (47), thus the negotiation of their identities is marked from the beginning with resistance to various dominant cultural forces and influences. As an exploration of cultural identity, the novel’s depiction of young Canadian Chinese men in contemporary western society necessarily considers the in-betweenness of their ‘double consciousness’ and ‘Banana’ identity, and ultimately offers the uniqueness of that ‘in-between’ position as a means to investigate and exploit the contingencies of cultural intersections.

A frequently worked theme in many diasporic novels concerns the issues of economic and labour exploitation that are duly acknowledged in Banana Boys, in which the narrative maintains its grasp upon the issue of ‘where you’re at’ but
without diminishing the importance of ‘where you’re from’. This ratification recognises that while the new diaspora’s experiences are derived and built upon those of their predecessors, the two are nonetheless markedly different and divergent. As Woo’s novel demonstrates, the narratives of the new diaspora tend to revolve around personal crises in cultural identity and subjectivity. Because the typical or ‘stock’ narratives of their racial group have limited significance for them, those erstwhile stories become inadequate for a new generation seeking constructive validation and affirmation of their ‘in-between’ hybrid disposition. Put differently, the focus of a novel such as Disappearing Moon Cafe may be the fulfilment of a ‘recuperative’ project to reclaim the historical narratives and voices of early Chinese diasporic experiences in Canada. The historical overtones of the movement of capital and labour are effectively rendered in the Gold Mountain and railway projects that introduce the protagonist into a foreign environment, and which also initiate the trajectories for future generations of Chinese Canadians to follow. Yet, in the light of current developments and gains in cultural representation in contemporary societies, it is also likely to render diasporic history and experience to be normative and anachronistic in contemporary diasporic culture as experienced by the new diaspora.

The narrative of Banana Boys serves an important and relevant function by presenting the complex and difficult processes of negotiating their ‘double consciousness’ and the coming to terms with the politics of ‘where you’re from’ intersecting with issues about ‘where you’re at’. In dealing with the physical and psychological effects of exclusion, the novel is, ultimately, concerned with the charting of future trajectories
for its diasporic characters that are constantly grappling with the uncertainties of hybrid diasporic consciousness, culture and identity.

The attention and acclaim by the Canadian mainstream towards *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, while representing significant and widespread acknowledgement of Chinese Canadian narratives, does not, however, rectify nor redress the contemporary issues and manifestations of racial inequity and discrimination in present day Canadian society. The persistence of historically entrenched attitudes and prejudices towards non-white Canadians has evolved alongside the development and adoption of an official multicultural policy, such that racial and cultural identities are reified and their representational status claimed as “direct emanations of social ontologies” (Bannerji, 2000: 6). Moreover, multiculturalism, as governing ideology and administrative apparatus, has failed to consider one of the most pressing realities and consequences of cultural pluralism: transcultural affiliations and interracial relationships. This is precisely the point at which Woo’s novel surfaces and responds to the pressures and politics of gender, culture and race. More specifically, the themes that recur in the novel invariably involve the characters’ critical interpellation between Chinese and Canadian cultures as well as ongoing crises about their masculinity and their relationships with women. This chapter’s analysis of the intersection of race and gender politics as presented in the novel, through the Banana Boys’ negotiations of cultural identity and racial consciousness, highlights the issues surrounding minority group participation and engagement with their local and wider communities.
The imagination and representation of diasporic communities and individuals, or more specifically, how they are imagined and represented are inevitably and profoundly affected by the politics of ‘where you’re from’ and ‘where you’re at’. This chapter therefore engages with the two novels that each represent discrete and significant historical moments to locate the development of the Chinese Canadian diasporic consciousness within a complex network of intersecting and overlapping historical and political narratives. In fleshing out the imaginary existence of the Chinese diasporic community it also argues for a more thorough grounding and understanding of historical and political racialisation processes, disruptions, alterations and reconstruction. In the following chapter I examine two Chinese Canadian films to extend the analysis and discussion of diasporic identity representation, negotiation and development.
Notes

1 I refer to Zygmunt Bauman’s (1997) delineation of the strategies of ‘anthropophagic’, or assimilationist, and ‘anthropoemic’, or exclusionary measures, as discussed in Chapter 1. As an example of exclusionary and punitive measures, the Canadian government in the summer of 1999 put in prison four ships carrying 599 Fujianese people seeking asylum. As of April 2001, after numerous deportations, there were still 11 of these people in Canadian prisons. In Australia, in August 2001, a Norwegian freighter, the MV Tampa, rescued 438 boat people from a stricken Indonesian fishing vessel but was refused by Prime Minister John Howard to allow the refugees to land on Christmas Island and instead taken to the pacific island of Nauru for ‘processing’.

2 In her article “Against Multiculturalism: Rhetorical Images”, Sneja Gunew (1993) draws upon the analogy of the ‘host/parasite-guest’ to discuss and deconstruct the power relations between host and migrant cultures, obligation and immigrant ‘gratitude’.

3 For instance, entrepreneurial Chinese migrants setting up restaurants in their overseas adoptive countries often hire their fellow compatriots at exploitative and below-minimum-wage levels.

4 According to Bernard Luk, “ethnic Chinese constitute one-fifth of the population of Vancouver”, in Wing Ching Ng (1999). The significance of Chinese presence has been such that, under the Canadian government policy of multiculturalism, the Chinese Cultural Centre (CCC) was created in 1973. More recent reflections on the practical extent of Canadian multiculturalism include public discussions such as, “The Asian Infusion of Vancouver” (26 June 2001), held as part of the 2001 Asian Heritage Month activities.

5 These also include practices that emerge in relation to the dominant representations that deny or subordinate minority cultures as “other”, especially those that exoticise and “orientalise” Asians (Lowe, 1999: 65).

6 The Canadian Immigration Act was largely modelled on the American example of Exclusion in 1882.

7 Japanese Canadians too were denied voting rights until 1949.

8 Segregation also meant that Chinese could not attend the cinema or any other places of normal recreation, except for church, where it was hoped they would be converted to Christianity (Chao, 1997: 13).


10 In British Columbia, only Asians who were Canadian citizens and who had fought in World War II were given voting rights. Chinese Canadians were allowed to vote in federal elections in 1947, while in British Columbia, Chinese Canadians were allowed to vote in provincial elections in 1949.

11 Source:
http://citd.scar.utoronto.ca/ggp/Ethnic_groups/Chinese/Chinese_overview.html

12 This illegal form of entry was widely practised and the people who entered this way were known as ‘paper sons’ or daughters, taking the place and documents of
eligible applicants who had died, or immigrant slots which sponsoring relatives were willing to sell for a good price. Wayson Choy’s autobiographical *Paper Shadows* (1999) presents a personal account of this situation.

The CPR contractor Andrew Onderdonk testified before the 1885 Royal Commission: “Ninety-nine per cent of the Chinese here are industrious and steady”; “any radical or sudden restriction will close down many industries and seriously injure the prosperity of British Columbia” (Chao, 1997: 7).

The Kuomintang was a politically conservative party that had its beginnings in the 1911 Nationalist revolution led by Sun Yat-Sen, marking the end of imperialist and militant rule. The communist revolution was a breach of the Kuomintang-Communist alliance formed in 1937 (in the face of Japanese invasion), which introduced the split between older and younger Chinese, with the latter forming the bulk of the Communist party’s ranks.

See Ien Ang (2001) for in-depth discussions and ruminations on this issue. It is possible that, in the division between the Chinese-speaking first-generation migrants and their Canadian-born counterparts, there tends to exist feelings of resentment towards the latter because of their language, education and socialisation.

Paul Yee notes that approximately 17,000 Chinese labourers were recruited from Hong Kong and southern China by Chinese contractors who worked for Andrew Onderdonk, the contractor for the British Columbia segment of the railway (1988: 17).

The address of the Disappearing Moon Cafe in the novel — 50 East Pender Street, Vancouver, British Columbia — also marks the exact location of the present day Chinese Cultural Centre.

At the height of racism in British Columbia, this was an actual historical event that greatly threatened the Chinese community. I have kept the use of lower case letters throughout in accordance with the novel’s references to racial identity.

The phrase “Not quite three, not quite four, nowhere”, is a literal translation from the Chinese expression (“not three, not four”) to mean, broadly speaking, a severe, even scandalous, lack of propriety. This novel draws upon several similar Chinese expressions that are immediately recognisable to the Chinese-speaking reader, thereby performing an act of double-coding within its (English-only) narrative.

Moreover, underlying this statement is the presumption that women from China are/can be ‘real’ wives, ascribing to the notion of racial and cultural ‘purity’, while women from elsewhere are less ‘real’.

Ting An and Fong Mei’s offspring, in this way, function in the novel as the ‘return of the repressed’.

This book was awarded the 1995 Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction, the 1994 City of Vancouver Book Prize and the Van City Book Prize; it was also shortlisted for a Governor General’s Award and the Hubert Evans Non-Fiction Prize.

This book won the 1996 City of Vancouver Book Award, and shared the prestigious Trillium Award for best book of 1995 with Margaret Atwood.

Shortlisted for the 1999 Governor General’s Award, the 1999 Drainie-Taylor Biography Prize and the 1999 Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Non-Fiction.

The naming of the novel’s protagonist as an ‘excluded wife’ is a reference to the Exclusion Act of 1923.
See for instance contemporary Chinese-Canadian authors such as Larissa Lai, Evelyn Lau, Lydia Kwa, Judy Fong Bates and Kevin Chong.

Montreal’s Chinatown was hemmed in by commercial and residential high-rises and left without any space for growth; Toronto’s Chinatown was literally truncated to make room for the City Hall; while in Vancouver, plans were afoot to level Strathcona, a residential area adjacent to the commercial part of Chinatown.

This first novel by Terry Woo was shortlisted for the 1999 Asian-Canadian Writer’s Workshop Award.

As Dave says, “Unlike many young Chinese boys, I don’t have a Chinese name, heavy with mysticism and expectations.” (37)

All the characters in the novel were born in Canada except Rick who was born in Hong Kong and whose family moved to Canada a year later.

Lowe’s discussion of the Asian American situation is highly relevant to and parallels the Canadian instance.

The defensiveness that Dave feels about cultural citizenship and minorities can also be seen as stemming from frustrations about his inability to speak Cantonese to the old woman in the grocery store, which inadvertently subjects her to the racial taunts of the store clerk.

CHAPTER 4
Performing Chineseness: Renegotiating Diasporic Chinese Identities
in 2 Chinese Canadian films

In this chapter I turn to film, another mode of cultural production, as a vehicle for the articulation of concerns by the Chinese diaspora in Canada. I shall be discussing two feature-length Chinese Canadian films, *Small Pleasures* (1993) and *Double Happiness* (1994) with regards to considerations of how diasporic consciousness, in its variant forms, is depicted. Within these films, I will also be identifying those disjunctures — namely, of racialisation, class and gender — within diaspora that render it not only heterogeneous but also unstable and constantly evolving.

The fact that these two films are the only feature-length productions presently available about the Chinese in Canada points to an overwhelming silence or absence of material in the arena of cultural documentation on this minority group that has now come to represent a sizeable and significant portion of Canadian society. The label ‘minority’ however, may soon be rendered an anachronism in certain provinces, such as Vancouver, where Chinese and other Asian presence are well represented and where they have achieved critical mass. Following this, it is highly likely that the face of Canadian, especially British Columbian, politics will change in 50 years time, in terms of political representation and power structures which will have to take into serious consideration the growing presence and contributions of the Chinese.
Ang puts it, “there are now so many Asians in the West that the West itself is slowly becoming, to all intents and purposes, ‘Asianized’” (2001: 8). While this perception may be true of political and economic representation of minorities and Chinese groups, it has not been similarly extended to discussions of achievements by ethnic Chinese in Canada, especially in the socio-cultural, artistic, literary and film arenas. This exclusion is made all the more glaring in the light of a growing Asian presence and infiltration, even ‘infusion’, given the visible positioning of Asians in Canadian society and their substantial contributions in the economic and business sectors.

The recent waves of Chinese migration to Canada since 1980, dominated by economic migrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the more affluent parts of industrialising and capitalist Southeast Asian countries, have further compounded common perceptions of the Chinese diasporic community as being highly qualified, usually business migrants of the educated, skilled and middle- to upper-classes. While this upwardly mobile sector of Chinese in Canada have been noted for their contributions to the economic growth of their province and the country, other less privileged Chinese migrants have not been recognised for their roles in the non-economic and less commercialised aspects of Canadian society. That is to say, although the economic activities and profiles of Chinese in Canada may have been noted, their social, cultural and artistic augmentations seem to trail behind their economic and commercial achievements, or usually remain unnoticed.
Still, in less mainstream circles of cultural and artistic exchange and circulation, there is an abundance of ethnic Chinese artists, along with members of other minority groups, who inhabit that space of cultural and artistic production already designated as different, ‘racialised’, and even radical — in other words, marginalised. It therefore comes as no surprise that, in the short and/or independent film categories, and more significantly in the field of video productions, there is a vast selection of smaller-scale productions by the Chinese Canadian community. Yet, only two productions in the feature-length category are to be found which tell of the Chinese diasporic experience.

Small Pleasures

It is the earlier of these two films, Small Pleasures (1993; written and directed by Keith Lock) with which I shall begin because it portrays the experiences of recent Chinese immigrants from mainland China in Canada. Shot primarily in Toronto’s Chinatown district, Dundas Street, this film was presented in the Perspective Canada series in the 1993 Toronto Festival of Festivals. However, as an independent film, its circulation in mainstream media was extremely restricted. Two brief synopses of the film give one-line accounts that follow; the first reads:

Two Chinese student immigrants take different routes to resolve their East-West conflicts in the cultural mosaic of Toronto. 
(http://www.canoe.ca/JamMoviesCanadianS/smallpleasures.html)

And, according to the second one:

A young, ambitious woman, determined to make the most of her new life in Toronto, is contrasted with her roommate, also a recent immigrant, but one who still clings to the traditions of the old world. 
(http://www.hollywood.com/movies/detail/movie/164736)
Although not particularly singled out for any cinematic, artistic or creative merits, Small Pleasures is an insightful film that informs the wider public about the diverse range of experiences and perspectives of the Chinese diasporic community in Canada. The film especially addresses that segment of the temporarily diasporic overseas student population that constitutes, at any one point in time, a sizeable portion of the Chinese diasporic community in Western countries. I also argue that this film demonstrates, notably, the types of diasporic consciousness articulated in Chapter 1, through the overt representation and characterisation of its main protagonists, Sally and her roommate Zhao, and also through the interactions they have with other mainland Chinese, Canadian-born Chinese and white Canadian counterparts.

As a cultural document, Small Pleasures presents itself as an exercise in exhibiting some varieties of the Chinese diaspora in the Chinatown community in Toronto. In showcasing these diasporic subcategories, this film emphasises the diversity and varying notions and manifestations of Chineseness, and the different ways in which Chineseness signifies for different persons. The film is set in the year 1989 and it is spring in Toronto. Sally and Zhao, as recent immigrants to Canada, meet during a grocery store altercation in Chinatown and become firm friends. They learn that they are both enrolled as students of English literature and English language. Sally has dropped her Chinese name Xiao-Lu in favour of a similar-sounding but more convenient and recognisable English name, in the process revealing her Anglophile eagerness to learn about and embrace ‘the West’, while Zhao in contrast appears to steadfastly hold on to her conservative upbringing and opinions. Zhao’s belief, that,
“if you’re Chinese you cannot change”, grounds her firmly in opposition to Sally who is convinced that, “if you marry with a Canadian it’s easier to find a way into Canadian society”. Sally’s aspirations — her desire to “practise speaking English with a real Westerner” [emphasis mine], her insistence that “we are here to learn about the West”, and her belief that “the past cannot reach us here”— reveal an assimilationist type of diasporic consciousness that privileges and desires ‘whiteness’. Zhao, on the other hand, emphatically articulates her beliefs in traditional, conservative values, based on her conviction about the immutability of being Chinese — that, “if you’re Chinese you cannot change”. As she cautions Sally, “You want to follow Westerners so much, it’s no good. If you think like a Westerner, you will forget who you really are” [emphasis mine].

The emphasis on one’s ‘real’ identity is, for Zhao, an issue of racial and cultural ‘authenticity’. This influences her perception of Sally who, in desiring integration and assimilation into Canadian society, is seen as eroding or compromising her cultural ‘authenticity’ in her eager embrace of western lifestyle and values. Assimilation, as Zhao perceives it, is viewed and expressed in terms of loss of one’s ‘real’ ethnic and cultural identity, and therefore regarded with much scepticism. Zhao’s diasporic consciousness, being firmly centred on homeland notions of identity and belonging, displays the anxiety that many migrants feel about dislocation and displacement. Her statement, “I don’t want to end up stuck between East and West, just living in some Chinatown”, is interesting because of the perception of Chinatown as an in-between space in which the diasporic subject is ‘stuck’ or ‘trapped’. This apprehension also
underscores the loss of mobility and agency that many migrants feel upon being relegated to the status of disempowered and marginalised minorities in a new country. Therefore, Zhao’s statement that “the past is always with us” draws upon the memory of homeland and cultural history as a familiar and comforting source of identification and empowerment in many migrants’ negotiation of cultural differences in their new environments.

Sally’s desire to “practise speaking English with a real Westerner”, on the other hand, exposes the constructed nature of racial categories and classifications in her tacit equation of the ‘west’ (or ‘westerners’) with ‘whiteness’. This assumption relies solely on the clear and firm demarcation of ‘white’ and ‘non-white’ and draws heavily upon Orientalist notions of ‘otherness’ while attributing meaning, privilege and power to ‘whiteness’. Her Anglophile tendencies are, moreover, compounded by the fact that she is a student of English literature at a western university. While cultural ‘authenticity’ may not resonate as strongly with Sally as it does with Zhao, she nonetheless adheres to a firm belief in cultural incommensurability in her dealings with whites and non-whites; the “real Westerner” with whom she seeks to converse is first and foremost a white person. In other words, Chinese Canadians such as her landlord/employer and his Canadian-born nephew do not count because, ironically, they are in the west but not of it. Therefore, in spite of their apparently different beliefs, Zhao and Sally similarly ascribe to essentialist notions of race and ethnicity, even in the latter’s embrace of Western culture.
The tacit expectations by host countries for migrants to incorporate themselves smoothly into the dominant national culture often run up against migrants having to cope and deal with their new status as racial minorities, while negotiating for themselves the space for cultural practice, representation and citizenship. In Sally’s case, her fascination with the west marks her as a ready and willing candidate for assimilation and incorporation into Canadian society, a place that she associates with personal freedom; being away from the homeland has given her the liberty to assert that “here we can do what we want”, because “the past cannot reach us here”. The personal and political freedom that Sally seeks is demonstrably manifest in the lifestyle and character of her landlord/employer, Mr Ying, an immigrant from Hong Kong and a capitalist entrepreneur who owns not only property but also two restaurants, with a third one on the way. Although embodying, even epitomising, the excesses of Hong Kong style capitalism as evidenced by his exploitation of workers at the restaurant, Mr Ying however remains a faithful observer and staunch advocate of Chinese ‘tradition’ and values. For him, the upholding of modes of Chineseness extends to, and is expressed by, his unrelenting efforts in seeking “a nice Chinese girl” for his Canadian-born Chinese nephew, Danny. Although Mr Ying speaks disparagingly of the latter — “He thinks he knows better than his father, he thinks Chinese traditions not worth anything. I believe he’s dating Canadian girls” — this does not deter him in his mission to set Danny up with a Chinese girl. The girl he has in mind for Danny is Sally, and in the course of a meeting set up by Mr Ying, Danny reveals to her that he already has a white girlfriend and that he identifies not with Chinatown — “I’m not a Chinatown boy. No way” — but with the white
neighbourhood in which he grew up. At the same time, Danny’s friend, Jack, a white Canadian, takes an interest in Sally and they begin a relationship, beginning with Jack’s offer, “I could teach you everything there is to know about living in the West”, a prospect too promising for Sally to overlook.

Meanwhile, Zhao enters into a relationship with the restaurant waiter Li who is in exile from China because of his support for the pro-democracy movement but who has a wife and daughter still in China. Li used to be a linguistics professor in China, but is now relegated to the working class status of waiting tables in Canada. His lament that “Here I can be nothing but a waiter” is in stark contrast to Sally’s assertion of personal freedom in her statement that “here we can do what we want”. For Li, personal survival and political freedom were attained at the expense of economic and social mobility, therefore, because of his political exile status, he is the least empowered and most dispossessed of the group, and who sees ‘here’ as a place of disenfranchisement rather than liberation.

Zhao and Li’s relationship ironically becomes an endorsement of Sally’s assertion that “here we can do what we want”. In contrast to Sally, Zhao’s choice of partner being someone of the same ethnic and cultural background appears to be firmly in line with her beliefs in notions of cultural essentialism and immutability, and thereby also preventing her from crossing racial and cultural boundaries the way that Sally has. However, as the pro-democracy movement gains momentum and leads to the Tiananmen massacre, Li’s wife informs him that she is coming with their daughter to
join him in Canada, thus spelling the end of Zhao’s relationship with him. This turn of events confirms Zhao’s belief that “the past is always with us” and is, moreover, fast catching up with her. Sally’s relationship with Jack is eventually discovered by Mr Ying who dismisses her and Zhao immediately. At the same time, Jack decides to pursue his dreams and he quits medical school to embark on an adventure to see the world. Sally, however, is determined to stay in Toronto, telling him that “I’m already on an adventure; this is my adventure”. Together with Zhao, she finds another place to stay and make the most of her life in Canada.

An analysis of this film will unearth a range of issues, the most cogent of which is the matter of how Chineseness is perceived by recent immigrants, first and later generation diasporas, as well as non-Chinese, all within the context of a predominantly white society. These perceptions, while demonstrating the varieties of Chinese diasporic types and consciousness, also show the ways in which social, cultural and economic divisions are contingent upon particular modes of racialisation and exclusion. In other words, diasporic experiences are markedly differentiated by various strategies of categorisation and exclusion because of racial, class and/or gender attributes. The different levels of economic and social mobility influence and contribute to distinct perceptions of Chineseness and the diasporic condition. For Sally and Zhao, as recent immigrants from mainland China who are temporarily in Canada — since Zhao has no plans to stay on, but intends to return to China upon completing her studies — the question of their ‘authentic’ Chineseness is hardly ever posed or seriously challenged. There is a constant sense and maintenance of strong
connections with the ‘homeland’, evoked through the film’s depiction of events in China that are always in the background (in the form of radio and television coverage). In this regard, their employer and landlord Mr Ying shows himself to also exhibit the same type of diasporic consciousness, namely, homeland idealism/idealisation, in his faithful observation of cultural practices, even though their socio-economic status and diasporic experiences are poles apart.

While the tenants occupy very different, even opposite, positions from their landlord, they are all nonetheless unified in collectively identifying with the homeland, China, in their active maintenance of cultural connections with the homeland by keeping up to date with its news and current events. The Chinese Students Association is a place that Sally and Zhao regularly visit, signifying their membership of a network created to facilitate links among ethnic Chinese overseas students worldwide. Mr Ying’s sense of Chineseness is evinced in a variety of ways, from his close monitoring of the Tiananmen pro-democracy movement, to his practice of ancestral worship in the restaurant, as well as his ongoing efforts to ensure that his nephew marries someone Chinese. Throughout the film, notions of racial ‘purity’ and ‘authenticity’ are frequently evoked as reminders of homeland idealism, while Mr Ying’s endeavours for his nephew serve to further highlight the cultural essentialism often underpinning diasporic consciousness as well as multicultural policy. In this way, the demarcation of diasporic communities as marginal is often aided and advanced by strong sentiments emanating from within those groups about keeping their cultures ‘intact’ and therefore segregated from the wider community. Zhao’s statement that “the past
is always with us” therefore symbolises not only a deep attachment to the homeland but also expresses the desire for racial and cultural homogeneity and authenticity.

In contrast, Danny, as a Canadian-born Chinese, experiences Chineseness not as a form of cultural attachment but, rather, as something to be disavowed and, where possible, denied. His indifference, even aversion, to his cultural heritage (“I’m not a Chinatown boy. No way”) when juxtaposed with the homeland consciousness of mainland Chinese people around him, such as Sally and Zhao, reveals a different aspect to territorial notions of culture and belonging. In a conversation with Sally, he admits:

I grew up in a small town, most of the kids were white. I wanted to be like everybody else. I wished I could change my appearance.

Danny’s words reiterate the basic desire for migrants and different-looking people to be accepted by the dominant culture of their country, and this is often hoped for by altering those visible aspects of their physical bodies that carry markers of racial and cultural difference. Sally’s response, “you look Chinese but you don’t think you are”, sums up the common perception of Chinese-born Canadians, who are often regarded as ‘bananas’, racially marked on the outside but “white on the inside, that is, culturally assimilated to a Western way of life and Western standards of thinking” (Ommundsen, 2004: 181). This mode of cultural assimilation often renders Canadian-born Chinese as ‘inauthentic’ to their China-born counterparts because of the inability of the former to speak Chinese. On this note, Danny concurs with Sally by replying that he had never been to the Chinese Students Association because he could not speak Chinese back to anyone should they happen to talk to him. While this
reinforces the perception of Canadian-born Chinese as culturally ‘lacking’, the perspective from white Canadian society is also largely similar because of the effect that Canadian-born Chinese have in undermining dominant modes of conceptualising ‘whiteness’. In other words, the familiar assumptions about whiteness are destabilised by the presence of a non-white body that identifies more with ‘whiteness’ than with its minority group status. Moreover, with the population of white-identifying Canadian-born Chinese increasing over time, the question and constitution of Canadian national identity will have to be revised and reconfigured to include more progressive mappings and imaginings of cultural identity and citizenship.

As a Chinese Canadian citizen, Danny’s primary identification with white Canadian culture gradually develops, as the film suggests, into a transitional type of consciousness that eventually acknowledges and incorporates the fact of his ethnicity. In other words, his diasporic consciousness expands to include some measure of affiliation with the homeland and its people, as evidenced by his increasingly regular visits to the Chinese Students Association. As the Tiananmen demonstrations gain momentum, culminating in the infamous massacre played out on an international stage via worldwide broadcasts, audiences the world over could not remain unaffected by the events, and even more so for ethnic Chinese in the diaspora. Rey Chow describes this as “the world watch[ing] in sensationalised anticipation” (1993: 97) while

The mass demonstrations that began with the mourning of a dead national leader, Hu Yaobang, acquired momentum not only from intellectual circles but also from workers and different Chinese social
groups elsewhere in the world, notably Hong Kong and Taiwan. (Chow, 1993: 95-6)

On the other side of the world, as Sally and Zhao listen intently to the radio announcer giving details of the brutalities, and as Mr Ying watches his television set closely, we see Danny too observing with great concentration the same events on a television set at the Chinese Students Association. This signifies the transformation of Danny’s attitude and consciousness towards ethnicity and culture, evolving from a firm identification with white Canadian culture to a growing awareness and acceptance of his Chineseness. For Danny, ‘China’ has become less of an empty signifier in the process of his acceptance of ethnicity and the formation and transformation of his cultural connection, identification and affiliation. The sense of community as evoked by the film’s representations of its very different characters listening to and watching the events of Tiananmen also create a sense of unification among different segments of the Chinese diaspora, as they cannot help but be similarly affected by what they see and hear. For a moment in their disparate lives, these characters constitute Benedict Anderson’s ‘imagined community’, unified in their reactions to the fortunes and upheavals in the homeland.

The film’s use of Danny’s character traces the shift or progress from denial to acceptance of Chineseness in order to reflect at a deeper level the cultural mindset and ethos of a Canadian society still evolving and coming to terms with the fact of ethnic diversity and cultural pluralities. The adoption of an official multiculturalism act in 1988 in Canada led to the granting and extension of institutional recognition to minority cultures already present, whose presence may even have preceded that of the
dominant white majority, as in the case of indigenous or First Nation peoples. The ‘cultural mosaic’ metaphor frequently evoked in Canada’s official multicultural discourse and rhetoric points to the creation and provision of spaces for the accommodation of various minority cultures within the socio-cultural fabric of Canadian society. This film, set in the year 1989, can be read as an exercise in tracing the shifts in dominant attitudes towards ethnic minorities, particularly following the country’s very recent adoption of multiculturalism in 1988. While Danny’s racial consciousness is transformed — in which can be mapped the ‘progress’ from superficial acceptance of ethnicity that does not really entail any profound or meaningful engagement, to the overcoming of underlying prejudices (he thinks his uncle is “too old fashioned”) and a deeper involvement with minority cultures — there is another episode that I want to highlight, which offers yet another perspective on diasporas in the context of multiculturalism.

Early on in the film, we are shown that it is a racist encounter in Toronto’s Chinatown with a Chinese grocery store cashier that brings Sally and Zhao together. As Sally worries about her problem of finding accommodation in a foreign and ‘capitalist’ country — “In Beijing the government gives everybody an apartment. Where do I find one here? How do I begin?” — we see already the interpolation of East against West, or socialist versus liberal democratic modes of governance, which set the tone and context for the film. Inside the store, Zhao’s attempts to obtain a refund from the cashier, for a batch of rotten eggs she had earlier bought, are met with outright disdain and explicit racism. What is remarkable about Zhao’s encounter is that the
store cashier is also an ethnic Chinese. However, the latter’s comments suggest that she is Canadian-born rather than China-born: “You two girls obviously got off the slow boat from China”. Moreover, because of her privileged position — having and asserting her control over the transaction — she is empowered to draw the distinction between East and West, distinguishing herself from the “two girls”, in addition to presuming some backwardness about the Chinese immigrants and their dealings.

While all three women are ethnic Chinese, it is clear from this episode that the store cashier not only identifies with the West but has also taken on the confidence, even arrogance, of its self-proclaimed superiority over non-white and non-western cultures. First of all, in referring to Sally and Zhao as “you two girls”, not only does the cashier position herself in diametrical opposition to them, she also asserts herself as more socially and culturally progressive, hierarchically above the level of ‘girls’. Secondly, she uses the expression, “slow boat from China”, which alludes to the ‘FOBs’, or people who are/appear ‘fresh off the boat’ and who display an awkward unfamiliarity with their environment. This unfamiliarity usually signifies an underlying cultural incommensurability, which further entrenches the mainlanders in positions of subordination not only in relation to the dominant (white) culture, but now also secondary to Canadian-born Chinese. These references to the mainland Chinese in a derogatory manner (“girls”; “slow boat”) are usually made by persons associated/affiliated with or belonging to the dominant social and cultural order. In aligning herself with the dominant culture, the cashier effectively reinforces and
perpetuates existing power relations and structures by naming Sally and Zhao as ‘other’ and foreign, and placing them firmly in the marginalised spaces of minorities.

One of the considerations often overlooked in discussions of diasporas is the issue of class differentiation and discrimination within the same ethnic group, creating divisions that contribute to resentment by the less empowered diaspora towards those in positions of privilege and with greater economic and social mobility. However, in the grocery store episode, the hostility is directed towards Sally and Zhao who are, in comparison, less empowered and also less upwardly mobile than the cashier herself. The cashier’s hostility can be read as symptomatic of a deeper anxiety about the impact of immigrant labour on the Canadian workforce, or about the increasing numbers and presence of Chinese people in the social and cultural landscape. These anxieties are eventually manifest in the defensive/protective stance taken against newly arrived Chinese, or FOBs, which reveals, in turn, near-absolute integration and assimilation by Chinese Canadians with white Canadian culture, thereby enabling them to racially discriminate against other ethnic Chinese and non-Canadians. The cashier’s assertion of her own superiority — in aligning herself with the dominant culture and drawing upon categorisations of birthright/citizenship and class privileges — is, however, actually an exercise of self-validation tinged with anxiety and defensiveness about race and class.

Although Zhao, Sally and the cashier all share the same racial and ethnic attributes, their diasporic consciousnesses and identifications are extremely different. The
various modes and manifestations of racism are now accompanied and even
superseded by other forms of discrimination, such that racial prejudice and hostility
can be turned against members of one’s own ethnic group. As a later generation of the
new Chinese diaspora, the cashier belongs to that category of the ‘Banana’ — ‘white
on the inside’, more empowered and assertive when compared to newly arrived
migrants like Sally and Zhao. Her hostility, directed towards the two Chinese
mainlanders, can thus be attributed to the resentment, even inferiority, often felt by
local-born Chinese about their cultural ‘inauthenticity’ in the presence of China-born
Chinese.

This method of discrimination — among members within the already marginalised
community itself — represents one of the effects of increasingly culturally plural
societies that have, in moving away from overt racism based solely on physical
attributes, adopted other and more subtle as well as wide-ranging means of
differentiation. Stephen Castles, in discussing the changing character of racism at the
international level, notes that

The dividing line between racism and nationalism has become less
clear. There are new types of discrimination and exclusion, as well as
new ideologies to justify them. (Vasta and Castles, 1996: 18)

This, I argue, is an effect of the multicultural accommodation of diverse minority
groups within the shared space of the nation-state. Because of the supposedly colour-
blind and anti-discriminatory policies that now govern the management and
integration of different races and ethnicities, the underlying forces and forms of racial
antagonism, thus re/suppressed, inevitably emerge as or are channelled into other modes of divisions.

Returning to the encounter with the Chinese cashier, her racially hostile comments represent a reactive and also defensive form of white anxiety about the growing presence of foreign people and alien cultures in a dominantly white country. That anxiety is exacerbated by the discourse of official multiculturalism which tries to provide and ensure the ready insertion and accommodation of different minority groups into the shared national space. One of the consequences of this way of accommodating culturally different ‘others’ into that shared space is the desire by minorities to gradually eradicate markers and traces of their physical and cultural difference. In Danny’s admission to Sally that he wished he were white, the desire for whiteness finds expression in the denial of his Chineseness. Carried further, that desire is now manifest in the Chinese cashier who, although not making any statements about her own Chineseness, engages in racially discriminating against (and even abusing) mainland Chinese people as ‘other’. The Chinese cashier, in this sense, is juxtaposed with Danny; as Chinese Canadians, their behaviours — denial and discrimination — represent more or less the same type of reaction when confronted with Chineseness, a form of ‘otherness’ that they are eager to disavow in their attempts to fit in with the dominant culture.

In the multicultural attempt to unite different minorities within a shared national space, the common assumption of the group’s internal cohesion and cultural solidarity
often runs counter to the reality of class and other divisions within the diasporic minority group. This film demonstrates, via its use of characters that identify with Chineseness in very distinct ways and to very different extents, the fragmentation and fissures that keep the group more or less permanently divided. In James Clifford’s observation that “theories and discourses that diaspor[i]s[e] or internationali[s]e “minorities” can deflect attention from long-standing, structured inequalities of class and race” (1997: 258), he highlights the importance of maintaining separate and distinct minority group politics as well as emphasising the significance of internal group divisions. It is those internal divisions — of racialisation, class and gender — that are most often overlooked in theorisations of diasporas.

The straightforward mode of narration adopted by Small Pleasures is mostly engaged in exploring the homeland idealising consciousness of various members of the Chinese diaspora\(^\text{14}\) in order to foreground the different meanings and modes of signifying Chineseness. To this effect, the film presents us with a variety of ways of affirming and practising cultural citizenship in a foreign country. Although the homeland idealising diaspora appear to be more culturally attached to their Chinese identity compared to their Canadian-born counterparts, the effect of political upheavals in the homeland is shown to have a profound impact upon both mainland and overseas Chinese. In addition, the pertinent questions of the diasporic subject’s sense of belonging and identity are also highlighted as being strongly influenced by their social environment as well as the dominant culture. Therefore, in a white multicultural society, although the basic desire of many migrants is to assimilate with
their dominant culture, there is also the felt need to assert their cultural citizenship, especially under the aegis of a multicultural policy that encourages the display of ethnic minority cultures. The ensuing conflict between wanting to assimilate while also remaining ‘authentic’ to one’s culture often constitute a major source of anxiety for different-looking migrants with little or no cultural affinity with their receiving country. These pressures, therefore, constitute the grounds upon which the debates surrounding multiculturalism are often based.

In Ien Ang’s declaration, that “diaspora is a concept of sameness-in-dispersal, not of togetherness-in-difference” (13), she pits the notion of an assumed boundedness and internal coherence of diasporas against the management and containment of cultural diversity within the multicultural space of the nation state. While Ang shows how this is problematic — because such a conception of the multicultural society “does not respond to the dynamism that occurs when different groups come to live and interact together” (14) — it also has to be noted that these groups are internally disjunctured and constantly evolving entities. Therefore, the dynamism of an encounter between two or more different and disjunctured groups is further problematised when the discursive strategies of multiculturalism are predicated on structuring these groups as static and mutually exclusive entities. The containment of cultural diversity and plurality thus inadvertently or intentionally produces further antagonisms by firstly reifying racial and cultural differences, inevitably creating a hotbed of controversies surrounding race, culture and ethnicity. These controversies emerge in the film *Double Happiness* which I shall now be discussing.
Double Happiness

To begin, a brief synopsis of the film is in order:

*Double Happiness* is writer/director Mina Shum’s debut feature, a knowing comedy about Jade Li (played by Sandra Oh), a twenty-two-year-old aspiring actress struggling to balance the traditional expectations of her Chinese family with the realities of living in the western world. Jade is an irreverent, cheeky Chinese-Canadian still living at home with her parents and younger sister. When her family decides she’s old enough to date, the matchmaking begins and Jade is set up with Andrew, a handsome Chinese lawyer. Afraid of being disowned by her father, Jade agrees to this arrangement, especially if it means that her family will leave her alone to pursue her passion for acting. But complications arise when she meets Mark, a white university student. As their relationship grows, Jade struggles to keep Mark at arm’s length, trying to walk a line between her two worlds. She must answer the question she’s been trying to avoid: you’ve got one life to live, what’s it gonna be? (http://www.flf.com/double/synopsis.htm)

The institutional and financial support behind this film — produced with assistance from *Multiculturalism Canada, Canada Council Media Arts Program*, and developed with assistance from *Canadian Film Centre* — has given it a higher profile in terms of mainstream circulation and audience reception. This film has also been internationally released on video networks because it was first made as a commercial feature-length movie in 1994. The cast of better-known actors, in comparison with the relatively unknown cast of *Small Pleasures*, has also lifted the profile of the film, by the body of work that its key actors have been known for, and also by the number of reviews generated. This film was nominated for seven Genie Awards — Canada’s version of the American Academy Awards, or Oscars — and won two: one for Best Actress (Sandra Oh) and one for Best Editing (Alison Grace). Like *Small Pleasures* did the year before, *Double Happiness* was also presented in the Perspective Canada
series at the 1994 Toronto International Film Festival. Although the two films differ in production and aesthetic styles and values, they nonetheless share similar attributes in being largely independent projects, and in their topical depiction of Chinese-Canadian life in white multicultural Canada.

A striking similarity that *Double Happiness* shares with *Small Pleasures* is that they are both predicated upon the diametrical opposition of two distinct cultures, in the tradition of ‘east-versus-west’, and both films use this cultural conflict as a point of departure. This is a dichotomy that is necessarily and frequently drawn upon to demonstrate the dynamism of cross-cultural interactions within a shared national and domestic/personal space. In the case of the Canadian-born Chinese, however, the cultural dichotomy has been somewhat bridged, or breached, so that positions within the rigid binary have given way to other forms of consciousness that are now rendered fluid and, more importantly, transitional. In other words, the Chinese-Canadian person’s cultural affinity is demonstrably more aligned with white Canadian culture than with a putatively ‘authentic’ Chinese culture, thereby undermining the ‘east-versus-west’ dichotomy. This is, inevitably, the consequence of an increasingly heterogeneous and culturally plural society where different cultural groups have evolved in ways contrary to the stereotype. Moreover, coming to terms with their status as a racial and cultural minority in the new country means, for the diaspora, engaging with identity politics in unfamiliar and unprecedented ways that contribute to the transformation of their diasporic consciousness. Variations of these forms of consciousness, as I have discussed in Chapter 1, usually entail the complex
interplay of an historic(ised) ‘where you’re from’ and the current immediacy of ‘where you’re at’, and are often exacerbated by anxieties about the future of the diaspora, that is, the path of ‘where you’re going’. The intricate interweaving of these concerns will also have significant bearing on relations between diasporic groups and their adopted countries.

In addition to this complex set of relations between diaspora and nation state, there are also forms of interaction with other groups, whether diasporic minorities or the dominant majority, which have to be considered. Where *Small Pleasures* is a close study of newly arrived Chinese immigrants to Canada, *Double Happiness* extends its scope to take in a greater extent of the Canadian milieu in its depiction of a Chinese-Canadian family and the ways in which they relate and interact with the local environment. The impact of inter/transcultural interactions is also shown in greater detail throughout the film’s depiction of the protagonist, Jade, and the development, or progression, of her transitional diasporic consciousness. First of all, her strictly traditional parents are already presented as racialised ‘others’ who are marginalised and alienated from the dominant white culture because each of their monologues is not only expressed in terms of homeland memory and nostalgia, but also delivered in Cantonese and marked with subtitles. The effect of the spoken foreign language presents an immediacy that, when contrasted with English as the main language medium of the film, constantly foregrounds the ‘foreignness’ of Jade’s parents and continually constructs them as ‘other’. The wistfulness of their nostalgia represents not only their homeland idealising consciousness but also connotes the poignancy of
their plight owing to their inability to adapt to life and living in the west. As a reviewer points out,

Shum speaks volumes simply by following up the father’s brief recollection of living in a house full of servants as a child in pre-revolutionary China with a later glimpse of him returning home in his security guard’s uniform. (Thomas, 1995)

The transition from an upper class lifestyle in the homeland to a working class status in the adopted country is often a source of discontent and resentment for many migrants who have made the diasporic relocation for supposedly better economic prospects and opportunities. For Jade’s father, the shift from a relatively privileged position in the homeland to a low paying job in Canada reveals moreover the extent to which the lack of language skills becomes a liability for certain migrants.

The inability of many first generation migrants to adapt to life in a western space — because of language, deeply ingrained cultural beliefs, for instance — means that the task and burden of assimilation fall on the shoulders of their offspring. After all, it was in search of better opportunities for the children that Jade’s parents migrated, first to Hong Kong and then to Canada, in her father’s words, to “seize the best opportunities”. This not only raises expectations but also adds tremendous pressure for the children of migrants, as sole beneficiaries of migration, to quickly assimilate and hence propel the family unit upwards, economically and socially speaking. It is therefore important that the familial structure is not disrupted, or worse, disintegrated, by the purportedly decadent influences of the liberal west. To this extent, we can sympathise with Jade’s parents’ anxieties behind their children’s assimilated lifestyle;
ensuring that they possess enough material and cultural capital to gain a foothold in
the white world, yet not so much that their traditional cultural beliefs and values
become expendable and/or irrelevant and eroded. In this way, the tension and conflict
sparked by the need or desire to assimilate with the dominant culture while remaining
‘true’ and ‘authentic’ to one’s culture is an anxiety often found in minority groups.
This mode of cultural interaction and engagement is primarily based on the
perception of cultures as static, essential and absolute entities, and where judgments
and/or criticisms are often made of one’s cultural ‘authenticity’ or ‘purity’, thereby
determining and sometimes undermining one’s position within the cultural group.
The overall impact of these multiple identifications and mixed messages upon many
migrant children is therefore considerably disconcerting and perplexing because of
the ambivalent yet contradictory needs or expectations to be proficient in both
cultures.

Yet, the relatively greater ease with which children of migrants assimilate with the
dominant culture of their receiving society often means the introduction of a cultural
divide, in addition to the erstwhile generational divide, between migrant parents and
their children. In the film, Jade and her sister’s incompetence in their parents’ dialect
mirrors the latter’s ineptitude in English. However, the fact that they are in an
English-speaking environment means that the parents’ lack (in English) is
experienced as loss — of language, skill, economic and social mobility — which
renders them all the more nostalgic for homeland, idealising the past with all its
comforting privileges that they had left behind. This willingness to locate and ‘trap’
themselves in the nostalgic past of homeland memories can only result in a greater withdrawal from their present environment and circumstances, as well as a refusal to integrate with the dominant culture of the host society. Children of migrants are therefore often compelled to excel academically because they have, in this way, been assigned the task of assimilation due to their parents’ inability and/or reluctance to assimilate. In turn, the latter continue and also prefer to remain in their ethnic enclaves of like-minded migrants speaking the same mother tongue. As Jade tells us in her monologue that begins the film, “I grew up wondering why we could never be the Brady Bunch”, her comments illuminate and resonate throughout the film the burden (and huge ambivalence) felt by many migrant children about the enormous weight of cultural as well as parental pressures.\(^\text{16}\)

Following Jade’s opening monologue, her family is introduced having dinner at home, in a convivial atmosphere of casual interaction and conversation. However, the dialogue is bilingual, with Jade and her teenage sister, Pearl, speaking only English and their parents only Cantonese. Shortly after, we return to Jade who resumed her direct address to the viewer, with the explanation that, “The Brady Bunch never needed subtitles”. While the use of English subtitles for her parents’ language clearly signals the ‘foreignness’ of their discourse, it is at the same time reinforcing the processes of ‘othering’ of visibly different bodies and audibly different languages. This othering is repeatedly emphasised whenever Pearl says, “It’s a fact,” and her father mistakes “fact” for another four-letter word and scolds Pearl to stop swearing (Kempley, 1995).
The fact that Pearl resists/refrains from protesting or defending herself is a clear indication that her father’s authority is not to be questioned, even when the misunderstanding is his fault. As he tells Jade in a later scene, “You must listen to me, I know this world better than you”, the collective weight of patriarchal authority and parental concern, coupled with worldly experience, is simply too great for anyone to question, much less attempt to challenge. Thus, the film sets up the rigid formality of a tense and austere atmosphere at home, which stresses the widening generational and cultural divide. These divides are further exacerbated by the family members’ different proficiencies in language, where the parents’ limited English contrasts with their children’s proficient English, but also reveals the latter’s limitations in Cantonese. The episode where Jade and Pearl are forced to rehearse greetings in the Cantonese dialect, on their way to the airport to receive an uncle from Hong Kong, highlights the importance that their parents attach to the upholding of cultural practices and representation. What matters for her parents is that Jade and her sister are able to at least perform Chineseness, in order to signify, albeit superficially, their primary cultural identification. This signification is all the more important because of their minority status in a predominantly white society, a condition in which their cultural identity and heritage may be felt to be at risk of being eroded or lost due to environmental pressures. 17
In using English subtitles for the dinner table scene and throughout the film, the foreignness of the parents’ culture and language is underscored while also being moderated. The film connects its viewers with and through the characters of Jade and her sister, who understand what their parents are saying — and this is where the film’s subtitles feature most prominently — but are unable to speak with them in the same language. While the language and discourse of Jade’s parents are often made understandable and transparent with the use of subtitles, they are also portrayed as not having fully grasped the language and cultural idioms of their English-speaking and more liberal-minded children. This situation reflects the relationship between minority groups and dominant white culture, where the expectation is imposed upon migrants who are encouraged to assimilate with the mainstream but yet are denied adequate expression of their ethnic and cultural citizenship. In other words, as Sneja Gunew has observed of the relationship between dominant and minority cultures, difference is more often “domesticated and arrayed for appropriation” (1999b: 151) so that “the incomprehensible foreign tongue is mediated and transformed” into something acceptable rather than be allowed to “corrupt the language [or culture] from within” (1999b: 155).

The experience of being diasporic, when expressed as nostalgia for and/or loss of culture and exacerbated by language problems or difficulties, thus encourages the homeland idealising consciousness of disempowered migrants. This explains the tenacious holding on to old-fashioned beliefs, traditions and practices by the old diaspora in the adoptive country, because of the need to assert even more vigorously
one’s cultural identity and difference when faced with real or perceived threats of erasure. For later generations of the diaspora, the assertion of racial identity is also an important aspect of their negotiation with the dominant culture. However, the process and motivations behind it are significantly different from that of their (old diaspora) predecessors, as I shall be demonstrating in my analyses of the following film sequences.

In the first audition that Jade attends,

the casting director is obviously trying to tell her something, and she finally gets the message: She speaks perfect English, but he wants her to talk in thickly accented pidgin English, like movie Chinese (the fact that she is Chinese and in a movie makes this a nice irony, even apart from her pointed response). (Ebert, 1995)

In delivering the “movie Chinese” that the director wants, Jade is confronted with the dilemma facing most Chinese-Canadians in the acting profession; that is, while aiming for more complex character roles, they are too often typecast in stereotypical Chinese roles that pander to the western imagination and dominant, popular expectations of ‘authentic’ Chineseness. In Jade’s private rehearsal of a Blanche DuBois monologue in a sugary Southern accent, she displays her talent for mimicking speech patterns (Baumgarten, 1995), and her portrayal of a stoic Joan of Arc indicates the more ambitious roles she would like to take on. However, in a world and profession where Chinese-Canadians are not well represented or understood (Ebert, 1995), it is the stereotype that ultimately prevails, thereby denying Jade the opportunities to expand her repertoire. The film also draws upon cultural stereotypes to make the point about representation of Chinese-Canadians in the media. While
preparing for a blind date arranged by her family, Jade has to forgo her usual style of
dressing for a staid and conventional appearance. Her lament that she looks like
Connie Chung, a well-known Chinese-American female journalist on television — in
fact, the first Asian-Pacific American anchor in national television — is highly
revealing about the perceptions surrounding Chinese women in the west. The film’s
reference to a household name in North American television news reporting subtly
underscores the construction of a particular type of Chinese American feminine ideal,
as embodied by Connie Chung who then becomes symbolic of Asian femininity. The
implication for Jade is that, as a Chinese-Canadian woman, she is expected to
conform to the mainstream representation and definition of Chineseness and
femininity as epitomised in the figure of Connie Chung, who is taken as the model of
Chinese-Canadian femininity.

However, Jade’s performance of Chineseness during the first audition that we see her
attend unveils at a deeper level the problematic negotiation of cultural difference and
identity in a multicultural setting. The expectation is that Jade will deliver a
performance of the stereotype that is more consistent with her interviewers’
understanding of Chineseness, rather than a cultural persona that indicates and is
more attuned with the complexity of her hyphenated identity as Chinese-Canadian.
This episode demonstrates how, in accommodating different and/or minority cultures
into a multicultural society, the internal differences and disjunctures within are often
overlooked, assuming instead an homogeneous cultural identity and discrete cultural
boundaries with which to conduct ethnic and racial negotiations. The reality — that
diasporic identities are constantly evolving and fluid, with “mixed and multiple loyalties and affiliations” (Goh, 2004: 5) — is often overlooked in favour of a more static model, thus reifying established conceptions and perceptions of others as “socially pre-scripted in a certain category, namely, as a representation of “people of colour” and of “ethnicity”” (Chow, 1998: 100).

At the same time, Jade’s delivery of what is expected of her speaks volumes about how culturally different groups have negotiated their marginalised status as minorities within the shared multicultural space of a white society. Although differentiated from mainstream Canadian society along racial/ethnic lines, Jade identifies differently from her parents, and is undeniably conditioned by the dominant culture in which she grew up. Therefore, even though Jade’s grasp and experience of Chineseness are profoundly shaped by familial and ethnic community relations, her cultural awareness is also nonetheless tempered by the hegemonic and discursive constructions of ethnic minorities in Canada. Her interviewer’s request, to “try something different this time, something with a bit of swing ... try it with an accent”, prompts Jade to spontaneously ad-lib a Parisian accent. However, this is received with blank stares, and Jade quickly realises that the ‘correct’ accent is one that adheres to Orientalist notions of otherness and Chineseness, in accordance with how she looks. Her belated performance of Chineseness demonstrates an initial reluctance to claim difference from the mainstream or dominant national culture (Ang, 2001: 11); in other words, resisting the pressure to perform her ‘designated’ and ‘othered’ ethnicity. At the same time, we are alerted to the pressures and expectations from the dominant culture about
prescribed ‘otherness’. Nonetheless, being a ‘banana’ positioned at the crossroads of two cultures and being able to access and exploit the cultural capital of both ‘Chineseness’ and ‘whiteness’, Jade is thus enabled to perform what her interviewers assume and imagine to be ‘authentic’ Chineseness.

The dominant cultural preference for prescribed roles of otherness is symptomatic of an underlying inability and/or reluctance to confront the changing natures and complex realities of its minority groups, opting instead for hypostasised notions of ‘otherness’ as being locked within reified modes of representation. These cultural prototypes then constitute the basis of strategies directed towards managing and containing cultural pluralities and differences in a multicultural society. In this way, migratory flows are too often seen as divisive polarities set up between original and host countries, or between host and diasporic cultures, engaged in “various oppositional terms such as “home” and “alien place,” “self” and “other,” “crisis spot” and “asylum,” “poor” and “rich,” and so on” (Goh, 2004: 3). Therefore, it does not matter that Jade can extend her artistic expressions beyond representations of her ethnicity, because the casting calls that she attends were already and expressly designed for a specific type of otherness. As the film progresses, we see Jade being turned down for a news anchor job because the station was looking for a Filipino, and later on in her first television appearance, her walk-on part is rendered non-existent. These mainstream media representations of cultural plurality and difference are shown to be leaning heavily towards the superficial exhibiting of an assortment of various minority groups that purportedly contribute to a multicultural setting, while
the more important issues and processes of cultural negotiation and translation remain obscured and unaddressed.

The representation and perpetuation of racial and cultural stereotypes has, over time, also allowed for the exploitation of these normativised cultural forms and tropes. That is, hegemonic constructions and authorisations of ethnicity are sometimes manipulated by minority groups themselves so that expectations of what constitutes ‘otherness’ are constantly undermined and challenged. This is most clearly illustrated in Jade’s chosen profession where, as an actress, the demands of her acting skills frequently necessitate the putting forward and staging of many different personas and ‘selves’. Nevertheless, this film also points out how one’s ethnicity almost always surpasses other concerns, as evident in the casting calls and auditions that Jade attends. In the end, the absolute fact and sheer visibility of her ‘otherness’ almost always supersedes the range of her artistic expression. Besides, seeing as the situation is one in which “Chinese-Canadian actresses are not much understood in show business, either” (Ebert, 1995), the most feasible and readily available option left open to Jade is, invariably, the exploitation of the stereotype of Chineseness. As a result of these pressures and presumptions of the acting industry and profession, Jade consequently begins to claim her cultural difference from the mainstream and turn it into symbolic capital, evidenced in her performance of “movie Chinese”. Like so many others in the diaspora, as Ien Ang observes, this has become, or is fast becoming, “a powerful and attractive strategy among those who have never quite belonged, or have been made to feel that they do not quite belong in the West” (2001:
strategically or simply meeting the demands and challenges of an acting career, tailoring her staged characters to fit in with the popular imaginary, Jade’s performance of Chineseness is a “more or less deliberate, rhetorical construction of a self for public, not private purposes” (Ang, 2001: 24). The result is often that the “displayed self is a strategically fabricated performance, one which stages a useful identity which can be put to work” (Ang, 2001: 24).

The strategic staging of a ‘useful identity’ points to the complicit perpetuation of existing stereotypes by the ethnic person/group to conform to mainstream expectations and assumptions. This is the manifestation of a particularly evolved mode of diasporic consciousness that draws upon current discourses of multiculturalism and claims or emphasises the fact of one’s ethnic and cultural difference as a means of gaining recognition and acceptance by the dominant culture. In this superficial manifestation of multiculturalism, the exploitation of minorities and cultural difference becomes a mutually consensual process. Upon recognising the mainstream modes of ‘reading’ otherness and Chineseness, the diaspora returns in kind what its host society wants by self-consciously enacting and presenting themselves as a customised type of ‘otherness’ that is easily accessible and understandable. In consciously (and self-consciously) playing this multicultural game, the diaspora therefore leaves the status quo unchanged and unchallenged, while also preserving the comforting familiarity of their stereotype. This showy form of multiculturalism reveals itself to be more about ‘having’ and exhibiting its cultural
plurality than about ‘being’ effectively multicultural, which, in turn, exposes the underlying white supremacist fantasies of multicultural society. In playing the ‘game’ and adhering to the ‘rules’ of multiculturalism, diasporas show themselves to be complicit in reinforcing the dominant modes of social organisation and power relations between host and migrant communities.

The paradoxical situation of multicultural societies, in foregrounding cultural difference while attempting to neutralise and/or obviate them through strategies of containment — as in the rhetoric of ‘melting pot’ or ‘mosaic’ metaphors used in North American countries — nonetheless, is symptomatic of the dominant culture’s anxiety about its control over culturally different ‘others’ within its borders. Although the adoption of official multicultural policy entails the provision of accommodation and other measures for diasporic minorities in these countries, it does not clearly approach issues about the scope and extent to which minority cultural citizenship may be practised and asserted. This contributes to a large extent the ambivalence surrounding multicultural policy especially with regards to diasporic migrants who are encouraged to assimilate, but who are also faced with the pressures of conforming to dominant notions of ‘otherness’, in other words, assimilating in ways that adhere to prescribed and preconceived definitions of their ethnic and cultural identities. This is further compounded by the already difficult conditions and experiences of being diasporic, thereby placing the diaspora in extremely ambivalent circumstances in its relations with the host country. In a climate of tolerance and colour-blindness, fuelled by anti-racism and anti-discrimination measures, diasporas may find empowerment
from ‘equal recognition’ rhetoric, while having to confront their new status as a minority. Yet, earlier forms of discrimination that had been suppressed under a climate of political correctness often re-emerge in new forms so that the diaspora is kept from fully integrating into its receiving society. These conflicting messages and their implications therefore impact upon the practice, representation and negotiation of cultural citizenship and by minority groups. The challenges and ambivalences surrounding diasporic positions and experiences are thus major factors in the following discussion of the next scene in the film that I shall be focussing on, which is Jade’s first meeting with Mark.

When Jade is out with her friends one night and waiting in line to get into a trendy night-club, a young white Caucasian male, Mark, tries to strike up a conversation with her. Jade feigns incomprehension and smiles demurely, with her head bowed down, eyes averted, and her hand over her mouth, in her efforts to avoid communicating with him. However, when they are both refused entry into the night-club, she reverts to her usual (‘true’) self and, without batting an eyelid, picks up the conversational thread from where Mark had given up and left off. This then marks the beginning of their relationship, which is kept secret from Jade’s parents. What I want to examine from this episode is Jade’s first reaction to Mark, in which she exploits the racial and gender stereotype to perform a markedly specific ‘other’, namely one that signifies an archetypal Asian femininity that caters to the expectations and imagination of white western society. Although her strategic staging of cultural difference draws upon and manipulates racial and gender stereotypes at once, it
nonetheless demonstrates and emphasises the ubiquitous appeal of the image of Asian women as submissive and acquiescent.

In assuming the guise and borrowing the silence of a *non-English* speaking Chinese female as her ‘other’ self, Jade’s attempt at passing herself off as a silent/silenced ‘other’ can be described as what Rey Chow calls “self-dramatisation”, by taking the route of “self-subalternisation” (1993: 13). Subalternity is performed when Jade exploits the position of a disempowered other that is under the gaze of the dominant. Although her encounter with Mark is different from the circumstances of her first audition, in which the role of ‘native informant’ appeared to be expected of her, she is still manipulating hegemonic constructions of ‘otherness’ and ‘duping’ them into seeing what they want to see, namely, the stereotyped silent object and marginalised other. Jade’s performance exemplifies a particular mode of diasporic consciousness that locates ethnic minorities in multicultural societies as token representations of cultural difference, or “culture bearers” (G. Brennan, 1993: 171), in order to support claims of cultural pluralism. However, the extent to which Jade is empowered, in a climate of cultural pluralism and tolerance of cultural difference, is limited also by her performance of ‘otherness’. It is precisely her awareness about the discourses of ‘otherness’ that leads to her staging of a particular type of ‘other’, especially one that she knows is built upon and reinforces the stereotype of Asian women but that will nonetheless help her avoid communicating with Mark. Although seemingly frivolous, her perpetuation of the cultural stereotype is an exploitative move that targets
dominant readings of otherness for personal motivations, which, in a way, is not unlike the auditions that she attends where ethnicity was the issue.

The final scene that I will be focussing on highlights the issue of ethnicity again, this time in the context of diaspora-homeland relations and perceptions, which re-ignites the contentious debate surrounding ‘authentic’ cultural citizenship. In the final audition that Jade attends, she is faced with a Cantonese-speaking Chinese interviewer from Hong Kong who confronts her about the ‘truth’ or ‘purity’ of her ‘Chineseness’. Jade’s interviewer is already in a foul mood when they first meet, and when Jade is introduced as “one of the most talented Chinese actresses in town”, her interviewer’s prompt and cold reply in Cantonese is that there “can’t be too many of them”. Jade answers quickly in Cantonese that, “She says there’s two of us”, and her response is met with a surprised, “You speak Cantonese”, to which she replies “Some”. Throughout this exchange between the two of them, the language used is Cantonese, with subtitles again reminding us of the foreignness of the language, culture, and persons involved. Following Jade’s reply (that she speaks Cantonese), the interview gets underway. However, a problem arises as soon as Jade is presented with a script written in Chinese, as she is unable to read. This revelation gets her interviewer all fired up again, as she launches into vitriol:

“You can’t read Chinese? But you were born in Hong Kong! Are you really Chinese?” [emphasis mine]

With these caustic and critical comments, the nexus of relations and perceptions between diaspora and homeland is emphatically foregrounded as the locus of heavily contested sites of identity formation.
The diaspora, as a location for signification of cultural difference and otherness from its host culture, often maintains a vicarious relationship with its homeland that is sustained by ties, real or imagined, to its point of ‘origin’ (Ang, 2001: 25). Separated by geo-physical distance, diasporas therefore inhabit that peripheral space away from their cultural ‘centre’ as signified by the homeland. This centre-periphery relation characteristically parallels the relationship between most diasporic communities and their host country, especially where their new status is that of a minority. However, in the symbolic confrontation between diaspora and homeland, as represented by Jade and her interviewer respectively, the basis of discrimination appears to have shifted from the issue of race to the question and extent of ‘authenticity’. As the diasporic ‘other’ in relation to the homeland, Jade’s visible Chineseness corresponds with the image of a citizen of the cultural ‘centre’ although the reality of her actual, lived diasporic experience is more, even completely, aligned with western lifestyle and ideologies. In other words, Jade’s diasporic subjectivity is one that now succumbs to over-determination and over-signification in ways that do not reflect or correspond with the reality of her diasporic experience. The position of ‘otherness’ that Jade occupies in relation to the homeland is thus further problematised by the extent of her identification with the west — not simply removed in physical distance from the homeland but also in being alienated from her ‘authentic’ cultural identity.

The split that characterises Jade’s consciousness and behaviour towards the two cultures in her personal life constitutes a source of great angst, conflict and inner
turmoil that begins to manifest itself firstly in her relationship with Mark, a fact that she has to keep secret from her parents. In her public and professional life, however, as seen in this interview, she has no choice but to admit to her illiteracy in Chinese and be confronted with her interviewer’s wrath. In the collision of the two distinct and opposed cultures that govern her life, Jade is compelled to identify herself with only one cultural identity. This is largely due to the dynamics of the situation wherein cultures are established as distinct and mutually exclusive entities, thereby disallowing and precluding the notion of multiple trans-cultural affiliations such as mixed-race relationships and, in this scenario, the ‘banana’ identity. The two situations — her relationship with Mark and her audition with the Hong Kong interviewer — that bring Jade into confrontation with authority figures in her life draw attention to the complex negotiation of identity. Earlier in the film, we see how, in Jade’s relationship with her parents, the constant need for obeisance towards her elders meant that Jade’s ‘true’ self was always suppressed and held in check. Towards the end, in the film’s final interview, the expectation or demand for Jade to perform ‘real’ Chineseness and her inability to read and speak the language had, in effect, denied her any access to an ‘authentic’ cultural identity. The overall result is thus a near-total alienation of the diasporic subject from her cultural citizenship, a situation in which many ‘bananas’ find themselves.

With the meaning of Chineseness being subject to multiple shifts and displacements, influencing and informing a multitude of perceptions within and without the diaspora, this film traces those displacements by highlighting the futility of attempting to define
and normativise notions of diasporic cultural identity and citizenship. As seen in Jade’s first interview, the performance of an ‘authentic’ ethnicity sought after by her western interviewers was of one that would signify or evoke memories of an imagined culture and homeland, and that would represent exotic ‘otherness’. The ‘native informant’ role that was expected and/or desired of Jade in effect perpetuates the categorising and pigeonholing of minority groups and individuals as readily identifiable and ‘accessible’ cultural ‘others’. Diasporic subjects who function as such agents and conduits that facilitate access to ‘otherness’ are consequently and, by the same token, rarely seen as the repository of artistic excellence, or as generating radical concepts or ideas to feed into the wider cultural debates (Gunew, 1991: 4-6).

Indeed, with the ambivalent personal and political negotiation of diasporic identity and cultural citizenship — and moreover in a climate where the perception of minority artists and their work depends on contemporary sociocultural valuing of diversity and the range of acceptable ‘multicultural’ materials (Khoo, 2003: 93) — racial minority group participation in political and cultural debates and development is and remains limited at best.

In the relationship between homeland and diaspora, symbolised in Jade’s meeting with her Hong Kong interviewer, the discriminations and prejudices that influence perceptions of diasporic minority groups appear to be applied with equal force both in their host countries as well as in the homeland. In addition, the ability of diasporic minorities to ‘frame’ and represent themselves as culturally different and ‘authentic’, as in a multicultural setting, loses its significance when confronted with the homeland
and its more ‘authentic’ subjects. In other words, Jade’s interviewer now represents
the yardstick of ‘authenticity’ by which Jade’s performance is measured. At the
audition, Jade’s ability to speak Cantonese manages to get her far enough to converse
with her interviewer, but fails to achieve anything else, and even exposes her
Chineseness to be ‘fraudulent’. Put differently, the ability to speak Cantonese enables
Jade to ‘pass’ as a Chinese person, however her inability to read the script then
provokes the insinuation from her interviewer that she might not ‘really’ be Chinese.
Although diasporas are mired in complex relationships with their homelands and host
countries, each with their different notions of and provisions for the practise and
assertion of cultural citizenship, these contrary expectations and prejudices are
nonetheless predicated on the same idea of an ‘original’, ‘authentic’ culture.
Moreover, when it is via performance and speech/language that one’s cultural
‘authenticity’ is measured, the demands and pressures of ‘performing’ Chineseness or
cultural identity become more explicit — which explains the motivations and
investments behind Jade’s parents’ urging for their children to demonstrate some
knowledge of Cantonese when greeting their uncle at the airport. The complexities of
relating to the homeland and host country at once intensifies the marginality and
alienation of the diaspora’s position and also demonstrates how its ‘otherness’ is
dependent on hegemonic constructions of Chineseness by the dominant culture of
both homeland and host country.

The trope of displacement that characterises current theorisation and fictions about
diasporas is often more concerned with the estrangement of diasporas from their host
countries than with the tenacious relationship with their homeland. Yet, a study of the increasing marginalisation of diasporas reveals the operation of a twofold distancing that alienates diasporas from the places ‘where you’re from’ as well as ‘where you’re at’. Moreover, the shifting and complex internal group dynamics of diasporic communities also points to a growing awareness of the need to interrogate, redefine and renegotiate diasporic identity formation along with its multiple affiliations and transformations. The politics of diasporic literary and artistic production is, in this way, often tempered with the creation of alternative sites and practices of cultural citizenship in new environments as well as its internal disjunctures and differentiations. For diasporic subjects in Jade’s position, the pressure of having to maintain familial unity and cohesion often means performing what is considered to be culturally appropriate behaviour that is directly at odds with the reality of her assimilated diasporic subjectivity.23

The tension created by living between two worlds and two opposing cultures typifies much of the experience of later generation diasporas, and Jade is not alone in this. As the film shows, the first blind date with whom her family had set her up is a handsome, young Chinese lawyer who is also caught in the same situation of having to fulfil parental desires of being matched with a ‘good’ Chinese partner. Although a promising candidate for marriage, her date Andrew turns out to be gay, and has only agreed to the date because of the same family pressures that Jade faces. This is, arguably, the film’s strongest comment about the existential angst and dilemmas collectively faced by later generation diasporas who are ‘trapped’ between two
opposing cultures. The point, however, remains that the conflicting pressures facing diasporas — from having to shuttle between two distinct cultures — are not that contradictory but, rather, are symptomatic of wider and more general socio-cultural anxieties about the destabilisation of racial and ethnic boundaries and the reconfigurations of power relations.

The different forms of diasporic consciousness that surface among members of the same diasporic community, as illustrated by the two films discussed in this chapter, testify to and reflect the range of internal disjunctures that divide and differentiate diasporic experience. However, in spite of its internally heterogeneous and still-evolving condition, cultural documentation about diasporas nonetheless frequently emphasise the incommensurable differences that render diasporic entities as merely cultural exhibits or commodities that signify and stereotype ‘otherness’, thereby replicating essentialist modes of cultural representation. Meanwhile, the increasing levels of assimilation by diasporas into their host societies vis-a-vis multiculturalism has seen the gradual disintegration of cultural stereotypes as growing numbers of assimilated ‘others’ challenge and redefine essentialist notions of race and culture. To a large extent, then, the adoption of multiculturalism as official policy has thus been instrumental in the re-creation and validation of diasporic cultures and identities, even if it is, for now, only empowering minorities to understand and play the multicultural ‘game’. The varying modes and extent of assimilation for diasporic communities and individuals, as represented in film and literature, signify the increasingly diverse and complex developments and transformations of diasporic identity formation and
negotiation. The films discussed in this chapter therefore illuminate some of the
possible points of departure in theoretical and creative writing about diasporas that
seek to empower minority groups and individuals, and which also contribute to the
impetus for more critical narratives by and about Chinese-Canadians.
Notes

1 I borrow the term “Renegotiating Identities” from the title of an ACSANZ (Association of Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand) conference held at the University of Wollongong, July 2000, at which part of this chapter was first presented.

2 See Gish Jen, Mona in the promised land (1996), for an observation of the treatment and perception of “minority” status persons in the United States (Chapter 4), drawing upon the perspectives of migrant Chinese parents, their American-born children, and the community within which they live. This narrative about the Chinese diaspora in America has as its protagonist a teenage Chinese girl growing up in multicultural New York, “where the Chinese have become “the new Jews””, and makes a statement about “diasporised” persons by having her convert to Judaism.


4 I refer again to the forum, “The Asian Infusion of Vancouver”, held as part of the activities during the Asian Heritage Month in major Canadian cities.

5 See Monika Kin Gagnon (2000), in which she provides an (historical) overview of the video production and development in Canada as well as a discussion of how — although/because the medium is situated “within a number of parallel structures: parallel to other established art forms, parallel to mass culture, and in many ways, parallel to official culture in its venues of exhibition” (91) — it functions as “an oppositional practice capable of intervening in the hegemony of mass communications” (90).

6 The prevailing demographic of these filmmakers, however, tends towards later-generation Canadian-born Chinese in their mid-twenties to mid- or late thirties.

7 The filmmaker received Arts Council grants and made the film for $170,000 CDN cash. Granting bodies were Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council, Toronto Arts Council, and National Film Board (personal communication).

8 As a film review has pointed out, “Unfortunately, amateurish performances by most of the cast members, few of whom have much experience, damages the film’s credibility and makes sitting through it a bit of an ordeal.” (n.a.) (http://www.canoe.ca/JamMoviesCanadianS/smallpleasures.html).

9 In The Encyclopaedia of the Chinese Overseas, students constitute a significant percentage of Chinese nationals who are overseas. Higher education is seen as a vantage point from which they “may choose to settle and become naturalized in the country where they are pursuing their studies” (p.15). In this regard, they are not yet fully “overseas Chinese” but are considered to already occupy a liminal and sometimes ambivalent space because of the potential for permanent residency.

10 Li, Sally and Zhao are hired illegally by Mr Ying to work in the restaurant (presumably for minimum wage or less). This form of casual employment in Chinese and Asian restaurants is commonly undertaken by foreign students in Western countries and constitutes a major source of their supplementary incomes.

11 The politics behind (and alleged provocation of) global media coverage of the Tiananmen event is discussed in Rey Chow, (1993) Chapter 4, “Pedagogy, Trust,
Chinese Intellectuals in the 1990s: Fragments of a Post-Catastrophic Discourse”. See also (1998) Chapter 7, “We Endure, Therefore We Are: Survival, Governance, and Zhang Yimou’s To Live”.

12 The adoption of official multiculturalism also proves itself a timely event for mainland Chinese who, after the Tiananmen massacre, found themselves stranded in a foreign country that now had the ability to accommodate their cultural difference within the Canadian ‘mosaic’.

13 This is a term frequently and pejoratively applied to migrants from less privileged circumstances or, sometimes, refugee situations, and who are severely lacking in cultural and economic capital.

14 Such as implications of culturally essentialist issues, explorations of territorially or linguistically bound notions of ethnicity.

15 An Internet search has unveiled, in North America, no less than thirteen web reviews of the film.

16 Sau-ling Wong describes how these expectations of assimilation can become a form of cannibalism when migrant parents try to live the process of assimilation through their offspring. In this way, she argues, Westernised children can be configured as sources of nourishment for their parents and act as sacrifices to their parents’ appetites for a ‘better life’ (1993: 37).

17 Where modes of minority cultural representation are upheld, such as in films like Double Happiness and Small Pleasures, they are usually independent undertakings that do not have the same types of exposure (or support) as projects within the mainstream.

18 That is, English spoken with heavily inflected Chinese tones, or stereotypical conjurations of how, to the popular imagination, ‘authentic’ mainland Chinese persons speak English.

19 Although Jade and her family are not overtly segregated from white Canadian society in the way that “darker skinned” immigrants in Europe have been identified as forming ethnic ghettos either in city centres or “on the outskirts” (Goldsmith, 2000: 49), there still operates a strong sense of racial and cultural self-regulation and ‘policing’ undertaken by members of the minority group.


21 Greg Barns discusses how economic and spiritual empowerment of Aboriginal people in Canada has been made possible by the British Columbian government and the impact on self-empowerment and sense of worth to indigenous people. From the early 1970s, the Canadian governments have been prepared to negotiate and recognise the Aboriginal people of Canada as equal partners in the land, by firmly placing the tools and levers of economic and social change in their hands. See Barns (2004).

22 Chinese script is written one way but can be read in a multitude of ways according to the regional dialect, with no change in the Chinese characters or their meaning; only the pronunciation varies.

23 For instance, the following observation is made in a review of the film:
   When she deftly changes a C to an A to give her younger sister Pearl (Frances You) a straight-A report card to present to their father, Jade is
actually marking the beginning of revealing how much of her life is a lie.
Outside home she’s freewheeling, liberated and ambitious, yet when she returns she finds herself reverting to the dutiful traditional Chinese daughter role with her parents, most especially to her ultra-strict father. (Thomas, 1995)
PART C

THE CHINESE DIASPORA IN AUSTRALIA
In this chapter, I want to extend the discussion of diasporic diversity by considering the community of first-generation migrant as well as local born (second-generation and onwards) Chinese in Australia, for a comparison with the Canadian example. My aim is firstly to extend the discussion of Chinese diasporic experience beyond the scope of the North American context, taking into account the movements of diasporic Chinese in/to a largely white and Western space. At the same time, I want to emphasise the point that the heterogeneity and internal conflict in diasporic experiences for Chinese Canadians are equally present and prevalent in the case of Chinese Australians. Issues of differentiation among the community — such as birthplace (whether locally born or ‘FOB’) and differing levels and extents of assimilation, leading to distinct modes of socio-economic participation — present the diasporic community as irrevocably split. These disparate elements nevertheless remain attached to and/or often evoke images of a community that has created its own ethnic enclave, perceived to be insulated from mainstream culture and society, thereby alluding to while reinforcing the common perception and conception of diasporas as homogeneous entities. Following from this, the second objective of this chapter, therefore, is to highlight the importance of conceptualising diasporas and
diasporic experience in ways that acknowledge the diversities and disjunctures of
diasporicity.

This chapter draws upon the history of Chinese in Australia to chart the progression of
t heir diasporic experience, and to read the novels of this community against the backdrop
of historical developments and engagements within the country. In Chapters 1 and 2, I
have demonstrated that, although certain modes of cultural stereotyping can and may lead
to individual and group empowerment, the conception of a homogeneous Chinese
cultural identity is not only false but highly problematic as well. Certain diasporic traits,
such as nostalgia for homeland, when held to be normative of the group’s behaviour, can
have a detrimental effect on how the diasporic community is perceived by the wider local
society of their receiving country. The strong tendency towards homeland nostalgia
positions the diasporic individual or group in a marked way as being uncommitted and/or
unwilling to assimilate with their host country. Conversely, a host country’s embrace of
multiculturalism and its commitment to equal recognition of minorities can also blind
itself to the economic and political manipulations by some diasporic groups and
individuals who are too ready to exploit the seemingly benign and benevolent rhetoric of
tolerance and cultural pluralism. To this end, this dissertation, in drawing up a taxonomy
of diasporic consciousnesses, aims to not only provide a way of theorising diasporas and
their behaviours, but also to chart new ways of reading diasporic narratives that build
upon and re-examine those theorisations.
Having discussed the diversity of Chinese diasporic communities in Canada (Chapters 3 and 4), I now turn to the Chinese diaspora in Australia to provide a further insight into the internal complexities of the diaspora. The issues surrounding diasporicity, identity and cultural citizenship that are acutely experienced by the Chinese in Canada are equally manifest and similarly demonstrated in the case of the Chinese in Australia. Forms of diasporic consciousness that are deeply engaged in homeland idealising, or in tokenistic representations of ethnic difference and otherness, are replicated within the Chinese communities in Australia. However, as I will be demonstrating, where Chinese Australians differ from Chinese Canadians, in spite of their relatively similar histories of racial discrimination and persecution, is the level and strength of political advocacy for their cause and marginalised status. The fragmentation of minority groups in majority white societies, owing to external pressures and internal divisions, often undermines group cohesion and effective political representation. While this divisiveness is an erstwhile condition that ensures the heterogeneity of the group, it nonetheless also perpetuates the group’s marginal status. To this end, my study of the Chinese diaspora in Australia will focus on two novels by Chinese-Australian writers to explore particular depictions of diasporic consciousness (as described in Chapters 1 and 2), as well as investigate the internal disjunctures of diasporic experience. These disjunctures relating to differences in racialisation (or the extent of the diaspora’s assimilation), class and gender will reflect upon the divisions between older and younger generations, between locally born and newly arrived immigrants, as well as between privileged and marginalised Chinese-Australians.
A wide range of cultural transformations, as well as racial and class tensions are significantly palpable in the Chinese diasporic community; moreover, these transmutations in effect further segregate the community, rendering it irreconcilably split. These distinctions that mark the Chinese diasporic experience in Australia appear in and sometimes characterise the literary and film narratives of Chinese-Australians. This chapter therefore looks at the different depictions of Chineseness in the Australian milieu for an insight into the internal diversities of a community often regarded as largely — and inscrutably — homogeneous.

**Historical background**

Eric Rolls, in his 2-volume work on Chinese in Australia, *Sojourners* (1992) and *Citizens* (1996), dates early Chinese association with indigenous Australians as far back as 1676, and establishes the nature of Sino-Australian relations as largely mercantile based. At that time, it had been the practice for Australian captains to replace their dead sailors with Chinese in Canton, en route to Australia (Rolls, 1992: 27). In 1844, a few Chinese convicts were brought into the colony, and about a dozen Chinese from Singapore were imported in 1847 by South Australian pastoralists, while 20 more were sent to Western Australia, to work as shepherds and farm labourers (Rolls, 1992: 34). As the country grew, so did the need for labour and migrants. However, white Europeans, such as the Scottish or German sheep farmers, tended to shun Australia, therefore the need for cheap labour led to large numbers of Chinese being imported, with the first batch of 100 men and 21 boys from Amoy arriving in Sydney Harbour in 1848. By 1852, a mere 4 years
later, it was estimated that at least 3000 Chinese, recruited from Singapore, Hong Kong, and China, had entered Australia, a tenfold growth from the 300 in Australia in 1849.

Clearly, it was very profitable to engage in the importation of Chinese workers, and the newly arrived workers were also unequivocally positioned as a source of cheap and industrious labour. This, however, became an attribute that served to their detriment because of the economic threat they posed, as a collective whole, to the European labour force. In *Astronauts, Lost Souls and Dragons*, Diana Giese writes that “[n]umbers swelled to such proportions that the Chinese represented a perceived threat to other, less distinctive and cohesive groups” (1997: 5). The white point of view held that “they were here in disturbingly large numbers. In 1859 one in every nine men in Australia was Chinese” (Castro, 1983: epigraph). Anti-Chinese sentiment can also be traced back to 1849 when an advertisement in the *People’s Advocate*, a local newspaper, called for a meeting of fellmongers, woolsorters and “all parties that are not favourable to China Emigration” (Rolls, 1992: 46), mainly because of the negative impact of cheap Chinese labour on the white European workforce.

Because the settler society of Australia bore deeply the imprints of British colonialism and culture, its sense of national identity was inevitably derived from Britain. As Richard White describes, “Australians saw themselves, and were seen by others, as part of a group of new, transplanted, predominantly Anglo-Saxon emigrant societies” (1985: 47). Jon Stratton and Ien Ang go on to elaborate on the characteristics of the Australian “national type” that emerged: “believed to be a new product of the multiplying British
stock, the ‘race’ which, in the heyday of British imperialism, saw itself as superior to all other ‘races’” (1998: 148). In the quest for racial and cultural purity, held to be integral to the formation of a distinct national identity, “Australian anti-Chinese discourse was not only ... overtly racialist, but also ... much more connected with the cause of nation-building” (Stratton and Ang, 1998: 150). These acts of racial exclusion and discrimination contributed to and also compounded the vision of Australia as a predominantly (and exclusively) white nation, thereby feeding the ‘white nation’ fantasy while fossilising anti-Chinese discourse and sentiment in the history and development of Australian nationalism.¹

With the discovery of gold in 1851 in New South Wales and Victoria, Australia experienced a massive influx of migrants, causing its population to double in the first year of gold. Most of the miners were European, and the Chinese were present only later on the goldfields, having stayed away because of racial and cultural animosities especially from the English. Since the racial conditions of that period were extremely volatile, Chinese miners were severely discriminated against, and also prevented from working in the goldfields until the sites had been given up and usually exhausted by European miners. The Australian gold rush experience, also known as ‘sum gum san’, or, New Gold Hills (after the North American example), has typified the Chinese diasporic experience and narratives, alongside its history of indentured and coolie labour. The common perception of diasporas — especially with regards to the Chinese diaspora — as economic migrants has not only characterised Chinese diasporic movement but has also contributed to the ‘pigeonholing’ of the community, regarded as an
influx of lowly-qualified members of a workforce who, it is commonly assumed, will take on low-paying jobs (if they are at all successful in gaining employment), live in abject conditions, and contribute to urban problems like crime and the creation of ghettos. (Goh, 2004: 2)

The ‘ghetto-isation’ of diasporic and migrant communities, moreover, extends to our contemporary society, led by the dominant belief that the local national culture is under threat and that the sense of a homogeneous national identity will be compromised by the arrival of large numbers of conspicuously different migrants. Although the concerns of 19th century Australia appeared to be largely motivated by economic reasons and tended to emphasise the intensification of competition in the workforce, the underlying preoccupation was nonetheless about race, while more contemporary animosities are also strongly reminiscent of anti-Chinese sentiments dating back to the beginning of European settlement.

The first volume of Eric Rolls’ history of the Chinese in Australia, Sojourners, ends in 1888 when four ships carrying Chinese passengers were refused entry into Sydney Harbour, because, according to the authorities, the “influx of such people was a menace to the colony and to public peace. The government had determined not to admit them” (1992: 505). Over the next few years, the colonies instituted laws to exclude Chinese, with measures in New South Wales being the most extreme: the poll tax rose to £100, tonnage was restricted to one (Chinese) to 300, naturalisation papers were refused, and Chinese were to be excluded from mining. In his conclusion to Sojourners, Rolls writes:

The day of the sojourners was almost over. The aim of the Chinese in Australia from 1888 on was to become whatever citizens society would allow. (508)
This citizenship, however, proved to be limiting in more ways than one. Since 1878 when rubies were discovered in the Hale River area, “Australia’s red heart was really glowing, and nobody was prepared to share its light with Chinese” (Rolls, 1992: 458). This exclusion of the Chinese had several motivations, the first of which was racial segregation that ostracised the Chinese because of their physical difference from the rest of the Australian population. Secondly, because it was common practice among Chinese migrant labourers to save their earnings for remittance to their families in China, this habit encouraged the perception of them as “birds of passage who were eager to leave Australia, taking away the gold at the earliest possible moment” (Castro, 1983: epigraph). While this statement is true because of the sojourning habits of Chinese migrant labourers, it nonetheless perceives and positions the Chinese community as a transient group in the Australian demographic landscape, hence further reinforcing the group’s already marginalised and minority status. Even Chinese who were naturalised were not granted full citizenship rights; they were denied the vote, they had no claim against any colony except the one that had issued the certificate, and laws could be directed at them specifically (Rolls, 1996: 2). What little sense of citizenship they had was further curtailed in 1901, the year of the federation of Australian colonies.

The Immigration Restriction Act, also known as the White Australia policy, was the first act to be passed by the new Commonwealth Parliament. This act restricted entry by means of a dictation test, first in the English language and then later reworded to extend to any European language (Rolls, 1996: 414-5). It had the benefit of weeding out not only unwanted Chinese migrants but also the banning of, amongst others, communists, half-
castes (then regarded as scandalous) and morally suspect persons. In 1903, the Nationality Act further prohibited any non-European from becoming a citizen, which meant that the Chinese and other Asians lost the right to be naturalised. This act stayed in force until 1956; in 1957, non-Europeans were allowed to apply for citizenship only after 15 years’ residence and later, to bring spouses and children to Australia. While these discriminatory Acts had, effectively, discouraged and/or prevented entry and migration by nationalities that the country deemed to be undesirable, they also had the effect of curtailing the sojourning tendencies of the Chinese, thereby making citizens and permanent residents of those who had remained in Australia. Yet, the sense of citizenship experienced by the Chinese in Australia was an extremely limited and circumspect one.

Shortly after the Whitlam government came into power, the discriminatory Immigration Restriction Act was removed in 1973, and the period of residence for those seeking citizenship was shortened to 3 years. The upshot was the introduction of a greater sense of permanence and continuity for the Chinese community in Australia, who began to conceive of themselves (as well as be regarded by the wider community) as settler migrants and citizens, rather than as a transitory and sojourning group. During the period of the Immigrations Restriction Act and the Nationality Act, Chinese in Australia were mostly either working class bachelor labourers, or professionals and businessmen, though in far smaller numbers. The population gradually diminished as migrant arrivals declined and older immigrants died. In 1901, Chinese made up less than one per cent of the Australian population, or just 32,717. When the Immigration Act was eased to allow non-European spouses into the country, and Asians could be naturalised again, the Chinese
population increased, albeit only marginally; in 1954, they numbered 15,558 (0.17 per cent of the Australian population), and in 1961, 23,568 (0.22 of the Australian population) (Pan, 2000: 276). Wenche Ommundsen points out that, owing to their minority status and insignificantly small numbers,

Chinese and other minorities were tolerated only to the extent that they made themselves inconspicuous, either through segregation or through assimilation. Not surprisingly, many of the values they had to adopt in order to survive were internalised, becoming part of their personal and cultural make-up, in Australia as elsewhere in the Chinese diaspora. (in Goh, 2004: 79)

The need to be inconspicuous, just in order to survive, meant that the Chinese had to keep their displays of ethnicity in check, as tolerance (by the local and dominantly white community) for different types of otherness remained low for many decades. Although this led to increased levels of assimilation by Chinese into white Australian society, the effect of being constantly vigilant against overt forms and practices of cultural citizenship also led to the gradual erosion and censorship of Chineseness by Chinese themselves. This explains to a considerable extent the low levels of political representation by and of Chinese Australians in state and national politics. Consequently, the levels of Chinese representation in the cultural and arts scene are similarly diminutive.

The majority of Chinese in Australia were engaged in market gardening (mostly by default as they were gradually excluded from entering into many professions), an occupation in which they eventually came to dominate. The importance of their activities can not be undermined, according to Rolls’ documentation of a Customs officer who wrote in one of his scrapbooks (circa 1888):
It is only those who have lived in the Territories who can realise what an important factor in its present organisation the Chinese are. Remove them tomorrow, and the residents of Palmerston would be left without fish, vegetables or fruit, to a large extent without meat, without laundries for their washing, neither would there be any tailors, cooks or domestic servants. (1996: 3)

While this account provides significant insight about the Chinese contribution to Australian society, there is little by way of creative pursuits that chronicle the Chinese diasporic experience of that era. Because of their minority status and diminished stature in the Australian population, coupled with the instituting of racist and discriminatory measures — such as legislation preventing property ownership, exclusion from many occupations, circumscribing their leisure activities, and prosecuting them for living with or employing Aboriginal people (Giese, 1997: 6) — Chinese in Australia survived mainly on the fringes of Australian society, by segregating themselves from mainstream culture, and then living as inconspicuously as possible. This racial divide similarly influences our contemporary prevailing and dominant perspectives (of Chinese and Asians) among white Australians. Alison Broinowski, in *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia*, notes (of that era) that “Australians’ images of themselves and their neighbours were simplistically typecast”, and that,

> From the nineteenth century into the twentieth, most Australians, accustomed to having intellectual and artistic standards set for them in the West, took few initiatives of their own to develop a deeper understanding and subtler use of Asian culture. (1996: 7)

This racial and cultural schism, having been in operation for so long, is largely responsible for the sense of alienation or exclusion/non-belonging that many migrants and later generation diasporas feel about their cultural and political citizenship.
Within the Chinese diasporic community in Australia, however, even before Federation in 1901, there had been a clear internal socio-economic division. Although mostly male, they were either usually labourers or, less commonly, businessmen and professionals. The economic impetus/motivation gave Chinese migrants a strong historical background of economic and labour migration, but also set them apart as mostly working class. Minorities of middle and upper classes of businessmen and merchants contributed, to a lesser extent, to the trend of economic migration, but as their numbers were very small, the overall background of Chinese diasporic movement was still largely that of coolie labour. In spite of that differentiation, the experience of racism and discrimination were almost uniform throughout, so that most migrants’ sense of Chineseness and practice of cultural citizenship had to be subdued and subjugated to allow for a less traumatic and contentious merging of their diasporic history into the grand narrative of the Australian settler nation state. This highly self-conscious mode of assimilation by the majority of the Chinese diaspora into white Australian society consequently gave rise to a particularly tenacious sense of ambivalence about their citizenship and position in the Australian milieu. Recent studies and surveys have noted that while the socio-economic profiles of migrants in Australia may have shifted (usually upwardly) over time, the sense of belonging and the notion of Australian citizenship have not registered or increased significantly in or accompanied the migrants’ accomplishments and integration into Australian society. These contemporary attitudes and perspectives are but manifestations and repercussions of the long history of physical, socio-economic and cultural exclusionary practices affecting the majority of non-European and visibly different migrants to Australia.
The White Australia policy, having curtailed much of the freedom and rights of migrants to Australia, inculcated a highly attenuated sense of belonging among those remaining in or able to enter Australia. One of the markers of that sense of belonging in Australian society is the level of artistic and cultural productions by migrants to Australia, because they provide a way of ‘reading’ into the complex process/es of cultural assimilation and integration, as well as the negotiation of inter- and intra-cultural differences and disjunctures, against the backdrop of Australian society. Although works by Chinese in Australia are few (compared to those by the dominant white population) and hence marginalised, namely because of the writers’ race/ethnicity (and, sometimes, due to subject matter), it is the aim of this dissertation to examine contributions by migrant/diasporic Chinese to the literary scene. Ouyang Yü has observed that, while “Chinese have been in Australia for the last 149 years ever since they arrived in 1848 ... Australian-Chinese literature is a latecomer to the scene” (1998: 84). Similarly, Melissa Chiu, director of the Asia Australia Arts Centre in Sydney, writes that “the contribution of Asian Australian artists to this area [of cultural exchange] has been relatively limited” (2000: 27). Largely owing to the model of bi-polar engagement between Australia and Asia, the inclusion of Asian Australian artists has been a highly problematic move/strategy because it “disrupts the notion of opposition between Australia and Asia by offering a more complex equation of difference” (Chiu, 2000: 27). Moreover, this dissertation aims to also problematise that simplistic notion of ‘Asia’ as a homogeneous category. Therefore, by looking specifically at Chinese-Australian narratives in this and the following chapter, it aims to dispute the homogeneity often imputed upon
Chineseness (used as a cultural and categorical construct), and to reveal the internal disjunctures and heterogeneity beneath. This chapter now turns to an analysis of the literary output of migrant and diasporic Chinese in Australia, looking firstly at Brian Castro’s novel *Birds of Passage* (1983; hereinafter cited in the text by page numbers), and later, at Ouyang Yü’s novel *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* (2002).

*Birds of Passage*

This novel, as one of the earliest (if not the first) works of fiction by a Chinese writer in Australia, has been acclaimed not only for its literary merits but also for the insights it has provided into the experiences of migrant Chinese as well as later generations of Australian born Chinese. Two protagonists — one an early Chinese migrant, Shan, who comes to Australia in 1856 and the other an Australian born Chinese, Seamus, living in the present (or late twentieth century) — narrate their stories alternately throughout the novel, setting up a duality that renders their experiences almost identical to each other. Shan’s narrative, in which he leaves the comfort and familiarity of his upper-middle class existence in China for a journey to Australia, traces and evokes the experiences of many migrant Chinese who came to Australia during the gold rush of the 1850s. As this novel is the first to express a Chinese (and Chinese-Australian) perspective, it stands as a historical documentation of the early migrant experience in capturing the sense of alienation and isolation emanating from being in a foreign country and also from the racial discrimination and persecution happening at that time.
Shan’s sojourn in Australia (arriving in 1857 and leaving for Kwangtung in 1863, lasting 6 years) occurs at a time when anti-Chinese sentiment appeared to have peaked. Arriving in Australia on “the second day of February 1857” (63), he is informed that “Chinese immigrants have to pay £10 each for landing” (62), and that “[t]here is a lot of resentment against us Chinese” (76). His journeys around Australia were mostly limited to the Victoria region, making him more susceptible to racism because legislation had been passed in 1855 in Victoria to restrict Chinese immigration (repealed, however, in 1863, the year that Shan returns to China). He writes in his journal that “[w]e are now bearing the full brunt of their hatred” (109), and that raids regularly broke out during this period. The anti-Chinese riots that took place along the Buckland River in 1857 and at Lambing Flat in 1861 marked the height of anti-Chinese sentiment and hatred, and were especially significant for Shan because of his involvement with Mary Young, a white prostitute who used to be “the former darling of high society in Melbourne” (123) and who had also been with an Irishman (Clancy/Fitzpatrick), intent on persecuting the Chinese. Shan’s relationship with Mary produces a child, which later establishes the lineage between Shan and Seamus.

For most of the novel, the kinship between Shan and Seamus is not made known to either of them or to the reader, but Seamus’ discovery of and fascination with Shan’s journal, written in Chinese, leads him to learn the language (acknowledging, at first, that “I do not speak Chinese, but I am learning it” (8), and later, as if addressing Shan, he says, “You have begun to learn English, and I Chinese” (62)). Seamus’ translation of Shan’s journal represents the attempt to recuperate and restore the excluded Chinese voice from early
(and much of) Australian history. Although over a century apart, their experiences of isolation and alienation are shown to be closely connected, as are the instances of racism, discrimination and persecution. Seamus’ own existence is marked by a sense of restlessness and uncertainty about his identity as an Australian-born Chinese (ABC):

Yes. ABC. The first three letters of the alphabet. It was a classification which straddled two cultures. Yes. ABC. I am a refugee, an exile. My heart and my head are in the wrong places. There was no country from which I came, and there is none to which I can return. (8; italics mine)

It is the straddling of two cultures that poses a challenge to Seamus’ own sense of self, as well as disrupting the perceptions that other people have of him. As he explains, “You see, I have blue eyes. That is why I could not be completely Chinese” (10). His encounter with a woman, Fatima, on the train, elicits this reaction:

A blue-eyed white-haired Chinaman is an anomaly. Perhaps you’re an albino ... which makes it even more interesting. (69)

The range of responses and reactions that his appearance evokes, mostly unsolicited, from others, usually borders on unease because, firstly, it does not conform with normative depictions and representations of Chineseness, and, secondly, it disrupts the neat, sterile categorisations of race and ethnicity imposed upon minorities by the dominant mainstream culture.

Although not entirely fitting the stereotypical appearance of being Chinese, Seamus is, however, still subject to the racism directed towards his visibly different ethnicity, by members of the dominant mainstream:

There’s a bloody Chong. He doesn’t belong to our club. He spoils the look of the club. Get rid of him. If he’s allowed in there will be millions of them. They don’t speak the language. They don’t mix. (37)
Also, the more common expression, “You bloody Chink. Garn. Go back to where you came from” (36), is often used by the working class (white) Australians against different looking minorities and migrants. The attitudes expressed in those utterances reveal a deeply embedded racism that dates back to the country’s early settler history, when its collective memory had been stamped with historically constructed and imposed differentiations of race, culture and ethnicity.

In the present day Australia of the novel, even when Seamus’ experiences are not overtly racially denigrating, those perceptions and assumptions of him are still either tinged with or motivated by racial typecasting, hence betraying deeply entrenched racist attitudes. His best friend at school, when asked to describe him, sees only the ethnic exterior:

‘You have a moonface,’ he said, ‘with black hair sticking out of the top and your eyes are slits. Your nose is flat and you have yellow skin.’ (10)

Upon quitting his factory job (after a few days) his employer reveals that it was precisely because of Seamus’s Chineseness that the job was given to him: “You know, ven I put the position in the employment office I ask specially for a Chinese. You know, a Chinese because they have respect. They verk hard” (30). The racism inherent in his employer’s attitude — although not apparent at first or even ostensibly benign in a reverse-racist move in employing Seamus — is underscored by a deep and profound belief in racial and cultural differences, as well as the unshakeable conviction in the firmness and rigidity of those boundaries. Thus segregated, the extent to which Chineseness has been invested (and over-invested) with signification indicates first of all how Australian society is divided by (and maintains that divide of) race and ethnicity, and secondly, the culturally essentialist identity impositions it makes upon those categories. As Seamus observes,
“[p]eople are always very curious about nationality. They will go to great lengths to pigeonhole someone. They think this knowledge gives them power” (8). This fervent distinction of racial and ethnic boundaries leads to constructions of ‘otherness’ that are met with and challenged by individuals that do not fit neatly into those ‘other’ categories, therefore disrupting dominant assumptions of ‘otherness’ and in so doing, disturbing the established status quo. These unruly ‘others’, because slipping between the gaps of identity impositions, are then twice removed and thereby displaced from the (assumed) ‘centre’, as the ‘other’ of an imposed ‘otherness’. While all of these perceptions of Seamus conjure up a racially and ethnically disjointed image of himself, they nonetheless reflect what he feels himself to be, that is, as a total outcast. Being “a truly stateless person” (8), he “never worried about being classified” (9), because he knows that he exceeds the categorical limits of race available and operating in mainstream Australian society.

Seamus’ condition of straddling two cultures typifies that diasporic position of being neither here nor there, trapped in that liminal existence in the interstitial, in-between and ‘hybrid’ space. Homi Bhabha, advocating the liberating effects of that hybrid space, asserts that “[t]his interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (1994: 4), so that

The synchronicity in the social ordering of symbols is challenged within its own terms, but the grounds of engagement have been displaced in a supplementary movement that exceeds those terms. This is the historical movement of hybridity as camouflage, as a contesting, antagonistic agency functioning in the time lag of sign/symbol, which is a space in-between the rules of engagement. (Bhabha, 193)
For Seamus, however, his hybrid condition provides little by way of camouflage and consolation, and even less in terms of subject agency. Rather than being liberated, he feels more trapped and persecuted than free, revealing that “I admit that I suffered from feelings of persecution” (20), and that “I saw myself as a foreigner” (22). He takes to voyeurism, an act which gives him, to a certain extent and in his own way, a sense of power about the goings-on around him, but which positions him further away and outside of his society. Even in his deviance, he is still powerless; or rather, his sense of agency and power are derived from being obscured, invisible and unnoticed — in other words, affirming the extreme marginality of his (exiled) position in Australian society.

While that hybrid condition allows an individual to claim his or her difference and to turn it into symbolic difference — “a powerful and attractive strategy among those who have never quite belonged, or have been made to feel that they do not quite belong in the West” (Ang, 2001: 11-12) — hybridity is sometimes over-invested with potential significance so that the individual is rendered powerless and impotent. To some extent this characterises Seamus’s existence: as a ‘free’ subject and citizen of the state, he experiences little by way of agency or motivation, and even less in terms of power or access to it.

Because Seamus looks mostly Chinese, he is categorised as such, but his moments of identification with Chineseness are few. His inability to speak or understand the language, something that he does not claim as a birthright, encapsulates that dilemma:
When I go to Chinatown, I feel at one with the people, but then the strange tones of their language only serve to isolate me. (9)

This predicament, of Chineseness in diaspora, has been explored in detail by Ien Ang (2001), because the condition of being Chinese and not speaking Chinese is especially germane to many in the diaspora, especially second- and/or later-generation diasporas. Writing about her experience in Taiwan, Ang recalls that, “again and again, people on the streets, in shops, restaurants and so on were puzzled and mystified that I couldn’t understand them when they talked to me in Chinese” (vii). As a Chinese person — “a person with stereotypically Chinese physical characteristics” — Ang’s ‘difference’ in Taiwan, a Chinese place, stems from her inability to speak the language. However, when in ‘the West’ (or predominantly white spaces), the markers of difference shift considerably towards the surface, by her simply looking/appearing Chinese. One of the most frequently asked questions when encountering a different-looking person — “where are you from?” — reveals the attachments and investments by the dominant mainstream in racial, ethnic and cultural difference. As well, that question seeks the mention or evocation of “another space”, one that is somewhere in ‘Asia’ — or more precisely, ‘China’, the Asian land/nation/culture that has loomed largest in the European imagination as the embodiment of the mysterious, inscrutable other — presumably the ‘natural’ land of origin for people with my [Ang’s] ‘racial’ features. (Ang, 2001: 11)

In and to the Western/European imagination there is often little or no distinction between members of minority racial/ethnic groups; what matters more is their conspicuous difference from the majority of the population. Therefore, a Chinese (or Chinese-looking) person’s inability to speak Chinese is seen as undermining the (initial) impact of physical difference, because it signals the possibility of a closer and more proximate culture and
cultural alliances and identifications than what was first imagined or assumed. In other words, the exotic other is demystified and de-‘naturalised’, thereby exposing the assumptions and impositions of white imagination.

For the Chinese-looking person, the inability to speak Chinese — sometimes the result of an enthusiastic embrace of multicultural assimilation and/or the desire for smooth integration — not only defies western/white imagination, but also undermines to some extent the claim upon minority cultural capital (based on racial/cultural difference). In other words, their racial minority status (although remaining largely and physically intact) is somewhat abrogated because, now demystified, their cultural identity comes under question or scrutiny, is held suspect, and sometimes dismissed altogether as being fraudulent and/or ‘inauthentic’.

The Australian construction of national identity draws upon the idea of Australia as a “multicultural nation in Asia”, as enunciated by former Prime Minister Paul Keating, “thereby signalling multiculturalism as an integral and essential characteristic of contemporary Australian national identity” (Stratton and Ang, 1998: 137). As an interventionist government policy, multiculturalism promotes cultural diversity and emphasises the cultural heritage of its migrants, giving recognition to different ethnic identities and in so doing places them firmly and officially within the construction of national identity. However, because recognition of cultural diversity is based on the fact of difference, therefore in carrying out an active policy of multiculturalism, the endorsements of cultural diversity constantly and inevitably carry strong reminders of
difference and of racial and ethnic ‘others’ within the national space. This explains to a certain/considerable extent the concern, sometimes obsession, with categorisation, naming differences and places of origin, so as to put people in their place.

**Other Novels**

Before turning to an analysis of *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, I want to discuss, briefly, the award-winning novels by Beth Yahp, Lillian Ng and Hsu-Ming Teo, as these have been singled out for particular mention by the Australian literary circle/society. Firstly, Yahp’s *The Crocodile Fury* — about the life of “three generations of Chinese-Malay women, all of them nameless, and all pulled this way and that by ancient and modern mysticism” (Broinowski, 1996: 228) — refuses to name people and places, so that the novel takes on a timeless and almost ‘place-less’ aspect. The main characters, along with the narrator, are simply known as “grandmother”, “mother”, and “the bully”, whose lives unfold amidst locations such as “the hill with the convent”, “the mansion”, and “the ghosthouse”. As an award-winning work of fiction, this novel by a migrant Chinese (from Malaysia) to Australia is perhaps the only one (or one of a handful) that has chosen not to deal with the issue of diasporic migration and the accompanying complexities of negotiating cultural differences and disjunctures. Although this type of writing does not engage with homeland nostalgia and idealisation, nor with aspects of diasporic migration and inter/transcultural negotiations, signalling what could potentially develop as a trend or new direction in diasporic literature, it nonetheless represents a particularly distinctive mode of diasporic narrative that can, in Alison Broinowski’s words, “enrich Australian literature” (1996: 228). This it does, most notably, by expanding on the diversity of
diasporic experiences, thereby transcending the tropes of isolation and dislocation commonly found in diasporic literature. This novel accomplishes the dual tasks of moving away from the topics and themes commonly found in narratives of overseas or diasporic Chinese experience, while avoiding the familiar, sometimes-hackneyed and clichéd forms of engagement with identity and cultural politics of the new, adoptive country.

In comparison, Ng’s *Silver Sister* recounts the multiple trajectories of diasporic experience; chapters titled (respectively) “Village”, “Canton”, “Hong Kong”, “Singapore”, and “Australia”, chart the movement of the protagonist, Ah Pah, so that the novel at times reads like a travelogue with commentaries on the differences and idiosyncrasies of each particular location. The last chapter, “Australia”, appears to be where the most marked cultural differences emerge and are commented upon, not surprisingly since this is the first time and place in Ah Pah’s sojourning experience that she acquires the status of a racial minority. Representative of that minority status is her observation that “[in] this block of flats we were the only Chinese” (256), while her constant comparisons between the Australian way of life and Chinese living habits continually highlight issues of cultural differences. Her remarks on the details of life in Australia range in their content from “swimming pools in the backyards” (254), Christmas festivities (264-7), hayfever (265), beach culture (268), and the power of the media (269-72) — which, for her, has been “educational in more ways than one” (271). Through television, she acknowledges, “I was becoming familiar with the lives of Australians in the suburbs, their lifestyles, and their furniture layout” (271). It was also
through television that she witnessed the election victory of Gough Whitlam, which put an end to the White Australia Policy, and which led to her successful application for Australian residency: “I told him [the doctor] how I had managed to obtain my permanent residency when Mr Whitlam was elected: ‘There was an amnesty’” (300). Although Ah Pah gradually assimilates with the local and national culture, the experience of Yin, her sworn sister, reveals a darker side to the migration process when she tells Ah Pah that, “I’m treated like an indentured labourer” (292). This statement is reminiscent of Australia’s history of discrimination and persecution meted out to its unwanted others, and, having transpired in the late 1907s, shows how those attitudes have persisted, thereby accentuating the difficulties of altering that vision of racial purity endorsed by the White Australia policy. These reminders of cultural dislocation and disjuncture, while illuminating the diasporic experience from the Chinese perspective, also accentuate the difficulties that non-white/European migrants have had to encounter and overcome in dis/re-locating themselves. In moving between cultures and negotiating that inevitable process of cross-cultural translation, “from one regime of language and culture to another” (Ang, 2001: 4), the disparities between diasporic experiences are revealed to be vastly differentiated by very real contradictions surfacing as class and economic concerns.

More recent novels, however, have begun to address as their main themes other aspects of diasporic migration, such as personal sense of loss, frustration and the coping mechanisms employed to help navigate the cultural disjunctures. Although these themes stem, inevitably, from the geo-physical effects of diasporic re/dislocation, the novels deal
largely with more tangential issues to the migration process. Hsu-Ming Teo’s *Love and Vertigo* (2000), winner of the 1999 The Australian/Vogel Literary Award, demonstrates a shift away from the topical mainstays of novels by early or later-generation diasporic writers. Teo’s novel tells of a Chinese female protagonist’s exploration of her family history, moving between Singapore, Malaysia and Australia. Set in the relatively modern/ised countries of Southeast Asia, the characters’ sense of Chineseness and practice of ethnic and cultural citizenship are strongly prevalent in the novel, portraying and conveying without a doubt the unshakeable belief in their ethnic origins. Nevertheless, a passage in the novel reveals the superficiality of that belief and practice of customs and traditions:

Donald Duck had also organised for everyone to wear white cotton shirts and white shoes, with white bandannas wrapped around their foreheads so that they looked like photo negatives of Ninjas. This he did because he was convinced that it was the tradition of their unknown and largely unremembered ancestral village in China, from whence his grandparents had emigrated to Singapore at the turn of the century. How Donald Duck found out that this was their village custom was a mystery to everyone since none of their clan had ever bothered to return to China to rediscover their roots. (Teo, 2000: 17)

Considering that Singapore and Malaysia are themselves destinations of diasporic migration (by mainland Chinese as well as other racial groups), practices of ethnic and cultural citizenship would have been considerably attenuated and modified were it not for the dominance of the Chinese communities in these countries and the Southeast Asian region in general. This cultural capital has accrued largely because

[the] Chinese diaspora, especially, has by virtue of its sheer critical mass, global range and mythical might evinced an enormous power to operate as a magnet for anyone who can somehow be identified as ‘Chinese’ — no matter how remote the ancestral links. (Ang, 2001: 12)
In Singapore, where ethnic Chinese have formed independent government, their sense of
diasporic consciousness and identity are bound to differ markedly from Chinese in other
places where Chineseness is experienced as a deviation from the norm.\textsuperscript{10}

The case of Singapore, as well as some other Southeast Asian countries where ethnic
Chinese have been a dominant presence, presents an interesting example of the
differentiations of Chinese diasporic experience. Although multi-racial, Singapore is still
considered to be a predominantly Chinese establishment, with consequently different
complexities of cross-cultural interactions and identity politics. In these places,
conditions of diasporic subjectivity, for the Chinese especially, have been so highly
mitigated to the extent that there has been little or no cultural consciousness-raising.\textsuperscript{11}
The comfort and familiarity in the knowledge of belonging, however, is only highlighted
and sometimes shattered when confronted with those cultural disjunctures that arise upon
entering a largely white space, or where the condition of being a racial minority is
experienced for the first time. The relatively unproblematic ways in which certain
diasporic Chinese, especially first generation diasporic migrants, identify with
‘Chineseness’ takes on considerable significance when set against the backdrop of a
foreign, racially and culturally different space, as well as when laid alongside the
diasporic experience of later generation diasporas. It is within this context that Teo’s
novel is set, underlining the processes of cross-cultural translations and negotiation of
identity politics when the narrator’s family moves from Singapore to Australia in the late
1970s, after the abolition of the White Australia Policy. In the narrator’s reminisces, she
notes of the migration experience that, while “[immigration] forced us in on ourselves
and moulded us into a family” (Teo, 2000: 143), the stress of having to fit in did exert its
toll on her brother and herself:

He wanted us to fit in with the Aussie kids. Hated it when we did anything
to make ourselves stand out. Tried to correct my accent and my syntax all
the time so that I didn’t sound like I’d just come straight from Malaysia or
Singapore. He was ashamed of me at school, because he was ashamed of
himself too. [...] It wasn’t just that we looked different; our accents and the Singlish
we had grown up speaking marked us out as pariahs in the playground.
Everyday English was a minefield of mispronunciations for us. (177)

In spite of their accents, however, the fact of their proficiency in the English language
sets their diasporic experience apart from that of a non-English speaking (but also
different looking) migrant. This has significant implications not only in terms of
enhancing their socio-economic profile but also enhancing their access to privileges that
often cannot be accessed by non-English speaking migrants.

**The Eastern Slope Chronicle**

I now want to turn to Ouyang Yü’s novel, *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*,¹² as one of the
latest publications dealing with issues of diasporic subjectivity, identity politics and
cross-cultural translations from the perspective of a mainland Chinese migrant. This
novel, as described by Wenche Ommundsen,

portrays the dilemmas facing the NESB (non-English-speaking
background) migrant who has been educated to the highest level in the
English language and Australian literature only to find himself barred
from academic work in his area because of his ‘foreignness’ and accented
English. (1998: 602)

Ouyang’s protagonist, Dao Zhuang, also serves as a thinly veiled self-portrait, carrying
on the author’s well-known agendas — critiquing the Australian literary establishment
and institutions, the strength of the country’s commitment to multiculturalism, the
provision of spaces for racial minorities to engage in artistic and cultural practices — all
this while writing about the Chinese experience in Australia in the 1990s, “viewing this
would-be Asian country from the perspective of a dominant Asian culture” (Ommundsen,
Chinese Poet”, “howling his frustration, anger and infinite loneliness at an indifferent
moon in a sleeping or dead suburb” (1998: 595), challenging (and possibly disturbing) his
readers with the provocative nature of his writing, mostly on issues of multiculturalism,
immigration, and treatment of immigrants. Because Ouyang’s personal history with
Australia began only in 1991, his writing does not attempt to trace the history of
Chinese presence and settlement in this country, but rather, deals mainly with the
contemporary experience of Chinese migrants to Australia, especially during and after the
June 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. His perspective is therefore particularly
illuminating for the insights it offers on yet another aspect of the Chinese diasporic
condition, this time shedding light on that migratory phenomenon known as the
‘Tiananmen Square generation’ of immigrants, or what he calls “students or ‘students’
taking advantage of relaxed immigration regulations but without the language skills or
financial backing necessary to smooth their passage into Australian society”
(Ommundsen, 1998: 599). This group of migrants has created a new profile among the
existing communities of diasporas settled in Australia, establishing within the Chinese
diaspora another enclave and representing a further differentiation of the Chinese
diasporic experience.
In *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, the life of one such migrant from China is elucidated, beginning however, *in medias res* when the main character/narrator is somewhat settled into Australia, having been in the country long enough to have obtained citizenship. The narrative mode of the main character and narrator Dao Zhuang is in first person, frequently addressing the reader (“as you probably know” (9); “if you know what I mean” (14)), thereby assuming and establishing an already informal, if not intimate, relationship. Other narrative voices appear, though sporadically, which represent Dao’s alter egos: the first, Wu Liao, is a supposedly fictive character conjured by Dao:

> I wanted to tell you that one of the main characters in my novel is no different from the other twenty thousand who came swooping down on this continent before the June 4th Incident in Tiananmen Square and who came with no intention other than to learn English and then make money. (50)

The second character, Warne, is Dao’s roommate who is caught in the same circumstances of having been issued a restraining order against approaching his (ex) wife, after gaining his permanent residency. Warne’s situation, however, appears the most unfortunate of the three characters not only because of the separation from his wife, whom he had sponsored to come to Australia “to learn English and lead a better life” (370), but also because of the loss of employment and income owing to a work-related injury. From that perspective,

> He [Warne] had now come to think most Australians in this country were bad, trying to hurt him and harm him, these including the insurance company, his solicitor, some of the specialists who gave him low points on the scale of evaluation, and only a handful were good, such as his interpreter who constantly rang him up to remind him of his medical appointments one day before they were due and his family doctor who was kind enough to regularly write him medical certificates. (29)
It is inevitable for migrants in this position to harbour such views and sentiments because
the trauma of physical and cultural dis/re-location is now exacerbated by the bureaucratic
machinations of the new country that have not only marginalised them but have also
apparently denied them access to socio-economic forms of support and other resources.
This disheartening aspect of migration, explored in Ouyang’s novel, gives voice to the
often un(der)represented and unaccounted experiences of diasporic Chinese in Australia.
The two characters Wu and Warne therefore supplement Dao’s main narrative voice in
providing a fuller picture of the migration process for mainland Chinese, creating an
almost dualistic narrative structure between Dao and Wu.¹⁴

_The Eastern Slope Chronicle_ is the title that Dao gives to his “Australian novel in
Chinese” (20), a project that he is painstakingly engaged in.¹⁵ In writing the novel, the
account of his own life also touches upon the lives of those in his immediate circle, such
as his wife, roommates in Australia and friends in China when he returns for a visit. One
particular observation about Australia that he has found agreement upon with other
migrants is the feeling of tremendous isolation; that “Australia was found to be a
continent empty of memory, of history, of anything human” (21). His wife had come to
Australia under the impression, after reading Henry Lawson, that “the bush in his stories
represented the quintessential Australia”. However, upon arriving, she found instead
“miles and miles of monotonous, drab, boring suburbia which nearly drove her mad”
(14). Another common and unifying theme for these Chinese migrants is the experience
of exclusion; as Dao says,

> Like many who came before or around the time when I came, I regarded
> Australia as a land of opportunity. However, that opportunity seemed to
exist only for Australians and people from other countries of the British Commonwealth and not the likes of me. Even though I had sworn my allegiance, Australia saw in me an un-Australian. (25)

For these Chinese migrants, the process of cross-cultural translation has proven to be not so much a negotiation of cultural differences but rather, the overcoming of (or having to overcome) geo-physical isolation and exclusion.

In a letter that Dao receives from an associate in China, from the Shanghai Oriental University, the question is raised as to “how cultural identity persists despite changes” (27). Professor Zhong writes:

A living example is that many Chinese, once they become citizens of other countries, still try to keep their own culture alive. They eat their own food, wear their own types of clothing, speak their own language, and go their own ways. Does the foreign citizenship do nothing at all to change them? Do they themselves not feel that in adopting a foreign citizenship they would be obliged to adopt the culture of the mainstream society of the country and become more like them than us? How many years does it normally take a foreign citizen to shed his cultural, if not racial, identity in this identity-changing process or does their identity remain unchanged for always? (27)

This passage hits the nail on the head, raising the issues that this novel (as well as many others) tries to address. While many writers have dealt with the matter of cultural identity and change, their manner has usually been in the exoticising vein of either accentuating the differences between Chinese and white Australian cultures and practices (and in the process valorising one over the other), or simply commentating on the difficulties and adjustments required of them in the process of cross-cultural translation and transitions. *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* tackles head-on the pervasive problems of racial and cultural identity amidst the (subtly) changing environments, sentiments and perceptions, offering no satisfactory
resolution to the dilemma of migrants ‘trapped in between’, but rather, a realistic — and sometimes brutal, but honest — examination analysis of contemporary identity politics in the Chinese diaspora.

The title of the first chapter, “A New Beginning”, belies any propitiatory notions about Dao’s life. Although the title was perhaps meant to signify the new life that was expected to accompany the granting of his Australian citizenship, the changes and upheavals that quickly follow, however, set the tone for a cynical pragmatism and gloomy pessimism in the novel. There are constant comparisons and complaints throughout the novel between life in China and Australia, mainly because of the promise of opportunities and a better life and future that Australia represents to the Chinese (and potential diasporic) imagination. For Dao’s wife, whom he had sponsored to come to Australia, his “living conditions fell far short of her expectations” (14), because nothing compared well with what she had already had in China as an assistant professor in her comfortable two-bedroom apartment allotted by the university authorities at Red Cliff, where everything was bought first-hand and the rent was negligible. (15)

The position of Dao’s wife, as a professional migrant, sheds light on the difficulties faced by that segment of diasporic Chinese who, accustomed to a certain lifestyle in China, now encounter vastly different and usually lower standards of living in Australia. The “better life” sought after by many migrants often remains illusory even after migration, because of language or other qualifications (or lack thereof) that hinder and impede assimilation into Australian society. The disgruntlement and frustrations of this class of migrants stem from the restrictions and curtailment of their social, cultural and economic mobility in a new and foreign space. Migration — often associated with and undertaken
because of promises of a better future and more opportunities, representing an overall upwards mobility on the social and economic scale — is now experienced as the opposite of what many considered to be its attraction; social and economic ascendancy.

Personal differences and changed circumstances eventually lead Dao’s wife to leave him, taking out an intervention order against him, at the same time feeding the suspicion that “she would go for another man, preferably a white man with blue eyes with whom she could have a blue-eyed and perhaps black-haired baby” (12). For all the education she had acquired in China, it had neither helped nor made her realise that “Australian men had a peculiar fondness for Asian women in general and Chinese women in particular” (16) (17). Succumbing to the theory that

Western men looked far nicer than the ordinary Chinese men on the street and they are far less chauvinistic and more humane as you could easily see in the imported films from Hollywood (17),

her opinions and attitude are overtly biased towards the West. The power of the media — Hollywood-produced, therefore Western-dominated — cannot be undermined because it has been largely responsible for constructing and influencing her perspective on matters of race and culture, leading to the preference for Western ideas and models over other cultural types. The readiness with which she places her faith in Western institutions and their products means that her engagement with Australia can only ever be a superficial one. This is especially so when considering that her complaints about and arguments with Dao were mainly centred on the physical and material aspects of their lives in Australia. Coming up against an island continent better known for its “insularity and exclusiveness” (61), the difficult transition experienced by many Chinese migrants (even though
professional and English-speaking) is often neglected or omitted from diasporic narratives about Chinese in Australia.

Representing another aspect of migration to Australia is that community of students who, during or after the time of the Tiananmen Square Incident, had applied for and obtained permanent residency or Australian citizenship and are now choosing to return to China. As Dao prepares for his visit to China, he reflects on the actions of his compatriots:

> My friends had all gone back to China as soon as they obtained their permanent residency or citizenship. They had argued for the advantage of being able to straddle two cultures, and had put that theory into profitable practice. I was the one to stick it out to the last as an Australian, if not an old one, then new. (19)

As an insular and exclusive island continent, Australia (and Australian citizenship) offers to the Chinese person a sense of security, in socio-economic as well as political terms. Firstly, there was the “very good system of social security so that when [Dao] was unemployed [he] received unemployment benefits on a fortnightly basis that was worth more than a Chinese professor’s monthly salary on the current international exchange rate” (45). Secondly, and also above all, it is the political motivation that encouraged Dao to apply for citizenship, as he admits later that, “if things did not work out [in China], I could always pack up and go, safe in the knowledge that I now was an Australian, without the restrictions that a Chinese national would normally have” (72). However, this sense of security and political freedom (to a certain extent, in largely liberal democratic countries), when conceptualised as ‘self-sufficiency’, is also underscored by the subsequent realisation that, “in Australia nobody gave a damn about you but without a
status you were simply a nobody and had to face the danger of being chased out of the country” (98). The ensuing dilemma therefore arises: on the one hand,

Now that he had got his permanent residence, he had got a kind of guarantee that life would somehow never change for him again because he was in Australia and because Australia would never become China, which was as changeable as the clouds. (100)

Yet, on the other hand,

His trouble was that he could not possibly have the best of both worlds, that is, to have the kind of human activity available in China that makes you feel like a human being and to have the kind of freedom in Australia that helps you to do whatever you wish to do. On the contrary, he was now stuck helplessly with the worst of both worlds, the kind of quiet that Australia condemned the poor to and the lack of China. (100)

This desire for some form of security while not letting go of the comforts of a familiar environment explains, therefore, the return to China by migrants who have obtained their permanent residencies and citizenship. Although their condition is definitely marked as diasporic, the strong and constant longing for, and idealising of, the homeland — as well as acting on that nostalgia by returning — undermines any sense of permanence or fixedness about their new positions in the host country. This ultimately renders them even more unstable and transient as far as population demographics go because of their constantly fluctuating and mobile positions, therefore reinforcing the perception of these diasporic migrants as transitional sojourners.

One other aspect of being a diasporic Chinese person in Australia that this novel also emphasises is the subject’s identification with a particular type of Chineseness. Because of the difficulty of Dao’s position, his perspectives on and relationships with both China and Australia have become highly complex and problematic. Towards China, his feelings
were not unlike those of a former prisoner who, having broken free, vows never to return but nevertheless cannot resist the dreams of a long-forgotten past that keeps haunting him, dreams that are to become part of his Australian identity. (20)

While

Australia, in its own quiet and unassertive ways, seems to have a shrinking effect on me so that by the end of ten years I found myself leaner, tighter-lipped, silenter, moving closer to the edge of life. I wouldn’t even wish to utter the name of China. (20)

In Australia, socio-economic circumstances seem to have conspired to make him feel trapped and helpless, without a job or drifting from one to another while living on social welfare payments. The exclusion from mainstream Australian society and its workforce represents, to him, a real impediment to his successful integration and assimilation with Australian culture. This leads to his deep cynicism about the freedoms that had attracted him to the country in the first place. In the words of his roommate Warne, “The Australian government is as bad as the Chinese government. If they don’t want you to stay in Australia, they will invent a perfect China and talk you into going back to it” (32).

However, as the novel develops Dao finds himself on a trip to China after ten years in Australia, and his perspectives undergo a subtle shift. Elaborating on the topic/question of culture and multiculturalism — “how cultural identity persists despite changes” (27), and “how people of so many ethnic backgrounds can live and mix in such harmony with the mainstream Australians while managing to keep their cultures alive” (28) — in a lecture set up by his friend Professor Zhong at the Shanghai Oriental University, he finds himself delivering the hard, even cruel, facts to a group of students. Telling them about the harsh conditions that many migrant “students” had undergone while in Australia, such as
“[earning] blood money in Chinese restaurants and even prostituting themselves!” (46), Dao readily dismisses his audience’s conception of migration as the “solution to the problems at home” (46), even saying, “I don’t really see why one has to go overseas to find happiness. If you can find it at home, seize the chance” (47). Based on his personal experience and having learnt that the “responsibilities and privileges” as an Australian citizen in no way guaranteed that he would “get a job consistent with [his] qualifications” (48), his lecture therefore provided a platform from which he could give vent to particular frustrations, or simply illuminate his underlying and personal agendas. However, the irony about the topics of his lecture — cultural identity and multiculturalism — is that, for him, his cultural identity has not undergone any tremendous change, simply because the exclusionary measures and discriminatory practices in Australia are still firmly in place, which prevent his assimilation into mainstream Australian culture and society. The lecture that he presents to the students in China consequently represents only one perspective about multicultural living in Australia and, even so, it is necessarily tainted by his personal vendettas against the dominant cultural establishments and authorities in his life in Australia. In other words, because of his marginalised existence in Australian society, which he perceives to be the main deterrence to his successful assimilation and integration with the host culture, he can therefore only speak of the negative aspects of migration and Australian multiculturalism to his audience.

During the time that Dao is in China, he begins to assume, very self-consciously, the role of the token Australian to his Chinese friends:
Here I sat like a fool, aware of other eyes on me, which were probably observing how the Australian would behave in front of these oriental, I mean Chinese girls. (81; italics mine)

In China and in the presence of his Chinese friends, Dao’s labelling of the girls as ‘oriental’ is intended to signify his increasing identification with the west, or a westernised perspective. The seriousness with which he carries his new national identity gestures towards a self-aggrandising posture/position, yet this identity instantly comes under scrutiny when one of the girls in the dance hall asks, “How can it be that you are an Australian?” “You look Chinese. You speak Chinese. And you look no different from your friends” (82). Dao realises the difficulty of explaining “about the confusing meaning of identity and nationality”, because he had not even worked that one out himself (82).

Still, this has not prevented him from assuming an Australian identity, as his encounters with the taxi driver and Chinese prostitute have shown. Throughout the novel, Dao’s references to ‘Australians’ were always made with the exclusion of himself, intending only to nominate ‘Westerners’. Yet, once in China, he can/does not refrain from telling the prostitute that his movement was “an Australian movement” (77), readily assuming the position of a ‘foreigner’ (79), and moreover revelling in its novelty and pomposity: “Am I not an Australian in Eastern Slope? Perhaps the first one ever?” (123).

Nevertheless, instances do arise where his foreignness becomes pronounced, such as when comparing the dance hall in China to the Kings Cross dancing hall (80).

The line between Dao’s cultural (Chinese) and national (Australian) identities at times becomes highly distinct and yet, at other times, blurred, thereby allowing him to lapse into positions of ambiguity according to the situation. In the taxi ride from the airport, he
chooses not to reveal his Australian identity, telling the taxi driver instead that he was from Wuhan, because “remembering friends’ advice against revealing my foreign identity, for financial reasons” (38). More specifically, it was because

In this situation or any other situation, if a foreign national was mixed up with a bunch of Chinese guys, that foreigner was expected to pay for the show because he was supposed to be richer. (83; italics mine)

Once again, the assumptions of diasporic migrants making a better life for themselves in the new country are evidenced in Dao’s awareness of the expectations that Chinese nationals/mainlanders had towards their overseas counterparts. His careful avoidance of any mention of his Australian identity in some situations, as well as his assertion of his foreignness in other situations, indicates on the one hand, the difficult negotiation of his (cultural and national) allegiances to either China or Australia. On the other hand, however, the ease with which he slips between his Chinese and Australian identities unveils a highly motivated and strategic affiliation with a particular type of identity, or rather, a specific form of Chineseness. In her consideration of autobiography “as a more or less deliberate rhetorical construction of a “self” for public, not private purposes”, Ien Ang writes:

the displayed self is a strategically fabricated performance, one which stages a useful identity, an identity which can be put to work. (24)

The novel, if read as an autobiography, therefore puts forward and ostensibly displays the different types of selves available to the diasporic migrant, for strategic manipulation, from various motivations and for different purposes and effects. The multiplicity of diasporic subject positions illustrated consequently points to an even greater and increasing array of types of diasporic consciousnesses. Because the process of cross-cultural translation for migrants inevitably involves complex negotiations of identity and
cultural politics, the range of diasporic conditions, subject positions and consciousnesses
has extended far beyond previously conceived (and rather simplistic) notions of a single
diasporic type, or a normative/ised diasporic condition.

However, in spite of the heterogeneity of diasporic conditions and consciousnesses, the
perspectives from mainstream Australian society unveil a monolithic conception of
Chinese culture and identity/ies by the dominant white culture and its institutions and
establishments. Dao’s ‘fictional’ character, Wu, comes to Australia “ostensibly for the
study of the history of that country but secretly he knew that there was nothing much
there for him to study” (52). He is supervised in his MA thesis by Professor Sean Dredge,
a historian who knew little about Chinese and what they thought. The only
reason he accepted Wu was because he thought Wu was useful to him as he was researching for a book he was going to write on the recent Chinese experience in Australia, particularly after the June 4th, 1989. […] In a climate where all things Asian were good, the Chinese were quite a commodity to the market. As a historian, and one with a business mind, Sean was quick to seize the opportunity while others were still debating whether the option was viable. He knew he had made a fine choice because the first time he saw Wu he realised that there was a lot to get out of him in terms of raw information. (60)

The above passage attests to the persistence of a particular (white) Australian conception
of China and Chinese. As a member of a mainstream Australian institution, the
professor’s views and exploitation of Wu are an extension, even manifestation, of the
prevailing ideology and rhetoric that are centred on an exploitative and superficial type of
multiculturalism.

Also because “China favoured the only choice of Westernisation at the expense of its old
cultural traditions” (137), the tendency for many Chinese was towards a valorisation of
the West, which included Australia. However, Dao realises after moving to Australia that “white people were not what they made out to be, powerful, always in the right, honest and straightforward” (42), therefore implying that he had uncovered the ‘truth’ behind that steady diet of images fed to the Chinese to further encourage their pro-Western(isation) stance. This awareness is accompanied by the his gradual discovery that, while migrants have come to a certain provisional understanding of Australia and its culture, mainstream Australian society remains insular against other parts of the world, most notably Asia, of which it claims to want to be a part. For instance, Wu comes to realise that

For all his profound knowledge of Western culture and history, the professor did not know this current popular saying in China that went, “as poor as a professor and as stupid as a PhD student.” (91)

This observation highlights the ignorance about Chinese and other minority cultures by the predominantly white Australian society, adding to Wu’s discovery that “[the] Australian’s mind was very narrow compared with the extensive space of the country” (92). Wu’s appeal to Dredge’s business sense stems purely from his use-value, as a “commodity to the market”, “a man affable enough and malleable enough for [Dredge’s] own use” (60). While the position and views of Professor Dredge may not be adequately representative of mainstream Australian society, it nonetheless represents an important and influential sector of the Australian public, especially when sanctioned by the academic and literary institutions and therefore signifying perhaps rather large-scale ramifications. The perspectives embodied by Professor Dredge are symptomatic of a white Australian attitude towards its Chinese migrants that is still underpinned by what Ghassan Hage calls the “discourse of productive diversity” (2000: 128). In this scenario,
“multiculturalism constituted an economically exploitable resource in the form of hitherto untapped potential”, so as “to give Australia an ‘advantage’ it was much in need of in a competitive international environment” (Hage, 128). In other words, this is “a much clearer discourse of exploitation rather than consumption” (Hage, 128).

On Dao’s part, as the ethnic migrant who has understood the multicultural rhetoric and above all the superficial treatment to issues of cultural diversity, the translation and footnoting work that he undertakes occasionally for Professor McLoughlin is viewed with a healthy dose of personal scepticism as well. As he says,

In our literary tradition in the past, it was common to write footnotes to poetry. For one poet, there would be hundreds of footnoters. This tradition had now slightly changed. We did not write footnotes for Chinese now. We wrote them for Westerners to cater for their love of Chinoiserie. I mean I wrote them for Australians. (114; italics mine)

Amidst Dao’s complex negotiations of his troubled perspectives and relations with China and Australia, he has nonetheless picked up on the multicultural “game” and its terms of engagement. Drawing upon his knowledge of ‘Chinoiserie’ as well as his strategic position as a minority in Australia, he is empowered to a certain extent to cater to and engage with the literary and academic worlds at the superficial level, thereby providing the enrichment to Australian multicultural society by producing “a kind of ethnic surplus value” (Hage, 128).

The similarities and/or parallels between the narratives of Dao, Wu Liao and Warne, accentuate the difficulties involved in migrating from one country to another. In their accounts, the process is even more painful because of their marginalised positions in the
new country. Although they have now attained personal and political freedom —
“freedom that was not available and could not be bought for any price in China” (37) —
the truth of the situation was that “it’s like a hell when there are no friends, no relatives,
no faces of your own race” (41). In addition, being unemployed and living on social
security also meant that even though he was an Australian citizen, as Dao’s sister tells
him, “your position is not that attractive to Chinese women these days” (103). The
expectations of socio-economic ascendancy that attach to the diasporic condition have
not materialised at all for these men who now feel trapped, “cast out of history”,
“unwanted by either country and reduced to this dump” (137).

One of the concerns that this novel illuminates is the exclusion and/or erasure of
diasporic lives and histories from the history of the nation. Cast out from the history of
their homeland, diasporas similarly encounter resistances to their incorporation or
successful integration into the national, social and cultural fabric of their new country. In
Wu’s writing, he believed that “everyone was a historian” and that there should be “as
many [history] books as people”, because

some people, like history, will never write their own history all their life
but then they don’t cease to be history themselves. [...] I am often left with
a regret how much is left out in our history that is written by their
historians, who, it seems to me, exist for the sake of exclusion (167).

In a gesture that aims to challenge that exclusion from mainstream Australian and
Chinese-Australian history, Dao’s writing and translating of his “Australian novel in
Chinese” is an attempt at redressing what he perceives to be a social injustice. Like Wu,
whose “strong point” was his
ability to historicise his daily reality, meaning that he was able to turn his or other people’s lives into a history in his head in the minutest details possible without ever committing his memories to paper (96) and who “had lately come to despise history books that were supposed to be about the real history” (96), Dao’s novel includes a section titled “Interlude: Notes on the Aussies” (168-175). Mainly comprising his passing observations and commentary on Australia, with particular focus on white Australians, this interlude constitutes a provisional historical account of the Australian way of life that is documented at the personal, and highly informal, level. His ‘layperson’ approach to ‘history’, as he sees it, is part of the novel’s aim of dis/uncovering and communicating the histories that are contingent to, but marginalised by, mainstream accounts of historical events. Although limited and perhaps transient, the history that he has chronicled — “a day-to-day account of my characters’ life in Australia for the duration of a year” (20-21) — is no less valid or pertinent than any other forms of historical inventory/documentation.

This novel shows up the various types of subject positions and identities experienced by the diasporic individual, drawing upon the same and commonly used tropes of alienation, isolation, cross-cultural translation, assimilation and identity politics that attach to or are often associated with the diasporic condition. However, it also goes beyond simplistic narrative modes by framing one character’s narrative within another’s account. This novel, moreover, has addressed very aptly the issues facing migrants, especially those for whom the material lures of diaspora have faded or had not even materialised in the first place. In fleshing out the less salubrious aspects of migration, the novel presents through its characters a negative and at times bleak picture of the migration process. Using the
multicultural rhetoric of Australian national discourse, which has pervaded the consciousness of many white Australians and influenced mainstream conceptions of cultural diversity in economic, or value production, terms, the novel exposes the country’s superficial engagement with other minority ethnic groups. At the same time, the significance of Chinese perspectives on Australia provides a counterpoint too, by reiterating and reinforcing images of Australia as “blankness” (54), “silence” (98) and “solitude” (100), void of any human activity. The increasing affluence of Chinese nationals has also perhaps begun to stem or reverse the trend towards migration, so that the condition of being in diaspora has lost some of its perceived benefits and potential, and migration is no longer materially and economically motivated. For that matter, those remaining in the homeland cannot be said to be any worse off. In other words, the position of the diasporic individual is gradually/fast losing its appeal, even credibility, among those in the homeland and those in diaspora as well.

The final point on which I want to conclude is that, from the plethora of Chinese diasporic experiences presented in this novel, it is clear that there are now multiplicities of diasporic identities and consciousnesses through which the subject has to negotiate. The diverse and highly differentiated positions of Chinese diasporic migrants present a complex process of negotiating cultural diversity and cross-cultural translations, while having to consider the engagement with identity politics. As China pushes ahead with its reforms, growing in economic and political stature on the international arena, the significance of Chinese identities and identifications cannot help but be invested, even
constructed, with greater and more open-ended potential. Ien Ang argues in the similar
vein that,

as ‘China’ and ‘Chineseness’ are increasingly becoming signs for global political and economic power in the early twenty-first century, there is no necessary political righteousness in Chinese diasporic identity, the long-standing Chinese tradition of feeling victimized and traumatized notwithstanding. Indeed, there could well be circumstances and predicaments in which it would be politically more pertinent to say no to a particularist Chinese identity, at least if our commitment is a universalist and cosmopolitan one, encompassing all people of the world, not just ‘our own’. (12)

This novel, in shedding light on the vicissitudes of the heterogeneous Chinese diasporic conditions, problematises many aspects of migration that are extremely germane to cultures and communities the world over, so that its illuminations on the Chinese diaspora may also be read as a comprehensive guide to other diasporic groups.
Notes

1 In spite of historical records attesting to the deep racial animosities of that period, this does not prevent Owen Harries from asserting that “Australia is overwhelmingly a country of immigrants, accustomed to receiving, settling and integrating a continuous flow of arrivals. As yet, Australians do not suffer from a serious problem of identity” (2004: 64). Contrast this to the maiden speech by Pauline Hanson, in which she claims that Australia is in danger of being “swamped” by Asian immigration — much in the same vein as David Blunkett, the British Home Secretary, who also used the word “swamping” to describe the effect of migrant numbers on British institutions (Harries, 2004: 64).

2 Most other states refused naturalisation and assumed the power to exclude Chinese from mining.

3 This was one of the first acts passed under the Whitlam government (Gough Whitlam's term as Prime Minister, however, lasted only 3 years, from 1972 to 1975).

4 Eric Rolls writes that “[g]ardening began as an adjunct to Chinese mining but soon became a pursuit in itself”, 1996, 63. See also Ouyang Yü (1993).

5 Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, Second Generation Australians, April 2002.


7 In the report Living Diversity: Australia’s Multicultural Future (see note 5), a survey published by the Special Broadcasting Service, less than 10 per cent of migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds were reported as identifying themselves as ‘Australian’, while 31 per cent of second-generation migrants (defined as “Australians born in Australia, who have one or both parents born overseas”) were more likely to call themselves Australian.

8 Mabel Lee makes the observation that, “[w]hile Castro acknowledges his Chinese ethnicity and this manifests itself at many levels, despite the surface Chinese-Australian connections often contained in his work, there is in fact a clear absence of national boundaries” (1998: 584).

9 This book was awarded the 1983 Vogel Literary Award (shared with three other collections of short stories).

10 In Malaysia, Chinese form the largest racial minority, therefore their presence is still largely felt, especially in business.

11 Because spaces have always been provided for the practices of racial and cultural citizenship, most racial communities have seldom/never had to problematise issues such as race and sense of belonging (in ways which have pertained to Chinese people/communities in countries where their minority status is especially noted in their appearance).

12 Hereinafter cited in the text by page numbers.

13 In 1991 he came to Australia to do a PhD on representations of the Chinese in Australian fiction. See Ommundsen (1998).
Of the 24 chapters in the novel, however, only 4 represent Wu’s life, while the last 2 chapters centre on Warne’s experience. This ‘imbalance’ (disparity) therefore falls short of the dualistic narrative model, as seen in Castro’s novel, although it attempts to address those aspects of diasporic experience absent from Dao’s life in Australia.

The Chinese title reads as *Dongpo Jishi*, referring to a place in China while perhaps also suggesting, by the use of ‘eastern slope’, physical and/or facial features characteristic of Chinese.

It is also highly possible that Dao’s wife was aware of the Australian males’ fondness for Chinese women and intending to exploit that partiality. Like the character of Sally in *Small Pleasures*, Dao’s wife can be seen as wanting to assimilate and ‘fit in’ more easily with white society. In this case, her understanding and manipulation of the appeal of Asian femininity (to the white male imagination) portrays her as a multicultural game player who knows what the host society wants, and feeds it to them, by self-consciously re-enacting the role of an ethnic or ‘exotic’ Asian other.
CHAPTER 6

Floating Lives: Chinese-Australians Re-presented in Floating Life and Sadness

This chapter investigates the visual and cinematic representations and depictions of Chinese diasporas in Australia by Chinese filmmaker Clara Law as well as by photographer William Yang. The visibility of the medium, of screen and stage performance, which accentuates the racially marked difference of the films’ protagonists or subjects, viscerally foregrounds the politics of identity formation and negotiation of diasporic subjectivities against the backdrop of a white Australian socio-cultural, political and historical space. Given the critical acclaim that has greeted Law’s and Yang’s works, it is interesting to note that there has not followed a surge or trend towards filmic productions by and about the Chinese in Australia. 

Floating Life and Sadness have been produced with institutional assistance — the former by the Australian Film Finance Corporation and the latter by the Commonwealth Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body — representing ideologically sanctioned measures. Their commercial successes¹ indicate the general, if not warm, acceptance by the viewing public.

However, as Sneja Gunew and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have noted, “Migrant literature” not only exists as a construct within “Australian discursive formations”, but is also represented by a few token figures who “are elevated very quickly to those who speak for all the immigrants” (Spivak, 1990: 60). While the works of Law and Yang are by no means nor do they purport to be culturally representative, the lack of
alternative artistic and cultural productions implies that the few available narratives become or are then established as normative sketches of the community. Still, the fact that Law’s film resonates so forcefully among its Australian viewership is testimony to the many levels and points of identification that audiences have with the issues, implications and ramifications of migration as raised in the film.

Law’s 1996 feature film *Floating Life*, the first ever foreign language film to be made in Australia,\(^2\) appears after more than three decades since the abolishment of the White Australia policy\(^3\) and more than two decades after the instituting of multiculturalism as official policy.\(^4\) While the film captures, perhaps epitomises, the various experiences of cultural translation, disenfranchisement, dislocation and other effects of migration and the conditions of diaspora, it also highlights the dearth of cultural productions by Chinese in Australia, especially on issues relating to their marginalised status in relation to the predominantly white Australian society. The filmic narrative centres on a newly arrived Hong Kong Chinese family’s experience in migrating to Australia, and portrays with acute sensitivity the impact of physical, social and cultural displacement as experienced by the different members and generations of the Chan family. At the same time as it presents a statement about the difficulties of coming to terms with the new terrain and landscape, *Floating Life* also highlights the personal pressures and complexities that each individual has to grapple with in negotiating a sense of ‘diasporised’ cultural identity.
However, for William Yang, who “[seems] to have made a career of [being Chinese]” (Yang, 1996: 65), the issue of being Chinese in Australia is approached from a different perspective and unveils a profoundly different trajectory, not in the least because of the negative feelings he had had about Chineseness for most of his life. In his show *Sadness*, a monologue with slides, he admits that his engagement with and reclamation of being Chinese did not begin until adulthood. Having had “a completely assimilated upbringing”, Yang, in his work, is therefore able and empowered to present an-other aspect of the marginalised subject identity and experience emanating from the condition of diaspora, or being diasporic. Yang’s engagement with Chineseness, from the perspective of a third-generation Chinese-Australian, is strongly connected to Law’s portrayal of the first-generation Chinese migrant experience in Australia by his foregrounding of shifting identity politics and the multiplicity of subject identification and affiliation. More significantly, it is *from within* the exploration of a marginalised subjectivity that both *Floating Life* and *Sadness* speak to and about these multiple points of identification for the Chinese diaspora.

*Floating Life*

The film begins with a timely scene in a Hong Kong noodle shop, where the Chan family make a brief stop amidst their shopping errands just before departing for Australia. The migrating family, comprising an elderly couple, known only as Pa and Ma, and their two young teenage sons, are set to join second daughter Bing who has been in Australia for several years. We also learn, later, that first daughter Yen lives
in Germany, while eldest son Gar Ming is staying behind in Hong Kong to wait for the approval of his immigration application by the Australian Consulate. Although not knowing much about Australia — for instance, Ma wants to buy flat shoes because she thinks, “they may not have them there” — the family is generally positive about their new country. Pa’s conversation with the noodle shop owner inevitably centres on the topic of migration, because the latter is bound for Vancouver (as he says, “my son’s working on it”). Whether because of the multicultural policies of their chosen countries, or because of their family members who have already settled there, both men agree that Australia and Canada seem ideal, if not favourable, destinations for migration.

When the Chan family arrive at Bing’s house, each member is full of appreciation for the natural beauty and spaciousness of the landscape, even though it is only suburbia that they had so far been exposed to. Pa’s comment, “so beautiful”, echoes his son’s voice-over, “as beautiful as a movie”, and is summed up by Ma’s words, “I’m glad we came”. However, Bing immediately begins her litany of the dangers of living in Australia, as if compelled to quell the optimism of her newly arrived family. Citing the occurrences of deaths due to skin cancer, wasps, redback spiders, dog bites, and other traumas, Bing effectively introduces and inducts her family to the Australian way of life, albeit via a list of prohibitions and precautions. As the film progresses, the parents are unable to live under Bing’s draconian household rules, therefore they buy their own house and move into it, drawing upon proceeds of the sale of their Hong Kong apartment. During this time, eldest son Gar Ming has arrived in Australia
and the family is together, with the exception of Bing who now lives alone with her husband and Yen having returned to Germany after a brief visit to Australia. After suffering from a nervous breakdown, Bing is eventually reconciled with her family, vis-à-vis her mother who, in the film’s climax, sets up the ancestral altar to pray for the restoration of Bing’s health and familial harmony.

I want to enter into an analysis of the film beginning with the character of Bing as the central figure that binds the narrative together, although ironically, she appears in the film as the most isolated and estranged member of the family. The film depicts her as a cold and detached person, whose indifference is evidenced by her representation of Australia to her family; seeing the country in terms of its harshness rather than demonstrating sensitivity to her parents’ sense of novelty and enthusiasm about their new environment. Bing’s representations of Australia to her family, however, are stereotypical images in themselves that are usually drawn upon to instil fear, insecurity and anxiety — which are actually personal issues for her because, as she says, “I had a hard time myself” when she first arrived and lived alone in Australia. The first altercation that Bing has with her family occurs during a raid she conducts on her teenage brothers’ room. Furious about the discovery of pornographic magazines and cigarettes, she reminds her mother that “the world is full of louts”, and further, that “you’re here as migrants, not to enjoy life; you’re leaving your country, okay?” Finally, her ultimatum is issued: “my rules, or back to Hong Kong”. Although her words appear ruthless and calculating, they nonetheless bear the weight and traces of all her personal crises when she first migrated to Australia, and perhaps apply more
to herself than to those whom she addresses. In the later part of the film, Bing’s story is revealed through a flashback narrative that chronicles her life in Australia, as a “single female in the suburbs”. Because of the vulnerability of her position, Australia for her represents dangers on several levels: its spaciousness meaning isolation, its wildlife potentially terrifying and toxic, while the people in her encounters appear to have ulterior motives for extending help.

Bing’s experience of Australia, because tainted with negativity from the start, causes her to view people and situations suspiciously; therefore with a skewed perspective, she rejects, or remains militantly closed to, the possibilities that the country might offer — in other words, resistant to assimilation by the host nation. Her statement, that “you’re here as migrants, not to enjoy life”, is highly revealing because it represents her own experience and understanding of the country as workplace, a purely functional concept, and nothing else. She throws herself into her work and eventually succeeds in business, but has never found time to have a picnic or visit the local park — activities that foster and renew kinship ties, and which are insisted upon when Yen visits from Germany. In comparison with her family, Bing, as a modern and “successful young businesswoman”, appears “very much Westernised” and whose values and behaviour are at odds with the more traditional concepts and practices of her parents (Ma, 2001: 157-168).

Bing’s authoritarian control over her family, including her parents, appears more as a withdrawal into herself rather than her refusal to engage with them on any personal or
intimate level. Moreover, her lack of friends attests to an almost complete sequestration from social life, especially Australian society. She is seen declining drinks with colleagues on a Friday evening, excusing herself with having to wait for her husband’s phone call. However, in the next scene, she is having dinner by herself at a noodle shop, and then working at home on the weekend. Having had to negotiate alone the process of cultural translation and disruption and having undergone, quite painfully for her, dislocation and isolation, Bing’s experience of diaspora has been more of a painful endurance and disenchantment rather than fulfilment and apperception. Cultural border crossing, for her, entails the disposal and replacement of one form of subjectivity (such as suppressing or denying her feminine traits) for another disturbingly detached persona that is seen as a vital attribute for surviving the alienating environment and succeeding in her career.

In line with her harsh and unforgiving attitude towards her family, Bing is especially perturbed by her younger brothers’ behaviours and appearances. While she had previously drawn upon stereotypical images of the dangers of living in Australia, she is at the same time too aware of cultural stereotypes, particularly those pertaining to Asians, and therefore vehemently tries to oppose stereotypical images of Chinese people. The first rule that she issues to her brothers is that they speak only English all the time; next, she is scathing of their overly casual dressing and hairstyles, saying, “people will think all Chinese are like this”. The demands that she makes of her family are, however, drawn from and based upon her personal experience of migrating and settling into the new country. Bing’s question to her brothers — “how
many pages of dictionary have you memorised?” — can be seen as, on the one hand, imposing unrealistic and unreasonable expectations, because she is “judging the old culture according to the standards set by the new, dominant culture” (Ma, 2001: 165). Her family, having recently arrived, cannot adapt as quickly as she expects, as her mother is still in the habit of converting prices of Australian products into Hong Kong dollars, a definite sign of the homeward-looking diasporic individual entrenched within the old homeland economy.

On the other hand, having accepted and adopted the standards of the place ‘where you’re at’, Bing’s relentless admonishments betray an underlying anxiety about the status of migrants in Australia and also signify her efforts to counter and challenge the dominant cultural representations and stereotypes of Asian immigrants. Her resistance to assimilation appears peculiar in the light of the ambitions she has for herself and her family members. However, that resistance is centred particularly on or is reactive to a particularly and specifically constructed type or image of the Asian immigrant entrenched in the dominant discourse and consciousness of white Australia.

Her determination to save “two million Australian dollars” is so that, “even if the government goes bankrupt and has no pension for us Asian immigrants, I will still have enough money till I am eighty. I won’t have to beg for help. There isn’t anyone to turn to for help” [emphasis mine]. The sense of materialism in her rationalisation is overshadowed, however, by intense feelings of desolation and defensiveness that
pervades much of her existence as a migrant. In fact, as an economic migrant, Bing had had to relinquish those aspects of her cultural identity that valorised “Chinese attachment to cultural roots and its tradition of filial devotion” (Ma, 2001: 159). In the absence of family and friends, her personal and emotional well being and development have taken a backseat to her career and professional achievements, resulting in her becoming a cynical, even bitter, indifferent and isolated workaholic.

The phrase, “us Asian immigrants”, sets up in diametrical opposition the two cultures (Asian and Australian), and also illustrates how such perceptions and attitudes towards cultural differences operate to intensify racial stereotypes both ways. This method of alignment with one’s ethnic community relies, and reinforces, the “ghetto mentality” that keeps minority groups marginalised, and sometimes by their own volition too. The appearance of solidarity with one’s own ethnic community (“us Asian immigrants”) as well as withdrawal from mainstream society of the host country nonetheless represent defence mechanisms aimed more towards addressing the oppressive insecurities felt by diasporic individuals or groups that now find themselves in a minority status. This kind of withdrawal, however, is often non- or counter-productive, contributing to and encouraging the proliferation of racial stereotypes that become and remain even more embedded in the dominant cultural consciousness, particularly if those stereotypes hold considerable shock value, or caused more offence.

When Bing says that “there isn’t anyone to turn to for help”, she expresses at a wider and more general level the sense of isolation that most migrants experience in their
new adoptive countries, an isolation that is intensified because of the dual exclusion — from their homeland and now from the host country too. The absence or lack of familiar/familial support networks and close kinship structures easily translates into, and is also experienced as, alienation and loss. The number of years that Bing spends alone in Australia therefore represents a traumatic time in her life, as demonstrated in a scene where she is on the telephone with her husband in Hong Kong, in an extreme state of agitation and distress because of a rat in the house. Further, any solace or comfort that might have been provided by the phone conversation had to be denied because, as she tells her husband, “It’s expensive. I’m hanging up”. Physically cut off from her family, Bing does not even allow herself some measure of comfort and reassurance by talking to her husband on the phone.

Bing eventually befriends a Chinese restaurant owner, but that relationship is a short-lived one. Perhaps unaware of her marital status, the restaurant owner starts helping her out around her house, progressively spending more and more time with her. When his intentions of a romantic relationship become clear, she tells him to leave and effectively ends their friendship. In so doing, she returns once again to face the terrors of living alone, all the more painfully felt because of the vulnerability of her position as a “single female in the suburbs”. Although race is not mentioned, Bing’s vulnerability is intensified by the fact that she is not only a “single female”, but also an “ethnic single female”, who is even more precariously positioned in the suburbs of white Australian society.
By the time Bing’s family arrives in Australia, she has become too inured in her solitary and reclusive ways, lifestyle and beliefs, to accommodate their more traditional notions of kinship and familial ties, especially those cherished by her ancestor-worshipping parents. The notion of ‘legal custody’ that Bing has over her family is an alien concept to them. Although providing accommodation and some basic forms of support for them, Bing remains nonetheless physically and emotionally detached from her family by, for instance, not showing them around the country, or even around the neighbourhood where they live. Her family’s “first and only great adventure in Australia, ever”, is an attempt to buy tea, but the unfamiliar suburban layout eventually defeats their persistent efforts. Bing’s experience of personal and cultural displacement — perhaps a feeling she had wanted her family to undergo or be subject to in much the same way as herself, and hence her detachment — is understood in a significantly different way by each of them. The Australian landscape and environment, once seen as beautiful and “just like in the movies”, takes on a sinister and menacing aspect. Now recalling the dangers impressed upon them at the moment of their arrival, the family begin to shut themselves indoors, in one scene wearing large hats and sunglasses while looking out through the window. The huge disincentive of their new environment, unfamiliar and dangerous, makes their house not only a refuge from the elements but also almost a prison-like enclosure preventing them from the freedom of outdoor activities.

Bing’s brothers eventually resort to stealing the television that she has locked away in her room, while her father listens constantly to world news on his radio transmitter.
These actions express a basic need for connection with the outside world, while also highlighting the family’s exilic\textsuperscript{8} and ex-communicated status because of the alienation from homeland as well as their new country. The teenage boys, who initially thought that “[they] had successfully merged [themselves] into Oz”, find themselves now dreaming of returning to Hong Kong. This happens after their consultation with a doctor to improve their physique, because a comparison with their Australian counterparts at school highlights and exposes their relative physical lack or disadvantage.\textsuperscript{9} Underscoring the boys’ sentiments is the sense of nostalgia about, or idealisation of the homeland. Although still in their teens and therefore, presumably, more adept at making the transition from one culture to another, their longing for the comforting familiarity of Hong Kong is particularly indicative of the strain and hardship they feel subject to while living in Australia.

The displacement and dislocation undergone by the different members of the family are compounded in all instances by the isolation of Australia and the Australian way of life. The family is hardly or never seen interacting with any Australian or other person throughout the film, and there is no way of marking time in the case of Bing’s parents. Discussing whether or not to buy incense to offer their ancestors — and at first not having remembered that it was Day of the Ancestors soon — they eventually decide against it because they “have nowhere to burn it”. Their sense of cultural displacement derives from their lived experience of physical dislocation; being in a new country, Pa advises Ma to “follow the customs of the new village”, because, as he says, “we’re so far away, even if we make an offering, it won’t reach them”. This
acute reminder of separation from their ‘homeland’ is extremely poignant because it accentuates their migrant and exilic status in these simple yet forceful terms, showing up the traditional sense of cultural identity and attachment upon which their notions of self and kinship are based.

The effects of migration eventually manifest in the attitudes of Bing’s parents, who are later worn down by the strain of living in near-isolation in Australia and under the tyrannical rules of Bing’s household. In one scene, Pa reports to Ma, after hearing on his transmitter radio, that, “in America, a twelve-year-old shot his parents”. Ma’s reply, “Are you ready?”, referring to the picnic that the family is about to set out for, carries at this point a heavy and portentous dose of cynicism, because it signifies, on another level, her own (and Pa’s) preparation for their offspring turning against them. The family’s sense of wonder and excitement about having migrated to Australia is, by now, almost completely eroded, and to save the relationship from further strife, Pa and Ma buy their own house and move out of Bing’s house. This act, expectedly, incurs her wrath; yet, when she snarls that, “they’ve betrayed me”, we are left wondering exactly what her expectations were of her family.

The demands that Bing issues to her family are based on her experiences and anxieties that had arisen from her migration to Australia. Although educated and professional, her perception of the country and its vast sense of isolation has created a position of vulnerability in which she feels herself caught, psychologically and emotionally. All her efforts to overcome that vulnerability have consequently
translated into professional achievements and success in business; however, the psychological and emotional baggages that she had had to bear alone are manifest in the repercussions that follow her material and economic advancements. The film’s portrayal of Bing, as an economic migrant, highlights one often-neglected aspect of diasporic movement — that is, the immeasurable personal and emotional costs that are inextricably bound to processes of cultural displacement and dislocation. Migration and the diasporic condition are traumatic experiences for her, and throughout the film, we see the costs of this trauma\textsuperscript{10} manifest in the deterioration of Bing’s relations with her family as well as the detriment to her psychological well-being, culminating in a nervous emotional breakdown. For Bing, her trauma has not ended even with the arrival of her family in Australia because she still has not recovered the ability to redefine herself\textsuperscript{11} — this is one of the characteristics manifest in her constantly inhabiting that liminal space which separates herself from her family, as if to ensure minimal contact and interaction.

Clara Law’s depiction of one family’s migration, especially in the character of Bing, presents a highly complicated and complex picture of diasporic subjectivities as they enter into new configurations of racial and cultural networks and relations while constantly renegotiating identity politics of difference in a new and foreign space. With regards to the marginalised communities of ethnic minorities, this filmic narrative of a single family unit presents an intricate and tangled web of diasporic experiences that challenge and perhaps explode the myths and stereotypes frequently associated with visibly different persons and cultural groups migrating to Australia.
The character of Bing further problematises notions and images of the economic migrant, because she occupies a position of independence and success that runs counter to popular conceptions of the Asian female migrant — usually stereotypically represented as the accompanying and dependent partner. It is arguably and highly plausible that, because of the pervasive images and conceptions of Asian female migrants, Bing has had to work at consciously suppressing her femininity. For instance, the style of her hair, long and straight when she first came to live in Australia, is drastically changed to a short and businesslike style by the time her husband arrives. Bing’s attire appears to only comprise business suits, even when visiting her family at the picnic in the park; this is in stark comparison to when she had previously worn dresses to work and casual clothes around the house when she had first lived on her own. When Ma complains that there is no oil, salt or spices allowed in Bing’s food, we see the extent to which the latter has controlled herself and disciplined her life into an almost sterile existence. Emptied of emotion and void of almost any deep personal expression, Bing’s diasporic condition demonstrates the extent to which, for her, the trauma of migration has been so repressed that the articulation of her deep psychological and emotional needs has been impaired or denied.

Bing’s character in the film can be seen as progressively shifting from one extreme personality type to another. Living by herself in Australia, she is timid and nervous, and, although vulnerable in her solitude, manages to strike up a friendship with a Chinese restaurateur. When her husband finally joins her in Australia, she is reserved,
withdrawn, and too easily suspicious of other people. By the time her family arrives, she has transformed into a successful businesswoman but also a hardened and cynical person. From the moment she is introduced in the film, she is almost always either coldly indifferent, or perpetually wearing a scowl, signifying unhappiness and dissatisfaction with her family, the only people around her. The transformation of Bing’s character represents, on another level, the filmmaker’s statement about the after-effects of migration, namely, the situation of the diasporic individual who is caught, literally, between two worlds and two selves. We do not see the internal conflict and turmoil raging within Bing until the point of her nervous breakdown, when the psychological and emotional burdens become too great to bear. By then, the enormity of her sacrifice and what she had undergone to prepare for her family’s eventual migration restores some perspective to the clinical indifference within which she had apparently sealed herself. In other words, her withdrawn treatment of her family is somewhat exculpated, if only because of the ordeal she went through in order that her family may migrate in comfort.

Befitting the discussion of female migrants as represented in *Floating Life*, I want to now turn to the portrayal of Bing’s mother in the film, who recognises, in no small way, that “Bing and [her] son-in-law have worked hard to adapt to this new land. They are exhausted”. Throughout the film, there had been no mention or reminder of Bing’s hard work and sacrifice; now that the recognition is finally given, this perhaps relieves Bing of her deep personal anxieties, and therefore paves open the path to reconciliation with her family. It is remarkably significant that the film draws upon
the strength of the older generation female of the family as offering the more positive and promising representation of diasporic individuals. Bing’s mother is seen as taking everything in her stride, initially putting up silently with Bing’s household rules and admonishments, to eventually (and calmly) moving out when the threat of an irreparable conflict becomes too imminent. When informed of Bing’s nervous breakdown, she takes the initiative to seek Bing out, going by herself to her daughter’s house to care for her and pray for her health — acts which defy the traditionally circumscribed role of a Chinese mother in initiating reconciliation with her child. The non-traditional representation of Bing’s mother, however, is balanced by the film’s portrayal of her steadfast belief in traditional cultural practices, most notably in her devout ancestor worship. This carefully nuanced portrayal of Bing’s mother also characterises the ongoing process of negotiating cultural assimilation; as Nicholas Jose describes, “Chinese culture has proved apt at absorbing useful elements of other cultures while remaining relatively impervious to being absorbed in return — particularly in the encounter with the West” (1996: 37). Bing’s mother therefore personifies the idealised diasporic individual who is able to manage the interaction and intersection of different cultures while retaining a strong sense of her own cultural identity.

In the deeply moving scene whereby Bing’s mother sets up the ancestral altar in Bing’s house to pray for her daughter’s health and the family’s happiness, she seeks forgiveness most of all for being unable to offer incense to the ancestors because the family is “far away from you all”. Still kneeling, she utters while weeping:
Why, after all these years of not having a homeland? We are used to hardship. Now we have achieved our goal. The whole family is together in Australia, this *paradise on earth*. Why can’t we have any joy? Why can’t we put down our burden and plant our roots in this soil? [emphasis mine]

This passage, delivered heart-wrenchingly, evokes the most intense responses among viewers, and for many reasons too. The juxtaposition of “paradise on earth” with the family’s nomadic state — having been twice diasporised by political upheavals, first from China and then from Hong Kong — accentuates their deep longing and desire, above all else, for a sense of permanence and stability about their existence. Recalling the opening scene in the film, Pa’s comment about Hong Kong — “I say we’ve just been warming our arses here and now we’re off to somewhere else” — highlights the sojourning patterns of the Chinese diaspora as moving “from a less attractive diaspora to a more attractive one” (Safran, 1991: 89). The myth of a return to homeland is severely attenuated for Bing’s parents, especially Pa who remembers having to walk seven days and nights to get across the border into Hong Kong. In spite of the oppressive conditions under which he had been forced to leave his original homeland, he nonetheless reminisces about his ancestral house in China, with a big lotus pond, and still believes in “how nice it would be to retire in the village house”. Ma’s prayers to the family’s ancestors, however, about not having a homeland for so many years, shows that in spite of their (her and Pa’s) homeland idealisation, they are anxious to settle into the new country and feel a sense of belonging to the place, thereby putting to rest the myth of homeland return.
For diasporas that have yet to adequately “settle” into their new adoptive countries, the process of migration is experienced as traumatic because of the physical and psychological disruption to continuity caused by “uprooting” oneself from the homeland. Ma’s anxiety and enthusiasm about the new country and her eagerness to settle into the new ‘homeland’ is symptomatic of the journey and process of recovery for diasporised migrants. This journey is a twofold process that sees migrants assimilate into the dominant culture of their host society while also ensuring the co-existence and integration of their multiple diasporic narratives alongside the national and historical narratives of the receiving country. The importance of the recovery process cannot be undermined because it represents the attempt to preserve and restore the diasporic individual’s sense of identity and culture. This, however, is intended neither to essentialise nor hypostatise the notion of cultural citizenship but rather to affirm and assert the diasporic subject’s core cultural identity so as to better enable the complex transformations and renegotiations of diasporic consciousness.

The process of recovery, when seen also as the ‘covering again’, is meaningful as well because of the re-tracing of diasporic narratives that, upon subsequent and repeated accounts, provides a framework and ready reference to the histories of diasporic trajectories and their heterogeneous narratives. Often, in the journey from homeland to host country, homeland and other familiar cultural narratives are lost or suppressed, which impacts on the diaspora’s relationship and engagement with the new environment. The relentless drive by migrants to succeed in the new country is a measure as well as reflection of their cultural conservatism, compelling them to seek
and attain greater economic and social mobility so as to justify the costs incurred in migration. The pressure facing migrants to make a better life for themselves in their adoptive countries is also embedded in a homeland idealising consciousness because of the need to (more than) validate their disruptive relocation to a new country. For example, Bing’s strenuous resolve to ‘succeed’ in Australia impacts negatively on her personal development and relationships and also highlights the need for individuals to maintain the integrity of their cultural identity and citizenship, which is crucial for more productive and constructive modes of connections and negotiations of cultural identity.

In the final scene that I focus on, the act of setting up an ancestral altar in Bing’s house is especially stirring not only because of its deep signification of cultural ‘otherness’ and ‘authenticity’, but also for the emotions evoked by the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship that unfold. The symbolic function of the cultural artefacts — such as the ancestral tablet, altar and prayer items — overtly reminds the audience of the spiritual, religious and culturally specific practices of Asian communities, bearing traces of the tenacious attachments to culture and tradition. Here, the performance of assembling the altar in the new country represents the desire to establish and re-affirm the spiritual connection with one’s culture, an offering that Ma regrets she had been unable to make because of the family’s relocation to “far away” Australia. This is an act which recognises that, without acknowledging and re-connecting with one’s cultural and historical past, it would be futile or counter-productive to try to establish a sense of permanence about one’s personal and cultural
identity in a new environment. The film therefore makes a profound statement about the contributions of older generation migrants, in its positive depiction of the parents who meet the trials and tribulations of migration with confident optimism and the uncanny ability to ‘transplant’ themselves while still retaining a strong sense of personal and cultural identity. In spite of the turmoil that migration has thrown the family into, they nonetheless regard Australia as “this paradise on earth”, and are keen to make it their new ‘homeland’. In one of the film’s final scenes, Pa is seen drinking tea with his sons in the garden of the family’s new house, and commenting that the space is large enough for a lotus pond, a greenhouse, and for his sons to build their houses. The envisioning of these architectural features — lotus pond and greenhouse for planting tea — although nostalgic for Pa, attests to the optimistic energy of new migrants to Australia who are keen to establish some connection with the new country while maintaining their sense of cultural identity. This is accomplished, in Pa’s instance, by the imagined construction of a lotus pond, a symbolic reminder of the one in his ancestral home in China, and the planting of tea in a new (but dry) land. These represent, effectively, acts of “hybridisation” in which elements of Chinese culture become part of Australian culture, not merely as an enriching add-on but a lasting transformation of what exists already, contributing to the creating of something new. (Jose, 1996: 37)

The acts of tea-planting and of building a lotus pond signify the continuity of one’s cultural heritage, by attachment to traditional practices, while attempting to establish oneself within a new national space. Moreover, the announcement of Bing’s pregnancy at the end of the film furthers that sense of continuity because of the
promise and potential embodied by the next generation; as Jose has observed, “Chinese culture is disposed to survive, even in a hostile environment” (37).

The film’s affirmation and sense of optimism about migration, assimilation and the diasporic condition stands as a positive and optimistic recuperation and recovery of diasporic narratives in Australia, although this is also carefully balanced with the portrayal of the detrimental effects of migration. The disruptions and upheavals to Bing’s diasporic consciousness — having experienced the process of migration as damaging to personal, familial and cultural relationships — result in her deep ambivalence and defensiveness of her cultural identity, which inevitably impact upon her personal relationships. Nonetheless, in fleshing out the challenges and vicissitudes of migration and of being diasporic, the film represents a move toward the recovery of diasporic narratives, opening up and revealing the conflicting and contradicting perspectives that make up the vast array of diasporic conditions and experiences. The three generations of the Chan family, spread across three continents, represent at a microcosmic level the complex material and psychological transformations involved in cultural border crossings.

Sadness

The next film that I want to discuss is a study of the consequences and repercussions resulting from Chinese diasporic migration into Australia. William Yang’s *Sadness* \(^{14}\) is the result of his researching the Chinese in Australia, mostly centring on his family history in North Queensland, combined with his social documentary reflections of his
AIDS-afflicted friends. The dual narrative structure hinges upon the persona of Yang, who shares his experiences of being Chinese as well as being homosexual, and is mostly framed through his experience of loss and mourning for departed friends and family members. His family history is evoked via retracing the story of the murder of Fang Yuen, the late husband of his Aunt Bessie. At one level, Fang Yuen’s murder provides Yang with the opportunity to position his family’s narrative “within the landscapes of Queensland past and present” (Grehan, 2002: 155). At another level, the retelling of Fang Yuen’s murder also allows Yang to make a “political point about the racism inherent in Queensland in the 1920s” (Grehan, 2002: 155). The themes of loss and death in Sadness become further entwined and implicated with issues of racism and discrimination, which, for Yang, resulted in the near-disavowal of his Chineseness from a young age.

The story that Yang tells, about how he discovered his Chineseness, is hereby reproduced at length:

One day, when I was about six years old, one of the kids at school called at me “Ching Chong Chinaman, Born in a jar, Christened in a teapot, Ha ha ha.” I had no idea what he meant although I knew from his expression that he was being horrible.

I went home to my mother and I said to her, “Mum, I’m not Chinese, am I?” My mother looked at me very sternly and she said, “Yes, you are.”

Her tone was hard and I knew in that moment that being Chinese was some terrible curse and I could not rely on my mother for help. Or my brother, who was four years older than me, and much more experienced in the world. He said, “And you’d better get used to it.”

So for most of my life I’ve had negative feelings about being Chinese, which is rather ironic since now I seem to have made a career of it. (64-5)
Moreover, Yang’s “completely assimilated upbringing” meant that he and his siblings did not learn to speak Chinese or learn much about Chinese culture, as “[w]e were brought up in the western way” (21). This was mainly because “Yang’s mother felt that proclaiming one’s Chineseness was not an empowering move and therefore she did not encourage Yang to explore his cultural heritage.” (Grehan, 2002: 156). This is likened to the character of Bing in Clara Law’s *Sadness*, who is anxious for her newly arrived migrant family to assimilate, and thus forbids her younger brothers to speak anything except English at home. As Yang explains,

> I can understand why my mother did this. She only wanted to do the best by us, and by putting us in the mainstream culture she was giving us the most opportunities. The sad part of this process was that the Chinese side was lost and denied, and for most of my adult life I’ve felt uncomfortable about being Chinese. (21)

While the suppression of their Chinese identity appears to be solely motivated by the pressures of their cultural environment, it also underscores the widespread pragmatism that many migrants adopt in their rationalisation of the assimilation process. In other words, diasporic experience is often structured by the influences and pressures of a socio-cultural environment that contains built-in prejudices and discriminations that compel migrants to shed their primary cultural identities and affiliations in the pursuit of material advancements.

Yang’s mother, as he explains — recalling his father’s proposal and his parents’ subsequent marriage — “was in two worlds”, because

> In the pragmatic traditional Chinese world, marriage was merely an economic contract, but my mother had been born here and she allowed herself the indulgence of love and romance. (63)
This passage emphasises the “in-betweenness” of his mother’s position, who, caught in the conservative and “traditional Chinese world”, is meant to function merely as an exchange object in the “economic contract” between two families. Yet, “the indulgence of love and romance” now tarnishes the pragmatism of her Chinese cultural identity, thereby hinting at the already assimilated diasporic subject in the process of renegotiating her cultural affiliations. At five years of age, Yang’s mother was registered as a male because “it was considered useful to have a male birth certificate as later a boy could be smuggled into the country from China” (43). Later, as she tells Yang,

“Aunt Bessie was always sick, I brought up her children. If there were any decisions to be made, they’d come to me. I was the practical one, I ran the household, I learned to drive a car. Bessie never learned to drive, she never wanted to” (53-4).

These experiences — forced and moulded by circumstances — demonstrate the pressures and pragmatic sensibilities that governed much of Yang’s mother’s life. It was therefore inevitable and/or expected that she would quickly assimilate with the Australian way of life, and subsequently raise her children to in a completely assimilated fashion. This was not only to provide them with “the most opportunities”, but also to obviate the negative aspects and experiences of being Chinese in Australia, being too mindful of the racial discrimination towards Chinese by the white bureaucracy and also having lived through the unjust murder trial of Fang Yuen.

Yang’s own findings from his research into the murder of Fang Yuen unearths a multitude of responses as varied as his interviewees; however, the “one detail that everyone agreed on, [was that] the Chinese at the time felt very bitter about the
outcome of that trial. They thought there had been a great miscarriage of justice” (35). This is hardly surprising when considering the mood of 1920s Queensland; “In those days killing a Chinaman was not considered a serious crime” (68). Therefore, despite the fact that everyone in town was aware that Fang Yuen was murdered by the “white Russian, Peter Danelchencko” who was a manager on one of Fang Yuen’s cane farms, the accused/perpetrator was acquitted and, a few years later, began to openly wear Fang Yuen’s diamond ring. As Yang’s mother was only sixteen at the time of the murder and trial, it was perhaps a traumatising experience for her to be involved, having to give evidence, and therefore she chose “to put it out of her mind completely” (69). For Yang, this meant the near-total suppression of his ethnicity, because, while his mother could have taught them Cantonese, “she never did — frankly she couldn’t see the point” (64). The sheer weight of the prevailing cultural and environmental pressures simply did not present an encouraging case for asserting and demonstrating one’s ethnicity and difference from the mainstream.

The experience of racism against the Chinese that was evident in Fang Yuen’s murder trial in 1920s Queensland appears relegated to the past in Yang’s contemporary narrative retelling. However, Yang himself admits to feeling “the legacy of the murder come down to me in that my ethnicity was suppressed” (69) — a definite sign of the repercussive effects of having been historically and systematically discriminated against, in spite of his assimilated upbringing. The suppression of his ethnicity also meant the ready absorption and inculcation of the dominant cultural hegemony and internalisation of popular attitudes and sentiments towards cultural
‘difference’, especially his own ‘otherness’. For Yang, this led to an interiorisation of the racism and racist culture of that society within which he lived. As he says,

I completely identified with being Australian. My tastes were all Western. I learned European and Australian history at school . . . I was mad about American movies and worshipped the Hollywood stars . . . There was nothing Chinese about me except for the way I looked and that was a problem for me. (1992: 21)

The most visible and visual aspect of Yang’s Chinese identity places him outside of mainstream Australian society and culture, in spite of the identifications that he experiences. Because of the way he looked — and in spite of having been thoroughly assimilated as a third-generation Chinese Australian — he still is regarded and perceived as ‘other’ when ‘at home’. This internalisation of racism is expressed in a similar manner by Tony Ayres in his article “China Doll”:

I started to see Chinese people through Caucasian eyes — a small, oily race with noisy table manners. I had an obvious blind spot (i.e. the mirror), but then I kept telling myself I wasn’t Chinese. I shunned the other Asian kids at school. I grew tall on Australian food. I forgot how to speak Mandarin, my first language. I became a “banana.” Yellow on the outside, white on the inside. (1999: 88)

The internalising of dominant white racist attitudes and perceptions towards one’s own ethnic and racial group is a form of violence to the consciousness of diasporic persons who are or have been already compelled to deny their racial and cultural identity. The discomfort and unease that many later-generation Chinese Australians feel about their Chineseness is therefore a direct result of having a significant aspect of their identities suppressed.

Yang also elaborates on the types of racism that operate in Australian as well as Chinese-Australian society. In another essay, “Japan”, he writes:
The overseas Asians don’t know about this, it is basically a colonial experience. The racism they experience is something external, directed at them, but they don’t know what it’s like to internalise a loathing of one’s own race . . . Since racism is a social phenomenon, it is natural that it is absorbed even if you belong to the group against whom the prejudices run. So you have running inside you an ingrained loathing of the way you look. (1994: 59-60)

As a third-generation Chinese-Australian with an assimilated upbringing, this means that for Yang, the racialised ‘gaze’ functions as a double-edged sword — causing him to identify with the dominant culture by absorbing the racist views of his own cultural group, while at the same time subjecting himself to his own racism. In other words, as both subject and perpetrator of the racist gaze, Yang is inevitably caught up in the oppositional structuring of his diasporic consciousness that identifies with two distinct cultures. This is the disempowering aspect of Paul Gilroy’s notion of the diasporic “double consciousness”. As Eva Hoffman describes it, Gilroy’s “double consciousness” consists of “having a doubleness or different perspective [that] enables a distance, or if you like, the possibility of being able to imagine different futures, different sorts of ways of writing the past” (1998: 25). However, the different ways of writing the past in this instance is vastly different from the ‘recovery’ mode engaged by diasporic history and narratives in their assimilation with and insertion into the dominant culture and its ‘foundational’ narratives. Yang’s experience and internalisation of racist attitudes towards his own culture represents the disavowal of diasporic history and cultural identity, which thus exerts considerable influence on the articulation and negotiation of cultural citizenship that is aligned with dominant cultural perspectives.
The importance of Yang’s social-documentary work in *Sadness*, as well as other shows in which he raises the issues of race and ethnicity, cannot be overlooked because the project of recovering the past is especially significant for diasporic communities whose histories have been obscured or put under erasure in the writing of the white nation state’s history. Yang, as a third-generation Chinese-Australian and “perceived as ‘other’ when at home” (Jacobs, 2002: 203), signifies the space in which contestations of subjectivity, nationhood and nationality, are increasingly being problematised. Australian-born Chinese, Australians of Chinese descent, Chinese-Australians and so on, are, according to genealogy, marked as outsiders to mainstream Australian society as well as being bearers of racial and cultural prejudices. The history of discrimination and violence against Chinese in Australia is now perpetuated with the persistence of the racist gaze and manifest in forms of self-oppression and self-loathing by Chinese-Australians — thereby continuing the violence to the diasporic body and consciousness.

The mechanisms and functions of the racism are important for an understanding of how notions such as ‘unity’, ‘nationhood’, and ‘ethnicity’ are constructed and deployed for the advancement of nationalistic goals. The nation state’s grand narrative and rhetoric of national ‘unity’ and homogenous culture” function primarily as representational strategies targeting the exclusion and inclusion of desirable and undesirable bodies. In Australia, this takes the form of imagined and invented common interests and cultural practices (Jacobs, 2002: 211) that attempt to demarcate an ‘us’ from an ‘other’. As Etienne Balibar explains, this involves instituting “in real
(and therefore historical) time their imaginary unity against other possible unities” (1991: 49). To this end, nationalism is thus understood as “the product of a fictive ethnicity”. Moreover, there exists a “broad structure of racism” which “maintains a necessary relation with nationalism and contributes to constituting it by producing the fictive ethnicity around which it is [organised]” (Balibar, 1991: 49). In other words, the fictional construct of a national ‘unity’ is at the same time a process of ‘othering’ by which the imagined unity of the nation rests on the strength of its construction (and vilification) of its ‘other’.

In contemplating the orchestration of racist discourse and rhetoric as stratagems of unification for the nation state, little has been said about the internalising of the racist ‘gaze’ by the ‘other’ who is ‘at home’ in and among the dominant culture.

Considering that the child’s world-view is re-shaped by an internalisation of racism and exclusion, the implications and manifestations of this discursive oversight bear heavily upon the diasporic individual. In this instance the Chinese-Australian is, according to Lyn Jacobs, “doubly disenfranchised by a society with a history of egalitarian ideals undercut by a reluctance to legitimate difference” (2002: 211). Jacobs refers in her article to the social, cultural and political milieu within which Chinese-Australian writers work, namely, the instituting of multiculturalism as official policy in Australia in 1979. With the adoption and declaration of an official multicultural state and policy, the previously imagined homogenous space of the nation state was rendered more accommodating towards ‘other’ groups and peoples. However, multicultural policy has also been widely recognised as a containment
strategy that neutralises difference, sanitising and sterilising ‘otherness’ while
fetishising and commodifying the products and discourses of ‘exotic’ others. As
Homi Bhabha has remarked, the discourse of multiculturalism entails simultaneously
“a creation of cultural diversity and a containment of cultural difference” (1990:
208). Ultimately, the machinations and rhetoric of multiculturalism draws and relies
heavily upon distinct notions of racial and ethnic difference, enabling the segregation
of the national ‘us’ and non-national ‘others’. These practices of reifying difference
thus produce rigid notions of otherness — which then implement and sustain the
capacity for recognition and accommodation of difference — while also fossilising
lines of racial, ethnic and cultural divisions. Ien Ang’s summation of the situation in
Australia is therefore one whereby

Asians are no longer excluded (as they were during the White
Australia Policy), nor are they merely reluctantly included, despite
their difference, but because of it! What we have here is acceptance
through difference, inclusion by virtue of otherness. (2001: 146)

From these categorical impositions of identity, stereotypes are produced which
perpetuate and reinforce dominant, hegemonic constructions and understandings of
otherness.

While these methods of representation serve to maintain a fictive unity for the
dominant white Australian culture, in which the ‘other’ is marginalised as ‘alien’ and
‘outsider’, the effect on the Australian-born Chinese is one of double displacement;
denied the status of ‘whiteness’, they are at the same time compelled to disavow their
Chineseness. Yet, these ‘foreign bodies’ that belong to and identify with the
national and cultural space of white society function at the same time to destabilise
the imagined unity of the white nation state. In other words, the designated (Chinese) ‘other’ challenges stereotypical representations of Chineseness and undermines popular conceptions of cultural identity. The Chinese-Australian, not quite as ‘other’ as imagined or perceived, thus occupies what Jacobs (referring to the work of Brian Castro) describes as, “a culturally destabilised position as a site of new agency” (2002: 203), facilitating “a positive transgression of cultural boundaries”. This is especially manifest in narratives that speak to and about the experience of cultural displacements and transformations that appear unsettling namely because of the disruptions to normative representations and circumscriptions of stereotypes, which effectively challenge their assigned and perceived positions within society. Racial genealogy and ethnic identity are hereby shown to mask rather than reveal identities, as Ien Ang has documented in her book, *On Not Speaking Chinese*.

Yang’s work in *Sadness* not only confronts the challenge of breaking stereotypes and resisting hegemonic constructions of Chineseness, but also unsettles notions of marginalisation as well. Firstly, his narrative positions him as storyteller, albeit from the ‘marginalised’ positions of being non-white and homosexual, as well as researcher into his family history and social documentarist of the Sydney gay social scene. Although on the periphery of white Australian society, Yang takes on an active role to illuminate the realities of existence for non-dominant groups and communities. Moreover, in his re-telling of historical events, he locates his family firmly within the Australian landscape, inserting his family history within the national Australian narrative, especially with family members who had been involved in the war:
My cousins Les and Frank had fought in the war. Aunt Bessie tried to stop them, she never understood why her sons wanted to fight for their country. She was born in Australia but her affiliations were with China. She didn’t have the same sense of country as they did.

In this passage, where members of the same family have conflicting national and political affiliations, Aunt Bessie is portrayed as being less patriotic because of not identifying with the Australian cause during the war, while her sons are acknowledged as “more Australian”. By the same token, Aunt Bessie, in spite of being Australian born, would also be credited with being more ‘authentic’ and culturally ‘pure’ Chinese compared with her sons.

Yang’s re-presentation of his family history is also an act of reclaiming the historical past of the Chinese community whose experiences and narratives had been obscured and erased by dominant white Australian accounts of history. His quest for the ‘truth’ behind Fang Yuen’s murder and investigation into the trial have unearthed a multitude of contradictory responses from family members. Going through the records at the Innisfail Court House, he finds that the testimonies and depositions of witnesses for the trial are equally at odds with each other. The conclusion that he arrives at —

I think I can say that the police were out to get Fang Yuen or, rather, that they were trying to save the white man. In those days killing a Chinaman was not considered a serious crime. (68) — does not change or re-make history, but rather, and more importantly, represents the re-instatement of at least a Chinese voice into the narrative of the murder trial, and reclaims the history as his own, recognising it as part of his heritage. As Ien Ang has
described, Yang’s “identification as Chinese took place in a context of co-existence and interaction with others, others who were identifiably different from him. Yang’s Chineseness then is fundamentally relational and externally defined, as much as it is partial” (Ang, 2001: 48). Yang’s own admission, that “I’ve had to work hard to reclaim my heritage” (22), is also complicit in the construction of Chineseness as externality and as an entity separate and outside of him.

However, when Yang visits China, he records his experience as follows:

I’ve been back to China and I’ve had the experience that the ex-patriot American writer Amy Tan describes; when she first set foot in China, she immediately became Chinese. Although it didn’t quite happen like that for me I know what Amy’s talking about. The experience is very powerful and specific, it has to do with land, with standing on the soil of the ancestors and feeling the blood of China run through your veins. (23)

At once, the Chineseness that used to resided outside of him is now, somehow, immediately and substantially internalised (via “blood” links), so that Yang falls into a readily identifiable categorisation of ‘race’. According to Ang, this “provides a reductionist, essentialising discursive shortcut, in which . . . the signifier ‘Chinese’ is torn from its historical, cultural and political embedding and lodged in a biologically constituted racial category” (2001: 49). Still, the empowering experience of being in China cannot be made to apply to all diasporic Chinese persons in general; as his family history has shown, members of the same immediate family can and do have significantly different points of identification and affiliations, much less national and cultural allegiances.
The aspects of Yang’s identity — being Chinese and homosexual — as presented in *Sadness*, appear to be structured around the experiences of loss, mourning, and grief. The depth of emotions involved when dealing with the departures of friends and family are, as Grehan has observed, delivered in an almost “oddly clinical” yet fascinating manner (2002: 155). By positioning himself as a detached narrator and removing all traces of his own responses and feelings, Yang can also be seen to have moved beyond “attempts at transcendence or salvation”, choosing instead to be located within “the elaboration of more desirable social and political institutions and practices” (LaCapra, 1999: 708). In other words, Yang’s articulation of his experiences of loss and sadness in traumatic events performs and accomplishes what Dominick LaCapra describes as “a less self-deceptive confrontation with transhistorical, structural trauma . . . in order to further historical, social and political specificity” (1999: 708). Writing about and differentiating between historical and structural forms of trauma, LaCapra says that

> As historical events that are indeed crucial in the history of peoples, traumas might instead be seen as posing the problematic question of identity and as calling for more critical ways of coming to terms with both their legacy and problems such as absence and loss. (1999: 706)

The experiences of grief that Yang undergoes and subsequently documents in his slide-show monologue presents an *alternative* and *creative* means of coming to terms with various alterities, especially in his perceived and multiple positions as ‘other’. His subject identity and identification, already problematised by his heterogeneously ‘othered’ position, is further challenged by the experience of trauma. In comparison with Bing in Law’s film, I would argue that Yang’s ability to redefine himself, as
well as re-negotiate subject positions and roles in his performance, represents an effective form of closure and personal resolution to the experience of trauma.

The experiences and examples of Yang’s personal and familial history provide a diverse and complex background against which new understandings and negotiations of Chineseness and ethnicity may arise. The identities represented in *Sadness* work also to disrupt notions of community and break stereotypes of Chineseness. As photographer and artist, Yang turns his racialised gaze on his family and observes, of his fifth-generation Australian cousins:

> Each of these kids is a quarter Chinese, and on their Chinese side they’re all fifth-generation Australian. It takes a hundred years to get a blend like this. (29)

What he is highlighting here is the ‘hybrid’ condition resulting from cultural and racial transformations that are now altering popular perceptions and conceptions of cultural difference and otherness, leading to increasingly negotiated and negotiable boundaries that effectively dismantle racial distinctions and other differentiations.

The emphasis on his family’s history of fifth-generation Australians, especially in his slide show performances, is narrated from “a position of stillness”, inviting the spectator to enter into the performance, “to participate, to inscribe ourselves variously within the terrain set out for us by the performance” (Grehan, 2002: 151). At one level, Yang, as “both the narrator and the subject of his performance: the central icon and the peripheral storyteller” (Grehan, 2002: 151), occupies a dual position that appears to destabilise the categories of narrator and narrative subject. Jacqueline Lo has also observed that, “by juxtaposing the racially marked body of the
performer/writer with the narrative of his family’s integration into Australian
day”, Yang’s performances “actively intervene to liberate ethnic identity from the
politics of origin”, thereby dismantling the stereotype of “what a Chinese is” (1998:
66-7). As narrator and narrative subject, Yang is able to construct for himself a new
position as reader of Australian history and historical events.

At another level, the audience is imbricated into Yang’s performative process, and
becomes aware of not just looking at Yang, the performing subject and
his visual text, but also of being incorporated into his frame of vision
— of looking at other objects/subjects through his photographic eye/I.
We become acutely aware of the circulation of the gaze in the
performance — of the audience looking at Yang and his slide
projections, of Yang looking at the audience looking at him, and of
Yang looking at the projections. (Lo, 2000: 165-6)

Yang’s performance, in turning the racialised gaze onto his audience, is an illustration
of the diasporic subject perceiving and disseminating his perceptions of Australian
history and society, relating to the social and cultural spheres from an increasingly
empowered position. By drawing attention to his family history and networks, Yang
also occupies a position from which to confront his audience by laying bare the facts
of history and relying on the narrative threads themselves to provoke his audience.
This position is highly unsettling because of the disruption that it poses and presents
to dominant attitudes about ‘Chineseness’ and ‘Australianness’, while also
undermining prior understandings and fictive constructions of ethnicity and
nationhood. Above all, the resistance to hegemonic practices of naming and
categorising ‘otherness’ also works to unsettle notions of ‘home’ and ‘homeland’,
with their attendant implications of ‘centre’ and ‘margin’. The question and identity
of the ‘national subject’ becomes problematic, when the diasporic and racially marked body locates and identifies itself with the social, cultural and political space of the nation state.

For Chinese-Australians such as Yang, the knowledge and experience of being Chinese is an extremely attenuated and mediated one because, firstly, Chineseness for them constitutes merely one of the multiple points of identification and cultural affiliation. Secondly, living outside of the Chinese mainland and belonging to that group of ‘overseas’ or diasporic Chinese over whom China has no claim, Yang is identified as the westernised overseas Chinese who is forced to take up a humble position, even a position of shame and inadequacy over his own “impurity” (Ang, 2001: 32). The issue of “impurity” and its connotations of ‘inauthenticity’ are further exacerbated by the inability of such diasporic Chinese to speak Chinese, much less recognise or write the language. Ien Ang, in recalling the pronunciation of “What a fake Chinese you are!” in response to the revelation of her illiteracy in the language, describes this condition as being “hegemonically constructed as a lack, a sign of loss of authenticity” (2001: 30). Although this perception has been recognised as emanating from and supporting the culturally dominant position in white societies, the effect on assimilated diasporic individuals and groups is nonetheless a disempowering one that undermines their experiences and understanding of Chineseness. For them, disempowerment stems, firstly, from their being culturally and geographically removed from the ‘centre’ of Chineseness, and secondly, from being perceived as ‘inauthentic’ by both the dominant and their own cultures because
of stereotypical constructions of ‘Chineseness’. While Chineseness in these circumstances constitutes an alienating aspect of their assimilated identities, diasporic Chinese nonetheless can defy and resist expectations and ascriptions of Chineseness, and ultimately reveal notions of cultural “authenticity” to be “flawed paradigm[s] of universal or essential notions of identity” (Kamboureli, 2000: 17).

Ien Ang’s agreement with Khachig Tölöyan’s definition of diasporas, as “transnational formations which interrogate the privileged homogeneity of the nation-state” (2001: 34), serves to highlight its “potential to unsettle static, essentialist and totalitarian conceptions of ‘national culture’ or ‘national identity’ which are firmly rooted in geography and history” (2001: 34). Further, she emphasises the need for “a critical diasporic cultural politics” that

should privilege neither host country nor (real or imaginary) homeland, but precisely keep a creative tension between ‘where you’re from’ and ‘where you’re at’ . . . to foreground the multiperspectival productivity of that position of in-between-ness. (35)

The production of “hybrid cultural forms” and the notion of “biculturality” are evidenced in such a work as Yang’s Sadness, which presents a challenge on several levels — the problematising of diasporic subjectivities and identities while calling into question the practices of ethnic and racial divisions and differentiations; the juxtaposing of different modes of marginalisation of identity that highlight the irreducibility and mutability of that identity; as well as disturbing and redefining the roles of performer, performed subject and spectator. These challenges that, ultimately, disrupt and/or transform ways of seeing also produce new subjectivities that can contribute towards alternative discursive formations around the issues of race, culture,
ethnicity and so on, and that may come to bear upon multicultural policy formation. Just as there is a need for “a critical diasporic cultural politics”, when the recognition arises that differentiations and differences of affiliation constitute lived diasporic realities, so will there be the need for a critical multiculturalism that, according to the Chicago Cultural Studies Group, “minds its proximity to the historical present and its different obligations to the variety of publics in which it circulates” (1992: 553).

Smaro Kamboureli’s advocacy of a “negative pedagogy” approximates the instituting of “a critical diasporic cultural politics” and “critical multiculturalism”; as she explains, it may enable us to begin to address history and the historicity of our present moment responsibly — without, that is, maintaining the illusion of innocence or non-complicity . . . Negative pedagogy themati[s]es not only the object of knowledge, but also the method of learning and unlearning inherited truths. (25)

The implications and manifestations of negative pedagogy are already to be found in the dismantling of grand narratives involving race, nation and ethnicity. As the works of William Yang and Clara Law have demonstrated, ‘ethnic’ diasporas that have located and identified themselves within the social and cultural fabric of white nation-states serve as constant reminders of the problematisation of multiculturalism, while renegotiating and expanding on perceptions and definitions of otherness and difference.
Notes

1 Floating Life has been transferred to video and has also had repeat broadcasts on SBS, Australia’s public broadcasting service “dedicated to not only the reflection, but also the propagation, of multiculturalism” (Cunningham and Sinclair, 2000: 21). The stage performance of Sadness has toured internationally and was later made into book and film.

2 Shot mostly in Cantonese with English subtitles, with assistance from the Australian Film Finance Corporation, New South Wales Film and Television Office and Film Victoria.

3 Al Grassby, the Minister for Immigration (under the Whitlam Labour government), issued the statement entitled A Multi-Cultural Society for the Future in 1973, making it a new government policy.

4 The Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs (AIMA) was set up in 1979, but replaced by a government agency, Office of Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs in 1987.

5 First staged in Sydney with grant assistance from the Australia Council in 1992, the show has travelled around Australia and overseas, and has subsequently been presented in book and video forms. Hereafter cited in the text by page numbers.

6 Defined by Cunningham and Sinclair as, “people wanting to improve or just maintain their life-chances, and willing to go and work in any one of a whole range of countries in order to do so” (2000: 11).

7 I refer, in this statement, to Dominick LaCapra’s article, “Trauma, Absence, Loss” (1999), where he makes the distinction between absence and loss, but also highlights the easy slippage between the two terms. See also Max Hernandez, in Diacritics, 28.4 (Winter 1998).

8 I want to highlight the distinction, as explained by Cunningham and Sinclair, that, “while exiles cannot go home, some other kinds of diasporic people can and do” (2000: 11). In this case, the family are in a position whereby they are able to go home, but have chosen not to, therefore identifying to a certain extent with the exilic condition.

9 The comparison with their Australian peers and the subsequent desire to improve their physique is also symptomatic of an internalisation of the white, Western ideal of masculinity, or notions of physicality. The assimilation and integration into Australian society may also lead to absorption of racialised and/or racist perceptions that can turn into self-effacement and self-loathing, as I discuss later in this chapter on the work and life of William Yang.

10 Trauma, characterised by virtue of the disjunctions it manifests, in its formulation “bears the mark of a construction emerging as the narrative of a belated experience” (Hernandez, 1999: 134). Bing’s narrative of her migration to Australia therefore feeds and constructs her current disposition of sullenness and withdrawal. See Max Hernandez (1998: 134-41).

11 See LaCapra (1999).

12 See Ien Ang, On Not Speaking Chinese (2001: 8), where she describes “long, straight black hair” as “a fatuous but still all-too-common manifestation of the erotic exoticization of Asian femininity which has long been part of western Orientalism”.

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According to an article titled “The Traditional Chinese Family & Lineage” by David K Jordan (http://weber.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/chin/hbfamilism-u.html), no two members of a Chinese family were equal in authority. Officially at least, senior generations were superior to junior generations, older people were superior to younger ones, and men were superior to women. Normatively [...] a family would be headed by a man who was older and/or of more senior generation than anybody else. When wills clashed, it was expected (and legally enforced) that the will of a family superior should prevail over the will of a family inferior. Traditional law held a child’s insubordination to a parent to be a capital offense, and a daughter-in-law’s insubordination to her parents-in-law grounds for divorce. Acts of heroic sacrifice in the support of one’s parents are the commonest and most important genre of Chinese moral tales. (Accessed 14 February 2006)

While the level of care and concern shown by Ma towards Bing may not be considered unusual or extraordinary for non-Chinese persons, the elaboration provided in the above passage accounts, to a large extent, the significance of Ma’s actions in relation to her daughter in circumscribed Chinese family relationships.

Sadness was written and first performed live by Yang in the early 1990s. This autobiographical monologue travelled to arts festivals around the world, enjoying international success over the years, before it was adapted to the screen in 1999 by director Tony Ayres. It has earned seven awards in Australia and has been placed as a finalist in a documentary section of the 1999 New York Festivals Television Programming Awards. Source: Greg Leong (2002). Hereinafter cited by page numbers that refer to the print publication.

See Leong (2002). In his essay, he observes (of the gay scene) that “many Asians out cruising have developed a sexually racist attitude against their own racial type”.

I borrow this phrase from the title of Hwee Hwee Tan’s novel, Foreign Bodies (1997).
CONCLUSION

In my mind, I have two homes ... So no matter which home I am going to, I am always leaving another one behind. Some part of me is always absent. Missing the sights and smells of one as I go rushing to the other. Migrants, I think, are people who are never whole, never completely in one place. Ours is a fractured existence. (Chai, 1995: 20)

In an era of increasing transnational flows of cultural meanings, people and products, it is important to rethink, re-theorise and re-conceptualise ways of approaching and understanding the notion and phenomenon of ‘diaspora’ (Castells, 1996). While global bureaucracy “constructs one’s identity according to the nation-state one belongs to” (Chen, 1998: 25-6), the pressures of globalisation on the one hand “[deepen] the ‘hybridity’ of the already hybrid subject” while, on the other hand, invoking national-ethnic identity “as a result of heavy trafficking and interactions” (Chen, 1998: 25). “The flow of capital, of population, of cultural identity, etc.” (Chen, 1998: 25) points therefore to the proliferation of identities, meanings and interpretations of national, ethnic and cultural citizenship. This dissertation has been concerned with notions of identity especially related to diasporic communities in marginalised positions and has argued for a broadening of the term ‘diaspora’ as well as for more fluid conceptualisations of diasporic subjectivities, identities, and group formations.

In comparing the situations of Canada and Australia with regards to the Chinese diaspora, significant disparities abound even when we consider that both countries
have adopted official policies of multiculturalism. As a result of more than two
decades of official multiculturalism in Canada and Australia, the constitution and
composition of diasporic community profiles have changed significantly. The politics
of these countries, too, have altered considerably as a result of the implementation of
multiculturalism as official state policy, and with changing attitudes towards the
treatment of migrant and diasporic communities.

While there have been much theorisation and writing about the official and/or
national state of affairs with regards to the management of migrants, difference and
diversity in a climate of ‘tolerant’ state multiculturalism, this dissertation has
examined the ways in which diasporas are imagined, and how they imagine
themselves; in other words, examining from within diaspora the politics and
representational strategies employed in their personal and community developments.
In Chapter 1, a survey of the writing and theorisations about diasporas identified three
distinct ways in which they may be conceptualised and provided an overview of how
diasporic groups negotiate relationships and cultural space in the host country. At the
same time as these diasporic groups and individuals are forging their new sense of
belonging as minority groups, the memory of and nostalgia for homeland (and other
idealised spaces and times) also bear strongly upon their sense of cultural identity.
These carry over and cross geo-physical and cultural borders, thereby enabling and
strengthening a sense of cultural citizenship in predominantly white, western nation
states.
In the analysis of relations between the nation-state and the migrant community, it is important to recognise also the minority individual and group’s self-representation and negotiation of cultural difference in a diverse multicultural setting. The diversity of that multicultural setting constitutes the basis for “diaspora space” (Brah, 1996: 181), wherein a wide range of cultural practices and documents may be instated and established, for the ‘constructed’ and ‘negotiated’ nature of ethnic social identities and spatial interventions. Moreover, individual and group access to these spaces, resources and other privileges can and do differ profoundly, within and between diasporic communities, thus affecting the type and manner of self-representation by diasporas themselves. It is propitious that, synchronous with the prevalence and proliferation of cultural stereotypes and other racially deterministic normativisations, there are now alternative forms of representation undertaken by diasporic writers and artists that challenge hegemonic constructions and ‘mainstream’ representations — thereby resisting co-optation — of ethnic minorities.

The diasporic texts surveyed in this dissertation have shed light on the formations of diasporic lives and communities, their similarities and differences, and how particular groups and individuals have come to be ‘situated’ in and through discourses, economic processes, state policies and institutional practices (Brah, 1996: 182). While diasporic narratives are primarily about migration, displacement and dislocation, they are, paradoxically, also “essentially about settling down, about putting roots ‘elsewhere’” (Brah, 1996: 182). As Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur point out
Although it is true that not everyone can cross borders with ease, and while it is true that not everyone necessarily wants to traverse borders, it is also true that for reasons of necessity and sometimes choice, people do cross borders and see their lives unfolding in diasporic settings. (2003: 15)

In the unfold of diasporic lives and trajectories, as seen in the films and novels discussed, migrants, reluctantly or otherwise, often and eventually reinvent and (re)create their unique sense of diasporic identity and culture. Especially for the accompanying families and children of migrants, the condition of being diasporic is often imposed upon them. Therefore, while diasporic texts are often perceived and conceived as narratives dealing largely with experiences of dislocation, disconnection and disconnectedness, they are at the same time equally as much about transitions, reconnections, the establishing of new ties, and creating of new and different affiliations, identities and subjectivities.

Moreover, along with the need to emphasise and foreground a more fluid notion of ‘diaspora’ and of diasporic movements is the imperative to pursue more fully multi-textured studies of diasporic lives and lived experiences. The politics of dislocation needs to be tempered with a consideration of the politics of location and reconnection; in other words, the balancing of ‘where you’re from’ with ‘where you’re at’ to emphasise the distinction between ‘homing desire’ and ‘desire for homeland’ (the latter entailing an ideology of ‘return’). As this dissertation’s analysis of the respective narratives has demonstrated, there is a strong urge by sojourning migrants to forge and establish some kind of relationship with their new host countries, emanating from the biological and physiological need to ensure a sense of
continuity of one’s culture while negotiating an equally important sense of belonging — sometimes interacting, intersecting and overlapping with other diasporic groups — in a new country.

With respect to the Chinese diaspora, there are multiple journeys that may configure into one journey via a confluence of narratives as it is lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory. It is within this confluence of narrativity that a ‘diasporic community’ is differently imagined under different historical circumstances. William Safran’s comparison of diasporas across the world — such as the Armenian, Polish, Maghrebi, Portuguese, Turkish, Indian, and (of course) the Palestinian and Jewish diasporas — includes also what he calls, the “Chinese expatriate communities”, who share the “cultural preoccupations of the Jewish and Armenian minority communities in their efforts at maintaining a variety of communal institutions” (1991: 89). There is also the acknowledgement that, for the Chinese diaspora, “the homeland myth — and with it, diaspora consciousness — has been attenuated in several locations” (Safran, 1991: 89).

However, Safran’s broad definition of diaspora is largely based on binaristic relations and oppositional notions such as centre-vs-periphery, inclusion-vs-exclusion, and true-vs-inauthentic. For instance, his listing of the characteristics of diasporas, that “[diasporas] believe that they are not — and perhaps cannot be — fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it”; that “they
regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return — when conditions are appropriate”; and that “they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship” (Safran, 1991: 83-4), demonstrates a deployment of the use of ‘diaspora’ that is underscored by an insistence upon “true historical antecedents or debates about strict reference that would, for example, trace the term ‘diaspora’ back to Jewish, Armenian, Greek, Indian, Chinese, African or even Black Atlantic units” (Hutnyk, 1997: 118). As demographic shifts become increasingly transnational and sometimes unpredictable, it is increasingly difficult to delimit the attributes and features of diasporas to a handful of characteristics, and to insist upon strict adherence to genealogical conceptions of diasporas and diasporic trajectories. Also, as the historical contingencies of culturally relative, even culturally deterministic, characteristics and attributes begin to wear away with time, Safran’s deterministic measures of ‘diasporicity’ tend to become increasingly anachronistic, more often than not used to appeal to popular preconceptions of diasporas. In other words, they become no more than reified stereotypes and laconic references to different-looking cultural groups and individuals.

Much of what Safran describes apply more to first-generation migrants and members of the old diaspora, with cherished ties to their homeland and countries of origin, and who depended heavily on those ties, the homeland, and the myth of return, for a more
assured sense of their cultural identity, especially in an environment in which their status was marginalised. For this homeland-idealising diaspora, it was important that the social reality of the nation from which they came remained a fixed and stable entity; and that the stability of that homeland and its myth, as well as other ‘foundational’ narratives, provided a solid and substantial point of reference for the diaspora’s sense of cultural identity. The desire, therefore, to ‘fix’ and perhaps idealise ‘where you’re from’ entails more than the assurance of one’s identity; it encompasses also the larger issues of historical and political affiliations that enable and/or enhance the diaspora’s assertion of their cultural citizenship in foreign environments.

Although some of these homeland-idealising traits may still prevail in contemporary diasporic group experiences, the more relevant portrayal of the diasporic condition would be one that considered the growing population of the new diaspora, later-generation and locally-born, over whom the ‘original’ homeland has no claim, and for whom the myth of return remains, fundamentally, a myth. This dissertation’s exploration of a selection of films and novels by members of the Chinese diaspora thus challenges and uncovers the myths surrounding Chinese diasporic communities, and, more importantly, demonstrates and establishes that the identity of the diasporic community and/or individual is far from fixed or pre-given, but rather, is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories that are told individually and collectively (Brah, 1996: 183).
These stories, however, are more than simply about ‘border crossings’ — with notions of homeland and fixed boundaries — and ‘productive diversity’, connoting material concerns and economic benefits. Diasporic journeys entail diverse trajectories with multiple ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. Diasporic texts therefore work across fixities of location, destabilising hegemonic understanding of nation, ‘home’, and ‘away’, to articulate tensions inherent in these multiple affiliations and contested relations. The focus on Chinese diasporas in Canada and Australia is aimed at setting the Chinese migrant community apart from other diasporas via culturally relative boundaries, in order to accentuate the fact of visible difference especially when considering the officially sanctioned policies of multiculturalism in both countries. Within an environment of official tolerance for cultural difference and diversity, the often-painful process and experience of being diasporic are no less alleviated for members of a cultural group easily distinguished by their corporeality.

Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6 build upon the observations made thus far, in their analyses of novels and films by Chinese Canadians and Chinese Australians. These narratives are important because, as cultural documents, they unveil a whole host of insights into the diasporic conditions as actually lived and experienced, rather than theorised and conceptualised, by those persons actually constituting the subject of this study. The work of writing, narrating and/or re-telling diasporic experiences is crucial to the minority group’s sense and assertion of cultural citizenship and identity because, at one level, it advances the self-representation by the group itself, which can facilitate access to other forms and avenues of group self-representation.
At another level, these narratives reiterate the establishment of the diasporic group’s settlement into the host country, and by articulating the group’s relation to past/lost spaces and times, provide a means of imagining or re-imagining new identities and roles in new and different geo-physical and cultural spaces. This is a process that also enables the diasporic group to establish a stronger sense of connection with their host country by the insertion of their migrant narratives into the historical and ‘grand’ narratives of the new country. As the novels *Disappearing Moon Café* and *Birds of Passage* have shown, the Chinese were present at the founding moments of Canada and Australia and have had a long history of living in these western countries. The denial and silencing of their narratives have been counterproductive and detrimental in the effects on the community’s sense of identity and belonging. These are illustrated in the novels *Banana Boys* and *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, both about contemporary experiences of the Chinese diaspora in Canada and Australia respectively. In all or most cases, cultural divisions, differentiations and stereotypical images are still drawn upon in popular references to ‘boat people’, ‘Chinatown’, and so on, that conjure and connote particular types and tropes of cultural difference and identity. These readily accessible images reinforce a similar rhetoric that works to alienate Chinese Canadians and Chinese Australians, both migrants and locally born, from an important and significant aspect of their identity — that is, the fact of their Chineseness.
In the re-telling of these diasporic experiences and narratives, the traumatic effects of migration, displacement and dislocation are worked through and given cathartic release. The condition of being diasporic — often experienced as loss of homeland, anxiety about migration, sense of dislocation and displacement, and possible erosion of one’s culture and identity, amongst other negative feelings — bears immense emotional strain and is usually internalised and not given adequate expression. Clara Law’s film *Floating Life* redresses this neglect in its portrayal of Bing, whose experience of emotional and nervous breakdown represents, in some ways, a *necessary* phase that she has to go through — because of the enormity of her sacrifice and silent suppression of her personal needs — *in order that* the unity and harmony in her family may eventually be restored. The narrating of diasporic experiences therefore has the potential to re-create, to some extent, elements of those ‘lost’ times and spaces, while negotiating a new sense of belonging with the host country and also among other marginalised diasporic groups.

In Keith Lock’s film, *Small Pleasures*, about mainland Chinese migrants to Canada, we see the attempted re-creation and perhaps reinvention of an idealised space and time in the migrants’ formation of a tightly knit diasporic community that often/constantly reminisces about their lives in China. However, the upheavals to their lives as a result of the Tiananmen Square massacre also bring about changes in their political status and cultural perspectives, and perhaps begin their initiation, at a deeper level, into Canadian society. The re-created space and time therefore takes on shades of Brah’s “diaspora space”, in which migrants, their descendants and the
indigenous are equally involved and implicated in the complex interweaving of genealogies and trajectories.

Mina Shum’s film, *Double Happiness*, is an observation of the unfolding of diasporic lives, caught in that ‘disconjunctive’ space between two worlds. On the one hand, the older generation diaspora seem confined to a homeland-idealising consciousness and hence refrain from more active participation in their host country. On the other hand, there is also the younger generation diaspora who are eager to embrace and exploit the range of opportunities that the Western world has made available to them. The tensions that arise in the household and within the individuals’ consciousnesses are a reflection of the dilemma faced by most diasporas across the globe, ‘trapped’ between two or more worlds, cultures and identities. One of the strategies adopted by the younger generation, in Gerd Baumann’s analysis, is the deployment of the ‘demotic’ discourse alongside ‘dominant’ discourses. Shum’s protagonist, Jade, demonstrates the subversion of “normative boundaries of ‘community’ set by [her] parents”, but nonetheless “revert[s] to the dominant discourse on public occasions” because of the knowledge that “any public challenge to this reifying discourse … is likely to bring upon the offenders the full wrath of community elders” (Werbner, 1997: 18). The double life that Jade leads — an existential mode that is already, if not fast becoming, a reality for many who belong to the ‘new’ diaspora — emphasises, however, an understanding and conception of ‘culture’ as reified, bounded and unitary, and which therefore ‘traps’ the individual who feels ‘caught’ between two ‘fixed’ worlds.
The films of Clara Law and William Yang, about Chinese migrants (from Hong Kong and China) to Australia, also function as an opportunity for the turning back of the gaze of minority ethnic groups on white-dominant society and breaking the silence of diasporic experiences in Australia. Law’s film explores the manifold aspects of diasporic subjectivity, from various perspectives that range from those of the newly-arrived migrant to that of the culturally ‘assimilated’ and adapted diasporic migrant. While *Floating Life*, as its title indicates, contemplates issues of migration, displacement, dislocation, as well as location and reconnection (in the migrants’ eagerness to establish and negotiate a sense of belonging to their new country), Yang’s film *Sadness* unearths the subterranean discourses of racism and racialisation in its interrogation of institutional and cultural practices of racial discrimination. At the same time, the juxtaposition of the dual narratives and accompanying images of Yang’s Chinese family alongside his gay family effectively creates a dialogic experience which dismantles dominant preconceptions of familial structures (Lo, 2000: 164).

This dissertation considers these literary and film narratives to be working in unison to dispel commonly held myths about diasporas and also break with racial and cultural stereotypes frequently and for too long circulated by mainstream media. At the same time they also unsettle notions of national identity, by questioning dominant constructions and perceptions of ‘whiteness’ — that is, mainstream depictions and interpretations of ‘Canadianness’ and ‘Australianness’ — and resist the hegemonic categorising of ‘otherness’. In exposing the fictive nature of an allegedly unified and
homogenous nation state and national culture, popular conceptualisations about ‘home’ are also challenged.

Within the diaspora, internal group differentiations and discrimination come to the fore, as highlighted in the contemporary films and novels. This is often expressed in the opposition between the new-versus-old diasporic cultures of the Chinese diaspora, as well as most other migrant and/or minority groups. Many first-generation Chinese migrants (the ‘old’ diaspora), like the subjects of Baumann’s research, “tended to define their cultural distinctiveness with regard to far more particularist pre-emigration heritages” (1997: 219), while their children, “being ‘young and born here,’” were more aware of their [the latter’s] involvement and creation of a new and evolving (‘Asian’) culture (1997: 218). Yet, the personal, familial and cultural baggages attached to the process of creating that new, hybrid culture often serve as a challenge to negotiating the processes and politics of diasporic consciousness and the formation of multiple identifications and cross-cultural alliances.

The novels and films examined here have, more often than not, pointed to the detrimental effects of migration upon personal and familial relationships, as well as the disruptions and disturbances to one’s sense of identity. These upheavals to diasporic individuals’ consciousness frequently result in a deep ambivalence towards, and defensiveness about, the diasporic condition. The historical contexts explored for both countries have unveiled deeply embedded motivations for these responses and reactions. Historically entrenched forms of racism and systematic discrimination — at
have left profound legacies that manifest themselves in contemporary prejudiced attitudes and treatment towards foreign and different-looking others. However, what are often ignored are the increasingly complex and sophisticated transformations to the composition and constitution of migrant demographics. As stereotypical and reified ‘commonplace’ images and references to non-white diasporic migrants and their offspring become more divorced from the increasing complexities surrounding the constitution of diasporic and ethnic groupings, that cleavage produces an ambivalent yet fertile space within which to contest essentialist notions of ‘otherness’. The ‘disjunctiveness’ of that ambivalent space, because of conflicting and competing notions ‘ethnicity’ and ‘otherness’, thus presents diasporic newcomers and differently marked ‘multicultural bodies’ as not only foreign but also ‘hostile’ to many host/receiving societies.

Perhaps Safran’s description of diasporas — that they believe that they cannot be fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it — will hold true for many visibly different minority groups that migrate to predominantly white western countries. After all, as Ien Ang argues, “an English-speaking Chinese is still seen, from a Western perspective, as so much more ‘unnatural’ than an English-speaking Norwegian or Italian” (2001: 34), mainly because of the desire of Western culture to keep itself white and “to keep non-white, non-Western elements from fully entering and therefore contaminating the centre of white, Western culture”. This explains to some extent the barriers to integration and
assimilation still existing, after decades of racial discrimination and in spite of multiculturalism, for locally born diasporas who have had no other experiences of homeland apart from the white society in which they grew up. For migrant diasporas who have embraced their new national identity and citizenship while having to renegotiate and re-establish anew their sense of belonging to a different place, the obstacles and costs — material as well as intangible — are even greater.

However, the diversity of diasporic communities also means that these experiences of prejudice and discrimination do not always or uniformly apply to all diasporic individuals. Differences and differentiations within the same cultural group mean that the diasporic condition holds multiple, sometimes conflicting and contradictory, experiences for its people. As this dissertation has shown, new (later generation) diasporas and old (first generation) diasporas are both faced with racially motivated forms of discrimination, but the experiences of these encounters are significantly dissimilar. Internalised racism is also practised within the diasporic group, for instance between ‘Bananas’ and those considered ‘FOB’, or ‘fresh off the boat’; or among first generation diasporas who consider locally born Chinese to be less culturally ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’. These instances demonstrate how, within the Chinese diaspora, an excess of meaningfulness already attaches to the notion of ‘Chineseness’ as an allegedly unequivocal signifier of cultural identity. To this extent, the strength with which one asserts and practices Chinese cultural identity and citizenship becomes not only a function of the cultural and political context but also a response and reaction to environmental and other pressures.
While this dissertation is concerned with Chinese diasporas in white western countries — seeing as the narratives that are explored all deal with the conditions of diasporic Chinese in predominantly white societies — it is meant neither to imply nor indicate living in the west to be “a mark of arrival” (Braziel and Mannur, 2003: 14). Rather, given the complex interweaving of diasporic trajectories, it is more useful to conceptualise the west, as Arjun Appadurai says of the United States, “as just ‘another diasporic switching point’, rather than as the teleological end to which all the world aspires” (Braziel and Mannur, 2003: 14; italics mine). This alternative way of theorising diasporic consciousness, culture and identity foregrounds the constant transformations that diasporas experience and undergo, thereby shifting the term and concept away from essentialist notions of ‘home’ and ‘away’. Such a process also paves the way for an alternative theorisation of race that sees whiteness as “just another ethnicity” (Brah, 1996: 210).³

All these point to the importance and necessity of conceptualising, imagining and representing diasporas in newer and alternative ways; recognising the creative tensions in their complex and flexible positionings at hybrid, syncretic intersections and ‘disconjunctions’. The syncretism of Chinese diasporic culture, identity and consciousness means that the Chinese diaspora defies being imagined or represented as a unified and homogeneous entity. Rather, the multiple affiliations and internal divisions and differentiations mean that there are forms of empowerment open and available to the community and its individuals, through its hybrid condition. As
border-crossers, people of the Chinese diaspora are empowered free agents for whom, as Lyn Jacobs describes, “the diaspora, with its binary concepts of centre and margin, no longer applies” (2002: 208). Further, the resistance by and from within diasporic groups and individuals themselves to embrace multiculturalism and its principles demonstrates a growing scepticism and critical questioning of the politics of tolerance and ‘benevolence’, while also freeing themselves from the impediments of culturally and racially bound determinisms and normativisations. Thus, diasporic consciousness inescapably incorporates those aspects of hybridity which, according to Ien Ang, are not only about fusion and synthesis, but also about friction and tension, about ambivalence and incommensurability, about the contestations and interrogations that go hand in hand with the heterogeneity, diversity and multiplicity we have to deal with as we live together-in-difference. (200)

This evocation of ‘difference’ as a descriptor for the multicultural reality faced by most societies also conjures up notions of ‘hybridity’ that celebrate its transgressive, anti-essentialist, anti-integrationist, and most of all, anti-totalitarian potential and energies. However, as Pnina Werbner has noted, as “cultural mixings and crossovers become routine in the context of globalising trends” (1997: 1), the feting, even veneration, of hybridity may become obsolete and its powers obviated. In her pronouncement that “[a]ll cultures are always hybrid” (1997: 15), Werbner exposes the reification underlying this attitude towards culture; that is, when applied to descriptions of culture, ‘hybridity’ simply “‘museumises’ culture as a ‘thing’” (1997: 15).
This observation presents us with one of the major blind spots of multiculturalism and diaspora studies, as both are intimately caught up in/with the discourse of ‘hybridity’ and cultural plurality. The rhetoric and practice of multiculturalism has revealed it to be strongly predicated on the reification and commodification of ‘culture’, as cultural ‘difference’, thereby spawning modes of consumption, discrimination and exploitation. In this scenario, “hybridity-talk is itself in danger of becoming ... another marketable commodity” (Werbner, 1997: 19), while also seeming “to imply a bogus notion of the prior and the pure — pre-hybrid cultures” (Hutnyk, 1997: 119).

Although the term has “broken new ground, and forced reconfigurations and reappraisals that have enlivened and irrevocably transformed academic debate” (Hutnyk, 1997: 118), there is a need, firstly, to examine “how these terms gain contemporary [institutional] currency” (Hutnyk, 1997: 118), and secondly, to reinvigorate the term with its anti-essentialising and anti-totalitarian energies and potential. This means, first of all, recognising that ‘hybridity-talk’, although useful for “fighting the cultural absolutisms of racism in the First World” (Hutnyk, 1997: 121), has not yet addressed the issues of “imperialism, capitalism, exploitation, oppression” (Hutnyk, 1997: 122). John Hutnyk, speaking of the World Music Festival held in the United Kingdom, critiques the ‘hybridity’ associated with hybrid cultural productions that has obscured “the aporias of official multicultural policies, and through inaction, in effect, alibis the overpolicing of inner-urban Britain, excessive and racist immigration control, and the continued maintenance of white privilege in education, the workplace, and the public sphere” (Hutnyk, 1997: 120).
The ‘hybridity’ that once acted “primarily as a defusing signifier of refusal and simultaneously enacts an exercise of authority”, that “challenges fixities and reconstitutes difference by yielding to an integrating behaviour of cultural assimilation” (Monti and Mittapalli, 2004: 118), is still often referred to for its potential for political equalisation of ethnic groups, aligned with the valorisation of diasporic identity as “a source of liberation for many — liberation from the oppression of the nation-state, of modernity, of mass capitalism” (Friedman, 1997: 85). After all, the context of globalising trends did provide fertile “conditions for cultural reflexivity and change” (Werbner, 1997: 1). However, its appropriation by cultural elites has led to a (suspected)

collusion with State policy-making in that one of the things it can sometime be is a call for access — a recognition that certain otherwise marginal, overlooked, or previously excluded activities are now creative cultural practices of enough merit to attract a small share of Arts Council funding, state subsidy, commercial acclaim and critical attention. (Hutnyk, 1997: 119)

What is worth noting here is that, while cultural elites, who, as “embourgeoisified groups [...] can avail themselves even of the space to articulate a demand to go to market” (Hutnyk, 1997: 119), there remain other groups dispossessed and displaced by this often celebratory perspective and stance towards hybridity. Friedman argues that hybridity “is always, like all acts of identity, a question of practice, the practice of attributing meaning. It can be understood only in terms of its social context and the way in which acts of identification are motivated” (1997: 85). Here, I want to return to Ang’s notion of hybridity as an emancipatory validation, because the (pro-hybrid) position from which she speaks is a clearly empowered one, therefore the meanings attributed to the term tend towards positivity and productivity. However, experiences
of “loss and disaffiliation, of actual distancing and reconstructed proximity” (Monti and Mittapalli, 2004: 120) that are often obscured point to a need for conceptualisations and manifestations of ‘hybridity’ that will provide further contextualisation of the relations between diasporas and nation states, especially for diasporic subjects caught up in more ‘disjunctive’ — or, as this dissertation argues, ‘disconjunctive’ — aspects of that hybrid space.

If, as Kamboureli declares, the meaning and function of diaspora is “dissemination”, which involves “the constant disjoining and relinking of the chain of events that constitutes diasporic experience, a set of actions that is always marked by political interests” (2000: 37-8), this dissertation argues, therefore, that it is in the dissemination of pluralities — of diasporic consciousness, of disjunctive and ‘disconjunctive’ experiences and texts, and so on — that ‘diaspora’ challenges while also shaping the limits of its investigation. Frequently worked notions and references to ‘ethnicity’, ‘hybridity’, ‘ambivalence’, even ‘diasporicity’ and ‘multiculturalism’, have to be constantly highlighted and problematised in an effort to disengage them from becoming increasingly one-sided and often celebratory deployments that risk co-optation into and collusion with dominant, mainstream hegemonic discourses that replicate and perpetuate not only inequitable access to, but also prejudicial modes of representation and distribution with regards to diasporic minorities. This dissertation has provided avenues of engagement, via a taxonomy of diasporic consciousnesses, with diaspora studies, and has moreover drawn upon that taxonomy for deeper analyses of diasporic narratives. The ‘diaspora space’, as a problematised space of
‘hybridity’, presents us with complexities of ambivalent positionings, identifications and affiliations of the diasporic subject, and therefore needs to be constantly reconceptualised and renegotiated — in other words, to maintain its relevance along with the unfolding of diasporic trajectories and their accompanying narratives. This study therefore builds on the growing body of work and the gaining momentum surrounding the field of studies of diaspora, and extends the scope of analyses into future developments of the discipline.
Notes

1 Diaspora space is defined as “a conceptual category” “‘inhabited’ not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words, the concept of diaspora space (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’” (Brah, 1996: 181).
2 See Gunew (1999b).
3 I have referred to Shirley Geok-Lin Lim’s Joss and Gold (2001; see chapter 1, note 25) as a recent example of the interruption of the expectations of American migrant novels that take settling in the United States as the mark of arrival.
4 As Werbner explains, “[t]o speak of cultural ‘mixing’ makes sense only from inside a social world. Hybridity is meaningless as a description of ‘culture’, because this ‘museumises’ culture as a ‘thing’ … Culture as an analytic concept is always hybrid … since it can be understood properly only as the historically negotiated creation of more or less coherent symbolic and social worlds” (1997: 15).
5 John Hutnyk, in his analysis of ‘World Music’, deconstructs “[h]ybridity, diaspora and post-coloniality [as] now fashionable and even marketable terms. The authors who deploy them as key concepts have become institutionalised social theory equivalent of household names (and, like household names, they are marketed and have a brand recognition that is an advertiser’s dream)” (1997: 118).
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Sadness [videorecording]

OTHER INTERNET SOURCES:

Double Happiness


Small Pleasures


Other