

## Dislocations and Diaspora: Reading Evelyn Lau's Choose Me

Lily Cho

Volume 32, Number 1, 2007

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl32\\_1art10](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl32_1art10)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Cho, L. (2007). Dislocations and Diaspora: Reading Evelyn Lau's Choose Me. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 32(1), 173–191.

# Dislocations and Diaspora: Reading Evelyn Lau's *Choose Me*

LILY CHO

FROM THE CRUDE PERSPECTIVE of plot and action, Evelyn Lau's *Choose Me* is a series of stories about older men who are involved with young women. There are no overtly Asian characters in any of the stories. They are stories about the white suburban middle class — the pettiness of their lives, their failed marriages, and the indignity of their aging bodies. In this sense, *Choose Me* would seem to be the antithesis of Chinese diasporic literature. Lau is a Chinese-Canadian writer who has refused to be read as Chinese-Canadian. She is a woman writer who is openly wary of feminism. Given Lau's resistance to categories of identity and community, or perhaps because of it, thinking of Lau as a diasporic writer poses important challenges for diasporic literature. What are the forms of diasporic community? Is there a kind of belonging which does not interpellate its subjects into restrictive forms of identity formation? This paper addresses two interrelated aspects of thinking about Lau under the rubric of diaspora: the problem of content (she does not seem to write about diasporic communities or people) and the problem of the affective elements of being in diaspora (what her writing reveals about the effects of dislocation). Her fiction asks for an understanding of diasporic community that does not take race or religion as unproblematic markers of diasporic belonging. She demands, instead, that these histories of dislocation be understood not as singular, traumatic events, but as a series of multiple dislocations which do not stay firmly in the past, but haunt the present. She asks her readers to take the sadnesses of dislocation seriously and to listen for the howl of inarticulable sorrow which has been stifled by the exigencies of daily life.

The goal of this paper is twofold. First, I want to argue for diaspora as a powerful rubric through which to read Lau's writing. At a moment

when diasporic literature is beginning to be consolidated within institutional contexts, it is crucial to think through what it might mean to read diasporically. Second, this paper seeks to test the limits of diaspora as a rubric by reading a writer who seems to run counter to some of the foundational tenets of diaspora. She is a writer who is largely understood as deeply individualistic, who seems to revel in her isolation, and who has already actively resisted being understood as writing *for* any particular community, be they street kids, Asian Canadians, or sex workers. Given these conditions, why read Lau as diasporic at all? Why claim someone who does not want to be claimed?

One reason to do so is because diaspora, at its best, is not about membership, but about a raced and gendered condition of melancholia and loss which is intimately related to the traumas of dislocation and the perpetual intrusion of the past of this trauma into the present. Membership implies that there are criteria for entry, a stable and static centre of identification. While diaspora critics such as Robin Cohen, James Clifford, and Khachig Tölölyan have tried to identify various diasporas by naming them, categorizing them, and providing them with historical narratives of dispersal and settlement, I cannot help but feel that these critical moves blunt the power of diaspora as a critical intervention. These typologies and categorizations are positivistic approaches which convert diasporic people into objects of inquiry rather than engaging with them as subjects of displacement. As I have recently argued in "The Turn to Diaspora," an approach which understands diaspora "as a *condition of subjectivity* and not as an object of analysis" would enable a way out of the tendency to approach diaspora as a definitional problem of boundaries and borders (14). In this essay, I will attend to Lau's writing through my arguments for diaspora as that which "emerges from deeply subjective processes of racial memory, of grieving for losses which cannot always be articulated and longings which hang at the edge of possibility" (15). Lau's writing offers the possibility of pushing up against not only the edges of diasporic theory, but also those of the emerging body of Asian Canadian literary criticism.

Echoing the definitional tendencies of much contemporary diasporic theory, some Asian Canadian literary criticism has also been preoccupied with the problem of membership, the ways in which Lau does or does not fit. Suggesting that Lau's writing is little more than exploitative autobiography at best and predictably denigrating erotica at worst, Lien Chao notes in particular the way in which Lau's depiction of the Chinese

Canadian community in *Runaway* “offended the Chinese Canadian community collectively” (171). Citing Beryl Tsang’s commentary on Lau in *The Newsletter of the Chinese Canadian National Council*, Chao disparages the “negative stereotypes” of Chinese Canadians perpetuated in Lau’s writing. As a result, Chao notes that Lau has “won herself the reputation of a Vancouver writer and poet, rather than a ‘Chinese’ Canadian writer” (171-72). There is a desire to claim Lau and a sense of betrayal at her refusal to be claimed. Even as she engages “with the curious and ambivalent relations between emotional investments and political economies that Lau’s writing presents,” Rita Wong finds that Lau’s writing nonetheless lends itself too easily to the commodifying mechanisms of a patriarchal, heterosexist, capitalist machine in part because its eschewing of markedly racialized characters leaves it vulnerable to being claimed by the default position of whiteness (“Marketing” 142). The suggestion that has Lau assimilated into dominant whiteness reveals the expectations that determine Asian Canadian subjectivity as, at the very least, participating in a larger project of identifying with, and being in some kind of solidarity with, a community. And yet, both Sneja Gunew and Charlotte Sturgess suggest that identity politics can be constraining. Sturgess notes that Lau’s “non-adherence to a legible script of ethnicity ... does not therefore mean that ‘*ethnos*’ is absent from her writing. It emerges precisely in the difficulty of locating a coherent site from which to speak, within the tensions of positioning, in the encounter with the Law of the cultural, social hegemony” (88). Building on the work of Gunew, Sturgess, and Wong, who have looked for the oppositional potential in Lau’s writing, this essay hopes to illuminate the possibilities for a diasporic reading of her work by understanding diaspora as a condition of subjectivity. Setting the problem of definitions and membership aside, I want to look at how diaspora is not an ontological problem but a contingent, genealogical one.

Diaspora is not about what you are in a static sense, but about the contingencies of diasporic subjectivity and the relationship of that subjectivity to a long history of dislocation. The question then is not whether or not Evelyn Lau *is* a diasporic writer, but rather whether or not her writing engages in what Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin call the “paradoxical power of diaspora”: “On the one hand, everything that defines us is compounded of all the questions of our ancestors. On the other hand, everything is permanently at risk. Thus contingency and genealogy are the two central components of diasporic consciousness”

(4). It is my contention that Lau's writing reveals both an excruciating sense of the contingency of those narratives that are supposed to sustain us (family, community, love, belonging) and, despite its seeming obsession with the individual over and above the collective, an overwhelming commitment to the genealogical in its melancholic return to the sadness of overlapping losses (family, community, love, belonging).

What does it mean to read Lau's *Choose Me*, a text that contains no explicit reference to any Chinese characters much less any direct reference to a sense of connection with a diasporic Chinese community, as a Chinese diasporic text? It means taking seriously the deep sadness and sense of loss which pervades her writing rather than demanding that she cure herself of an obsessive melancholia or reducing it to a perverse fetish for "daddy" figures. It means understanding the unhomely quality of many of her characters rather than seeing their homelessness as an expression of extended teenage bravado, selfishly misplaced anti-sociality, or pathetic desire for acceptance and assimilation. It means reading her critique of whiteness and white patriarchy in particular. I will discuss each of these points in turn, beginning with the latter.

In *Choose Me*, Lau's critique of whiteness emerges in a double movement: in her meticulous exoticization of white middle-class life, which tears away at its normality and normalizing effects; and in her merciless stripping of white men of their costumes of power (lawyer, professor, businessman), thus revealing them in all of their pathetic, needy, and undignified nakedness. In her article "Marketing Forces and Powerful Desires," Rita Wong makes a similar suggestion noting that "some protagonists who are sex trade workers have a gaze that is sharper than their johns realize" ("Marketing" 125). And yet Wong argues that "even when [a double] consciousness potentially exists, it does not seem to challenge or change anything" (126). I am less pessimistic about the potential power of the gaze of the women in *Choose Me*. It is a power that is at once more subtle than that which might be seen as directly changing existing relations of dominance, but also one that insinuates itself into the structure of patriarchy. The gaze may be broken, but its objectifying powers can continue to haunt. These strategies turn on the power of returning the gaze, of what Rey Chow identifies as the discomfiting power of the gaze of the colonized at the colonizer. In *Writing Diaspora*, Chow proposes that

Contrary to the model of Western hegemony in which the colonizer is seen as a primary, active "gaze" subjugating the native as passive

“object,” I want to argue that it is actually the colonizer who feels looked at by the native’s gaze. This gaze, which is neither a threat nor a retaliation, makes the colonizer conscious of himself, leading to his need to turn his gaze around and look at himself, henceforth “reflected” in the native-object. (51)

Chow’s reading of the gaze of the colonized subject suggests the subtlety of its power. Neither obvious as a threat nor as an overt retaliation, the gaze of the oppressed subject, of the sex worker, of the racialized woman, works through a process of unrelenting objectification. Throughout *Choose Me*, Lau’s characters see through the protective garb of power and reveal the nakedness of the greed, insecurity, and desire underneath. In “The Summer Palace,” the protagonist, a young woman who has been invited to spend the weekend at a summer cabin on an island, observes a gathering of “women [who] wore heavy gold jewelry and clusters of diamonds, pendants like amulets.... Their husbands were well-to-do and famous — famous for their wealth, or wealthy because of their fame. They were snug in their accomplishments” (77). Setting her gaze on them, Lau peels away the thin self-satisfaction of their diamond-encrusted smugness:

As if through the wrong end of a telescope she saw them laughing over their shared jokes — their heads flung back, their mouths gaping, five sets of thirty teeth, some surely false in their perfection, showing. The laughter was sharp and horrifying, like the laughter of dogs. (77)

While this observation of the ugliness of the rich captures the horror of its greed, Lau is perhaps even more unforgiving in her depiction of white men. Throughout the book, Lau captures white patriarchy without the protection of its lawyer’s robes, its suits and ties.

In “A Faithful Husband” she describes a lawyer who marries a woman six years younger than his youngest daughter and then retires, trading in “his conservative suits” for “clothes from another era, jackets of imitation suede that felt like the surface of a pool table, and shoes that split at the sides over his bunions” (96). Charting the diminishment of desire which follows their marriage, Lau uncovers the pathetic quality of the aging man’s libido:

sometimes he nudged her awake in the middle of the night to climb on top of her, panting hopefully into the pillow next to her ear. His shoulder blades fitted into her palms, but his brief, weak erection

would subside as soon as he entered her, and then there was only the bleakness of the bluish light in the room, the sound of a car wishing past on the street outside, the pulsing movement of his empty hips, his whispered apology which agonized her. He was old. His insides gurgled with distress as he slid off her, leaving her awake. (103)

The story closes not only with the death of desire, but with an unflinchingly real portrait of a repulsive old man, his smells, the folds of his skin, the texture of his tongue: "She was not only without desire, she was repulsed. The mucousy slip of his tongue in her mouth, the oils on his forehead, his ruined sagging face. He smelled off to her, a combination of sour musk and something vaguely fecal" (108). Lau strips the older man of his supposed attractions by engaging in what Heather Mallick notes as "a concentrated attack on the notion that older men are by definition wise, generous, sculpted creatures whose attractiveness increases with age" ("Evelyn Lau").

*Choose Me* attacks not only the naked desires of these men, but also takes aim at their vanities. In "The Outing," a story about a man taking an escort to an orgy, the man does not even need to be undressed in order to be stripped of his dignity. Noting the way in which "male vanity ... seemed to increase at middle age, in proportion to the diminishment of the attributes worthy of vanity" (33), Lau describes with almost clinical detachment the man in his "going out" outfit: "Hugh was wearing a pair of soft dress pants which draped his thick legs loosely, hiding his extra weight, and his white shirt was generously cut, bagging out at the waist. He looked like a stocky windup toy, comical, preposterous, a figure of fun" (33). The men in *Choose Me* are "small and pitiful" (127). Alone with the nakedness of their need, isolated from the protections of the old boys' network, without their conservative suits, sometimes even with them, they are laughable and pathetic. It is not for nothing that Lau's agent had originally suggested "Geezers" as a title for the collection (Richards).

Lau's critique of whiteness extends beyond the individual white man in her intimate shredding of middle-class suburban life. She dismantles those hallowed structures of stability, marriage and family. On the one hand, she subjects the white middle class to a persistent process of exoticization, and on the other, she reveals the ugliness beneath its suburban serenity. As Lau herself acknowledges in Misao Dean's article, "One of the reasons I so enjoy work by Cheever and Updike is that they write about something that I didn't know, they write about something that

is very exotic to me: well-off people having affairs, going out to parties, getting drunk and behaving badly, a real moral structure, family, secure housing, job, a privileged white class" (25). Unlike Cheever and Updike, Lau approaches this privileged white class not with the ironic eye of an insider, but that of someone who is on the outside, and will never be let into the house except as the ambivalent mistress, the contemptuous prostitute, the cause of the destructive affair. What she reveals then cannot remain in the realm of ironic detachment; it becomes a direct attack. She suggests that what she sees is not unique to the individual families that are her subjects, but symptomatic of the privileged white class itself. In this sense, there is some truth to the criticism sometimes made of Lau that she is repetitive and that all characters start to meld together, that they lack individuality. All the men start to seem the same in these stories. They are old, pathetic, sagging. And yes, the women start to seem the same too — they are inevitably at least twenty years younger than the men. They are bored. They feel trapped. There seems to be little difference between the escort paid to attend an orgy and the suburban wife who is wintering with her retired husband in the torpid heat of Arizona. But there is a point to this sameness. What Lau reveals is not the bourgeois individual in crisis, but a bourgeois class unable to bear the weight of its hypocrisy.

In "Suburbia," Lau dismantles the idea of the sanctity of the middle-class suburban marriage. In the story, a man has invited his mistress, a woman half his age who was once his student, to his house when his wife has left town for the weekend to visit their son. Through the cool eyes of Belinda, who already realizes that "the affair was going to end soon" because "sooner or later he would foolishly tell his wife about her and make some sort of demand for a divorce," what emerges is not only a portrait of a marriage gone wrong, but also the ugliness that necessarily accompanies the careful maintenance of these relationships (126). At one point, Jeremy tells Belinda of his desire to kill his wife, of hiking with her one day and nearly pushing her off a cliff. Of course, what is so painful is not only that he wanted to do it, or still sometimes wishes that he had done it, but that his wife "*just didn't know*" (128). Lau takes away the blissfulness of ignorance from all those people who believe themselves to be snug and safe in their suburban homes with the vaulted ceilings and hardwood floors. What is so precisely observed is not the violence that does happen, but that which lurks *in potentia*. It is not that white middle-class men in nice white middle-class families



necessarily commit violence when they fall out of love with their wives, but that they want to “a hundred times” (128).

Lau also homes in on the complexity and perversity of father-daughter relationships. Although Jeremy seems like the perfect father, talking to his daughter, who telephones in the midst of Belinda’s illicit visit, about his lectures, her boyfriend, and the university sweatshirts that he has bought for the family, Lau accentuates rather than avoids the juxtaposition of the daughter with the mistress, of Lisette with Belinda. Belinda recalls visiting Jeremy’s house for the first time as a student when he hosted a Christmas party for the class:

His wife and son had gone to visit Deirdre’s mother, so she hadn’t met them, but his daughter was there. They were the same age then, twenty-three. Lisette’s beauty was something Jeremy commented on with pride. Her black mini-dress was moulded to her body and Belinda could see her walking down the quiet suburban street, the mountains on one side and the creek on the other, how she would turn the heads of the fathers driving past. (116-17)

Lisette is the subject of the lasciviousness not only of other suburban fathers, but also her own. While he can tell Belinda about his desire to kill his wife, Jeremy can never say that he wants Lisette. Instead, Lau leaves his desire achingly unarticulated, emerging only at the edges of his consciousness. Having led Belinda to the bed that he shares with his wife, Jeremy starts musing on the memories which haunt his bedroom. It is the end of the night, he is about to betray his wife by sleeping with a woman his daughter’s age, and the memory that he drags up is one of his daughter in that very room. He tells Belinda the story, as though she would be interested, as though it were just a story about teenage rebellion:

I remember one evening we were having some kind of argument, Liz came in here and she said, “You know, who the hell are you to tell me anything. I bet you two haven’t even fucked in years.” She was right, of course, and she didn’t even know.... I grabbed Liz by the wrists and forced her down on the floor, right in front of this bed. She was struggling, scared, she’d never seen this part of me before. I held her wrists so tightly I left bruises.... She was pretty meek after that.... And eventually she outgrew whatever teenage phase she’d been going through, and she’s just fine now. (136)

Jeremy's hollow attempt to recuperate the story as being about a "phase" that Lisette simply had to go through underscores that which cannot be recuperated, the desire which he can barely acknowledge except in a moment of violence. Just before he is about to sleep with Belinda in his marital bed, Jeremy cannot help but remember that other desire. He cannot help but remember forcing his daughter onto her knees in front of that same bed in response to the accusation of his failure as a husband and a lover. Lisette may be "just fine now" but, as Lau points out, Jeremy most certainly is not. As Belinda grasps (and as Lau's readers also grasp), the comfort and security of white middle class suburban life lies only in the persistent denial of its fundamental discomfort, its lack of security: "It all seemed so ugly, so hopeless, what happened between people. So inevitable it was hardly worth feeling sorry about any more. She looked at her lover and it seemed to her then that he was small and pitiful, an aging man" (127). In the end, Jeremy, with his house, his books, the canoes in the garage, and the family portraits on the side table, is little more than a man with "jowls and thin hair" who "looks older than his fifty-six years" (133, 135), who writes letters to a lover "in two shades of ink — his pen had run out halfway — on the flight" that are barely even scanned before they are tossed unceremoniously into the wastepaper basket.

Lau is fully aware of the power of this stripping away of normality's (and thus whiteness's) normalizing claims. In a personal essay on her writing career a decade after the publication of *Runaway*, the diary which documents her life as a teenaged prostitute, Lau writes:

No one wants to picture someone in their lives, at their dinner tables and cocktail gatherings, at the golf course or in bed beside them, in some cruel or ignominious scenario with a prostitute. Their faces contorted, the nakedness of their need. The rhythms of their panting, the noises they make.... It was expected that my stories would now be of the imaginary kind, or about people you would never encounter other than in a furtive, dismissive way — the girls gathered on the street corners late at night, bright and shiny as birds in their latex and PVC, the faceless working-class men circling the block in their cars. Not about people you know. (*Inside* 12)

The power of Lau's critique of whiteness lies not, recalling Rey Chow's words, in a threat or a retaliation, but in the subjection of whiteness to the very processes of exoticization which it routinely exercises over those at the margins. Additionally, she plants the germ of suspicion and

doubt into the sacred heart of those foundations of white middle-class life, marriage, and family. These are people you know.

Despite the power of Lau's critique, there are a number of moments when characters such as Belinda, the "other" women, also seem pitiable, small, and pathetic in their desire to be seen by white men, and to be included in the very families and marriages that they dismantle. For example, "Suburbia" ends with Belinda finding herself in the reflection of Jeremy's gaze: "She could see her own face, suspended in the lenses of his glasses, and for a moment she did not feel so dizzy and lost, so anchorless" (137). Again, in the opening story of the collection, "Family," Zoe looks for herself in Douglas's gaze. Lau describes Zoe's consciousness of Douglas looking at her at a dinner party, the way she seeks his look, and the way she is marginalized in that gaze even as she looks for herself in it:

When at last she raised her eyes to his, he would not flinch away, he would only slowly turn his head to the side — as if she had been merely an object in the way of his turning gaze, as if all along he had been meaning to look at the edge of the table, or the spoon that lay on his saucer, or at another woman.... Later, he would tell her what she was like with other people. (15)

Anchoring themselves in the white male gaze, these characters seem to lose their edge as critics of white, self-satisfied suburbanity and patriarchy. There has been a tendency to read these moments as a sign of Lau's lack of feminist commitment, as her inability to imagine strong women, as yet another indication of her desire to be white and to assimilate.<sup>1</sup> I want to propose a different reading.

Reading these moments of displacement and longing from the perspective of diaspora, the homelessness of her characters emerges as unhomed precisely in Homi Bhabha's sense of the term. Bhabha posits that

to be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself with Henry James's Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of "incredulous terror".... The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home

and world become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (9)

It is not that the characters “find themselves” in the reflected gaze of the very men for whom they have so much contempt. Rather, these are moments of painful awareness of the displacement of the raced and gendered subject. As Elaine Chang argues, “if feminism is to ‘learn to learn’ from the ‘other’ woman, concepts of home and not-home must be reevaluated from the perspectives of those who ‘don’t fit anywhere’” (117). Let me be clear. I am not suggesting that any of the characters in *Choose Me* are homeless in the sense that they are without houses and apartments to which they can return. I am suggesting that the profound sense of dislocation and displacement which emerges in Lau’s characters gestures towards a connection with a longer history of dislocation and displacement — immigration and emigration — than that of any singular character. The women in Lau’s text are not looking to white men to provide them with homes, stability, identity. They invade the very homes that seem to provide whiteness with stability and identity at the same time that they are never at home in them. As one character reminds herself, “today at least, she was on the inside looking out” (*Choose* 19). Like the other characters in the text, her time “in a real home” is limited and provisional (4). These characters’ residence is temporary; they are visitors who are haunted as much by the dislocations of the past as they are of the present.

They are characters perched on the threshold of belonging. *Choose Me* opens with “Family,” a story in which the first scene revolves around a young woman being shown how to unlock the doors to a house nestled on a block of “heritage properties, fronted in brick and stained glass” (3). In this opening scene, the betrayal already lurks at the threshold of the brick and stained-glass solidity of the privileged white class:

Douglas had invited her in so calmly. After she set her bags in the hall with its high ceilings and polished floors, he pushed the keys to his home into her hand, two skeleton keys dangling from a loop of twisted wire. Then he motioned her back out onto the porch, where he wrapped his fingers around hers, demonstrating how to work the locks. Their breath showed in front of them, but his hand pulsed with warmth. She learned to shove the keys in smoothly, to jiggle them, to listen for the muffled internal click that signified the lock had been turned. (3)

In the intimacy of Zoe's invasion of Douglas's home, learning how to unlock the door becomes an exercise in treachery. And yet, even when she has learned to listen for the click of the internal mechanism that will allow her entry into a home that is not her own, Zoe's dislocation seems even more pronounced. Even as she displaces the wife, wearing her nightshirt, sleeping on her bed, sleeping with her husband, Zoe must still reassure herself of her own existence. After being mistaken on the telephone for Douglas's wife, Zoe must look at herself in the mirror, touching her neck, her throat. "Her voice when it came out in the cold room was still hers.... She was still herself. She was not his wife" (19). The story ends not with a catastrophic affair, but with a few fumbled and drunken kisses, a lipstick-smudged longing that remains unrequited because, in the end, it was never desired. Zoe does not want to be Douglas's wife, not even his lover, but something else altogether. The story closes with Zoe lying on the guest bed, awakening from a nightmare and longing to be taken in, to be folded into the contours of the family:

She thought of the man and his wife, sleeping only footsteps away, and the children who lay in their small beds. For a moment she imagined herself tiptoeing into the parents' room, easing open the door, fitting herself between their heavy, adult forms. They would each curve an arm around her and she would smell the musk of their skin and the cotton of their nightshirts, the comfort of warm sheets and pillows, and she would sleep. (28)

Zoe's longing is a painful reminder of the sadness of diasporic dislocation and the ways in which the dislocations of the past continue to haunt the present as a longing for home, family, genealogy, and belonging.

The longing of a grown woman for the safety of sleeping in the cotton and musk of parental warmth is not that of an individual woman whose pathologies have remained uncured. Reading Lau's work as diasporic makes clearer the connections between the sadnesses of a personal history and that of a broader history of uncured, and deliberately incurable, sadness. In thinking through what Anne Cheng has termed the "melancholy of race," we must relate individual grief to a long history of collective pain:

When we turn to the long history of grief and the equally protracted history of physically and emotionally managing that grief on the part of the marginalized, racialized people, we see that there

has always been an interaction between *melancholy* in the vernacular sense of affect, as “sadness” or the “blues,” and *melancholia* in the sense of a structural, identificatory formation predicated on — while being an active negotiation of — the loss of self as legitimacy. Indeed, racial melancholia ... has always existed for raced subjects both as a *sign* of rejection and as a psychic *strategy* in response to that rejection. (20)

Lau’s text negotiates this double movement between melancholy and melancholia, between fighting against the sign of rejection and responding strategically to that rejection. The sadness of Zoe’s longing is not that of a pathetic woman who wants only to be let in, to be assimilated into a classic white, middle-class familial formation. Rather, it is the sadness of a subject who will never be let in while still wanting to be included; it is a sadness that cannot be severed from the sadnesses of a community. It is a negotiation with pain that inexorably insists on the relation of the private with the public, collapsing the border between the personal and the political. As Cheng notes, race studies has tended to overlook the psychic in the attempt to insist on the materiality of race, sacrificing “discussions of all the immaterial, pressing, unquantifiable elements that go into the making of ‘reality’” (25). Some of the criticism on Lau has tended to despair over her lack of overt politics, over her rejection of the political. And yet, if we are attentive to the deep grief and sadness which pulses through her work, perhaps we may come to an understanding of the ways in which “the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (Bhabha 11).

While none of the characters in *Choose Me* is explicitly identified as a racialized subject, part of the relating of a personal history with “the wider disjunctions of political existence” involves the collapsing of the past and the present. In this sense, I agree with Rita Wong’s observation that one always seems to get the discomfiting sense that Lau’s personal history creeps shadow-like onto her writing, that it is “hard not to notice the author’s own notorious life flickering throughout the fiction and poems” (“Choose” 136). Later writing such as the stories in *Choose Me* call us back again and again to those excruciating moments in her first book, the diary which became *Runaway*. Reflecting on the girl in her first book, Lau notes that “this stranger whose life seems in so many ways foreign to mine is still inside me” (*Inside* 4). Lau draws us back repeatedly in her fiction not only to rape, to prostitution, but

also to the moments when her mother would probe her adolescent body, to the betrayals and sadnesses of a familial history which is deeply connected to the “wider disjunctions” of racism, of a social world in which her father would become increasingly diminished, denied work, and in which her mother would become increasingly hysterical over the fear of poverty, of dissolution. “It is the blurring of these lines, these worlds bleeding into each other,” Lau writes, “that makes me realize that the past exists inside me as ineradicably as the present” (*Inside* 10). Reading diasporically, we can make the connection between the intrusions of the past into Lau’s present with that of a history of racial discrimination and sexism into the smugness of a present which too often seeks to smooth over the inarticulate grief of those histories.

There has been a tendency to see this preoccupation with the past, the almost obsessive return to it, as self-indulgent and immature. It is curious how many reviewers and critics seem to be waiting for Lau to “grow up,” as though the repetition of themes and concerns in her writing were a sign of an infantile attachment. They want her to get over her Daddy fixation. They want her to “move ... beyond her own pathology and develop ... an interest in others” (Bannerjee). Rita Wong “wish[es] that Lau would direct her considerable talent to other kinds of relationships and scenarios; she has immense potential if she can broaden her scope as a writer” (“Choose” 197). Perhaps Jan Wong is most candid (and inevitably callous) in this assessment of Lau:

Now, I left my comfortable Montreal home at 19 to voluntarily haul pig manure in China during the Cultural Revolution. But I have trouble understanding why someone would drop out of school and run away from home at 14 and end up as a junkie-whore. Yes, it’s hard to be the dutiful daughter of immigrants from China and Hong Kong, the kind who consider friends a frivolity and an 89 percent exam mark a failure .... But I’m a parent now. Millions of Canadians have overcome such traumas, if that is the word, without self-indulgent melt-downs. (C1)

The overwhelming narrative of these evaluations, both of her as a writer and otherwise, is that Lau has not yet matured. In the assessments of her writing, there is a sense that she has only shown potential, that her real skills as a writer can only emerge once she pulls herself out of this egocentric rut. Beneath the suggestion of Lau’s underdevelopment as a writer lies a generational critique that is most explicit in Jan Wong’s anecdote but also apparent in pieces such as Beryl Tsang’s review of

Lau's *Runaway* in the newsletter of the Chinese Canadian National Council. In this narrative, Lau is a classic case of second-generation immigration gone wrong. This narrative insists that she is an ungrateful, spoiled, and selfish girl who not only willfully rejects her roots, but also has the gall to flaunt her rejection.

This narrative troubles me. It subscribes to a notion of progress and development which is deeply colonial in its formation. In declaring the demands and responsibilities of membership, this narrative carries within it what Miranda Joseph in the title of her book calls "the romance of community," or what Sneja Gunew distinguishes as "the claustrophobic paradigms of identity politics which can be constraining even when benignly situated in the realms of postcolonial and multicultural interrogations" (155). Casting Lau as the unruly and therefore always already racialized subject who refuses to grow up, to develop, works to diminish and dismiss her interventions. Yes, you cannot help but read Lau's personal history onto her fiction. Her writing seems to court the rubbing out of those uneasy distinctions. Yes, Lau's writing seems to circle back again and again to the same themes, the same set of pathologies and desires. However, I propose that we think of these attachments as part of a process of unfinished mourning — a melancholia which refuses to let go of the trauma of loss. As I have argued elsewhere, to insist on a cure for the racialized melancholic subject is to participate in the very progressivist imperatives which work to keep those at the margins marginal.<sup>2</sup> An open wound, the melancholic subject refuses to be cured, to simply mourn the loss of the father, the loss of the safety of family, community, home.

Rather than reading Lau as a victim of a marketing strategy that seeks to exploit the scandal of her personal history in order to satiate a dominant consuming public eager for stories of contemporary Suzy Wongs and dysfunctional Asian family life, we need to read in the contradictions of Lau's writing a form of agency which intervenes in the desire of historicist histories. These histories insist that we "move on," that we "get over" the traumas of dislocation which do not remain discretely within families or generations, but seep across families and generations to cast their unhomely shadow on those in diaspora. As Elaine Chang argues, Lau offers a form of agency which interrupts the imperatives of History:

A theory of relational, oppositional agency — born of and responsive to the exigencies of "daily life" — rewrites oppression so as to



particularize the struggles of fragmented and interstitial subjects: subjects whose location-specific knowledges interrupt the “grand narratives” of teleological progress and autonomous individuals that comprise “History” from a sedentary point of view. Evelyn Lau is this kind of subject in action. (100)

Interrupting the grand narrative of progressive history, Lau draws her reader back again and again to a past which people seem to prefer that she forget. Hers is not even necessarily a voluntary preoccupation. As she recognizes, the legacies of racism are not discreet. They do not simply reside within one generation, one family, and the pain of this legacy can no more be cured than a phantom limb severed. She writes of

the moments when you realize you loved these people, helplessly, that you were given no choice in this matter of loving them, and that they will always be part of you no matter how you try to carve them out of your flesh. That you are tied to them with bonds you could never sever, that they will live on inside you no matter how many effigies of them you hang and burn, no matter how often their reflections appear in the eyes of other men and women, men and women who then unwittingly play the roles of father and mother, with whom you act out the drama again and again. (*Inside* 205)

Lau goes on to connect her own grief with that of parents, and that of a racialized community. Writing of the way her parents would prepare for visitors, Lau observes:

My mother would spend hours and hours making traditional Chinese snacks and sweets, which would be heaped in plates on the coffee table. They both tried too hard. They seemed to carry around the feeling that they weren't good enough, that they were less than other people, certainly less than white people. It is a conviction which has leaked into me.... Imagine walking around in a world where everyone you see, everyone who brushes past you, is superior to you. All because of the colour of their skin. (*Inside* 205)

Lau brings to the surface a legacy of sadness which refuses to be cured because it mourns the loss of that which was not possible in the first place — the very safety and security of home and identity which seems to belong to the privileged white class who are the subjects of her critique.

It is not that racialized communities are doomed to permanent melancholia. Rather, this legacy of sadness refuses the hostility to memory endemic to the curative effects of mourning. One must let go in order to mourn, and the refusal to let go implies a recognition that justice has not been done. The haunting of the parental ghosts which cannot be carved out of the flesh reminds us that the legacy of racism persists and its disquieting ghost refuses to rest. As Adorno and Horkheimer so poignantly acknowledge in their note on the theory of ghosts, "Only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with the dead: unity with them because we, like them, are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope" (215). In the disappointed hope of the victims of racial injustice, we hear the demand for reunion, for a recognition of the ways in which the sadness of the past endures in the desires of the living.

In a poignant expression of utopic longing, Lau writes of her first days as a runaway at fourteen when she would walk the streets of Burnaby, a comfortable Vancouver suburb, all night long:

I watched the sun rise.... And I thought what happened inside those houses — the husband getting dressed for work, the wife in her bathrobe, the children crunching toast — I thought what happened inside must be the most heart-wrenchingly beautiful thing of all, the drama of daily life, of connectedness between people, and of the security they had earned for themselves. I thought that if I ever survived, that would be what I would seek for myself. (*Inside* 177-78)

The deep sadness of this longing lies in what Lau has already shared with us about what happens inside those houses — the fathers whose social power depends upon a conjunction of impotence and rage, the loveless marriages seething with hatred and resentment, the daughters who are the objects of lust as much as love. This happens inside those beautiful suburban houses which Lau describes with such loving detail in her stories. Facing the contradictions of wanting the privileges of whiteness does not negate the force of grief, nor does it compromise the power of critique. As Anne Cheng exhorts, "If we are willing to listen, the history of disarticulated grief is still speaking through the living, and the future of social transformation depends on how open we are to facing the intricacies and paradoxes of that grief and the passions that it bequeaths" (29). Let us listen.

And in listening, I hope to think through the shape of diasporic

community. Some might argue that Lau's melancholia is not only self-imposed, but that her losses are then also self-inflicted (didn't she, after all, run away?). Given her rejection of family, and thus the community to which her family is primarily identified with both in her writing and in criticism, a community which is defined by race and class, an obvious cure would be that of turning to that community. Rather than wallowing in the isolating mechanisms of melancholia, it would seem that Lau should at least try to look for the loss of safety and security in some form of community, something beyond herself. That she rejects these cures, that she staunchly denies writing as a woman of colour, for example, has been read as her complicity with whiteness. But what if this rejection is read not as a condemnation of the cure, but as a serious critique of the injunction to be cured? As her fiction makes clear, the utopias she projects are made possible not only by her presence in those very spaces of privilege and power, but also that of her mother and father, and an entire community to which they are connected. It is their collective alienation that makes those utopias possible. To insist on transparent solidarity, on what might be seen as the curative effects of community, is to shortchange the political work that is yet to be done.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada as well as the two anonymous readers of an earlier version of this essay.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Chao, in particular 172-73 and R. Wong's "Marketing Forces," in particular 130 and 136.

<sup>2</sup> See my "How Taste Remembers Life: Diasporic Memory and Community in Fred Wah's Poetry."

### WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming. New York: Continuum, 1986.

- Bannerjee, Chinmoy. "Writing, Self, and Sex." *Canadian Literature* 177. 15 Dec. 2003. <[http://www.canlit.ca/reviews/177/5532\\_Bannerjee.html](http://www.canlit.ca/reviews/177/5532_Bannerjee.html)>.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Boyarin, Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin. *The Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2002.
- Chang, Elaine. "Where the 'Street Kid' Meets the City: Feminism, Postmodernism and Runaway Subjectivity." *Vancouver: Representing the Postmodern City*. Ed. P. Delany. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 1994. 97-120.
- Chao, Lien. *Beyond Silence: Chinese Canadian Literature in English*. Toronto: TSAR, 1997.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.
- Cho, Lily. "'How Taste Remembers Life': Diasporic Memory and Community in Fred Wah's Poetry." *Culture, Identity, Commodity: Diasporic Chinese Literatures in English*. Eds. Tseen Khoo and Kam Louie. Hong Kong: Hong Kong UP, 2005. 81-106.
- . "The Turn to Diaspora." *Topia* 17 (2007): 11-30.
- Chow, Rey. *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993.
- Dean, Misao. "Reading Evelyn Right: the Literary Layers of Evelyn Lau." *Canadian Forum* 857 (1995): 22-26.
- Gunew, Sneja. "Operatic Karaoke and the Pitfalls of Identity Politics: A Translated Performance." *Transformations: Thinking through Feminism*. Eds. Sarah Ahmed, Jane Kilby, Celia Leung, Maureen McNeil, and Beverly Skeggs. London: Routledge, 2000. 145-58.
- Joseph, Miranda. *Against the Romance of Community*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2002.
- Lau, Evelyn. *Choose Me*. Toronto: Vintage, 2000.
- . *Inside Out: Reflections on a Life So Far*. Toronto: Anchor, 2002.
- Mallick, Heather. "Evelyn Lau Exploits Real Life." *Toronto Sun*. 15 Dec. 2003. <[http://www.canoe.ca/JamBooksReviewsC/choose\\_lau.html](http://www.canoe.ca/JamBooksReviewsC/choose_lau.html)>.
- Richards, Linda. Interview with Evelyn Lau. *January Magazine*. 15 Dec. 2003. <<http://www.januarymagazine.com/profiles/lau.html>>.
- Sturgess, Charlotte. "The Female Subject as 'Other': Symbolic Locations and Dislocations." *Genus: Gender in Modern Culture* 2. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003, 77-97.
- Wong, Jan. "Lunch with Jan Wong: Evelyn Lau Gets Perfect Grades in the School of Hard Knocks." *Globe and Mail*. 3 Apr. 1997. C11.
- Wong, Rita. *Choose Me*. Review essay. *Canadian Literature* 163 (1999): 195-97.
- . "Marketing Forces and Powerful Desires." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 73 (2001): 122-40.