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# Narrative Strategies and the Deconstruction of Lies

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JUDITH MISRAHI-BARAK

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. . . [I]t is an illusion to imagine that one could ever actually reconstruct the past.  
—Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*

**IN CARIBBEAN FICTION WRITTEN IN ENGLISH, CHINESE CARIBBEAN** people have remained in the background even though Caribbean people of Chinese ancestry have made important contributions to present-day Caribbean society. Anne-Marie Lee-Loy expresses this by saying, “Asianness, or more specifically . . . Chineseness, remains largely relegated to the realm of silences and suppressions or gestured to as merely an element of the greater ‘cut and mix’ that comprises Caribbeanness.”<sup>1</sup> Scholars like Walton Look-Lai, Trevor Millet and Andrew Wilson are among the pioneers who have examined the history of the Chinese migration to the Caribbean in works published in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century.

However, fictional writing seems to have drawn the attention of the academic and general public to the Chinese Caribbean. Interestingly, Meiling Jin’s collection *Song of the Boatwoman* (1996)<sup>2</sup> does not contain many short stories that focus on the indentureship period, apart from “Victoria” that brings the reader back to the Rose Hall estate in Berbice, British Guiana, in 1909. Her underlying focus is much more present-day Guyana and the Guyanese diaspora in the United Kingdom.<sup>3</sup> Jin was born in British Guiana in 1956 and went to the UK with her family in 1964. She may have wanted to avoid being placed in too small a box that would be labelled “Chinese indentureship writing”. Interestingly again, Patricia Powell does not have ethnic Chinese ancestry, no direct Chinese filiation. Yet, her fictional exploration of the Chinese Caribbean people in her novel *The Pagoda* (1998)<sup>4</sup> provided the necessary detour that authorised other writers to take fresh approaches.

In the Francophone Caribbean, Raphaël Confiant's *La Panse du Chacal* (2004)<sup>5</sup> foregrounded migrations from India to the Caribbean. He quickly followed suit with *Case à Chine* (2007),<sup>6</sup> which opens with a personal tribute paid by the author to his grandmother Jenny Yang-Ting. Through the narrative of the tribulations of three families emigrating from China (Canton and Shanghai), Confiant shines a new light on the Chinese in the Caribbean, from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, by revisiting history and playing with the chronology as he goes back and forth in time. Interest in the Chinese Caribbean community and fiction writing has now risen among writers, and scholars, producing a higher number of historical and fictional publications. Not only have Chinese Caribbean writers themselves chosen not to shy away from their heritage anymore, but they are rewriting it in more creative ways, as if their common goal was to revisit and review it, as well as to take issue with the opening sentence of *Case à Chine*: "Ils ne nous supportent qu'invisibles" (They only bear with us if we keep out of sight).<sup>7</sup>

Jan Lowe Shinebourne is one of the writers who have put fresh emphasis on the Chinese Caribbean diaspora. The unexpected literary strategies she uses to raise a new self-awareness are worth analysing, particularly because she has been writing and publishing for more than thirty years, from the prize-winning *Timepiece* (1986)<sup>8</sup> and *The Last English Plantation* (1988)<sup>9</sup> to *The Godmother and Other Stories* (2004),<sup>10</sup> *Chinese Women* (2010),<sup>11</sup> and, more recently, *The Last Ship* (2015).<sup>12</sup> Contrary to her early novels, which bore her married name, Jan Shinebourne, the later books were all published under the name Jan Lowe Shinebourne which, despite the anglicised spelling, brings the Chinese element of her ancestry visibly to the front page. All subsequent editions of her earlier novels were also released by Peepal Tree Press under the name Jan Lowe Shinebourne.<sup>13</sup> This leads to a revisiting of the writer's self, history and persona, in relation with the wider Chinese community in the Caribbean and its literature. As is the case with many writers who mine their own life as a source of inspiration for their fiction, Shinebourne has often been asked whether her fiction is autobiographical and whether she can be compared to her protagonists Sandra Yensen (*Timepiece*), June Lehall (*Last English Plantation*), Alice Wong (*Chinese Women*) or Joan Wong (*The Last Ship*). The answer she gives is, unsurprisingly, the following:

[Y]es, there are autobiographical influences in my novels but this does not mean that the fictional protagonists are me. I do draw on my own background to write

my fiction but the thing I have drawn on primarily, even when not directly, is the sugar estate environment in Canje where I was born and spent my early childhood and youth, at the height of the British colonial era in British Guiana.<sup>14</sup>

*The Last Ship* is entirely set in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and covers the tribulations of families migrating from China to become indentured labourers in British Guiana. The novel narrates the arrival of the Chungs on the last ship that carried Chinese indentured labourers to British Guiana in 1879 and their association with the Leos, up to the year 2000 when Joan Wong, one of the granddaughters, visits China for the first time.<sup>15</sup> The reader immediately notices that they are not offered a big, fat book of the kind one identifies with a saga, embracing several generations in one sweeping gesture. Instead, the vast historical perspective is pitched against the seemingly narrow points of view of characters such as the two grandmothers Clarice Chung and Susan Leo, the daughter Mary Leo, and the granddaughter Joan Wong. Additionally, the narrative underpinnings are provided by short chapters sometimes reduced to vignettes that take the reader from one character to the next, weaving a network of connections that transport us from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, even though it may not be obvious at first.

After connecting *The Last Ship* to its context and bringing out what made its writing possible and necessary, this article will analyse what makes this work “a remarkable novel”.<sup>16</sup> It will postulate that the originality and dynamics of the novel stem from a certain number of tensions entwined in the very form of the narrative. The novel flirts with different genres, namely the family saga, the historical novel, the autobiographical novel, the life story and the chronicle. It plays with the push-and-pull effects of narrative voice and focalisation, and oscillates between different tones. This article examines the narrative as one that intensifies the interest in the Chinese migration to the Caribbean and in the history of the descendants of the indentured labourers. The hypothesis is that the deliberate choice of a fragmentary and (s)light structure is an essential element of the search for the most appropriate creative form to tell a story so far untold.

### Probing the history of the Chinese in the Caribbean through subtle narratorial strategies

Two epigraphs open *The Last Ship*. The first one is from *Stress of Weather* by Helen Atteck and Philip Atteck, which is subtitled by the authors as a “collection of

original source documents relating to a voyage from China to Trinidad, West Indies, in 1862” as well as “a family chronicle”.<sup>17</sup> The quotation puts the emphasis on China viewed by the Europeans as “merely an impoverished, overpopulated source for unskilled labour” and on the fact that “those who were recruited for the purpose of emigrating had no idea of the implications of their actions” (loc. 16 of 1923). The second one is from *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar* by historian Walton Look Lai<sup>18</sup> and gives the names of a certain number of families who became wealthy after their migration to British Guiana. The ships are also mentioned, as if to enhance their physical presence: *Corona* (1874), *Dora* (1860), *Chapman* (1861), and *Dartmouth* (1879) (loc. 25 of 1923).

The opening section, merely two pages long, entitled “The Old Lady”, operates the transition between the two epigraphs and the rest of the chapters:

Her name was Clarice Chung but in Canefield, Berbice, everyone called her *The Old Lady*, even her own children . . . When they called her *The Old Lady*, they emphasized *old*, though when she came to live in Canefield in 1923 she was only fifty, and when she died there in 1946 she was seventy-three, not so very old at all.

For twenty-three years she sat in her shop in Canefield in the same spot, behind the counter, where she guarded the money drawer. She hardly moved except to open and close the drawer. She rarely spoke to customers, only to her three children, Norma, Frederick and Harold, who worked in the shop and bakery daily, obeying her commands and serving her customers. (loc. 55 of 1923)

This first chapter ends with a paragraph that hints proleptically at the end of the book:

Many years later, near the end of the twentieth century, these same children, those who were still in Guyana, now themselves nearing old age, were reluctant to speak to Joan Wong, Clarice Chung’s granddaughter, who had returned to Canefield to research Clarice’s history. They were reluctant because they had nothing good to say about her grandmother who had come to British Guiana in 1879, on the last ship to bring Chinese people to the colony. (loc. 65 of 1923)

The *Admiral*, the last ship that took Chinese indentured labourers to British Guiana in 1879, is thus added to Look Lai’s list in the second epigraph. This initial focus on the end of the Chinese indentureship in British Guiana indirectly invites the reader to enquire about the early beginnings. Chinese emigration from the mainland to the Western world had in fact started as early as the sixteenth century, but intensified in the nineteenth century due to increasing domestic

crises, social upheavals and trade pressures in China. The migration from China towards Trinidad started in 1806.<sup>19</sup> It had been hoped that a substitute for the transatlantic slave trade could be found on this island acquired by the British in 1797, when the abolitionist movement was gaining momentum in Great Britain and when it was felt that the slave trade, if not yet slavery itself, would soon have to be abolished. Revolutionary fever was also seizing French-colonised islands, threatening to spread the slave revolts that had started in Haiti in 1791 and that were going to lead to the creation of the first black republic in 1804, to the rest of the empire. The *Fortitude*, property of the East India Company, landed in Trinidad on 12 October 1806, bringing 192 Chinese. The fact that not a single woman was among the 192 original indentured labourers (only 20 percent of Chinese immigrants before 1870 were women) and that the Chinese were not particularly fitted to the agricultural needs of the colony led to the project being aborted: within a few years, only twenty to thirty Chinese had remained, the others had died or gone back.<sup>20</sup> A more intrusive kind of Western imperialism, which culminated in the two Opium Wars (1839–42 and 1856–60) then exacerbated the migratory movements.<sup>21</sup> After another “stillborn effort at recruiting Chinese labour for Jamaica, British Guiana and Trinidad in 1843”,<sup>22</sup> the idea of a Chinese settlement in the West Indies was forgotten until the 1850s.

By the 1850s, migration from India across the “*Kala pani*” (black waters) of the Indian and Atlantic oceans was well underway. These indentured labourers had responded to the need for labour on the plantations after African enslavement was legally abolished and fully terminated (1834 and 1838 respectively in the British empire; 1848 in the French empire; and 1863 in the Dutch empire).<sup>23</sup> The history of the ‘bound coolies’ migrating from India to work in the sugar colonies of the British, French and Dutch empires between 1834 and 1917 has benefited from the relentless research by historians, anthropologists, literary scholars and non-fiction writers who have investigated indentureship and its after-effects over the past century.<sup>24</sup> For a long time, the history of the Chinese in the Caribbean remained in the shadow of the Indian indentureship but, as mentioned earlier, it has gained more attention from the last generation.

About 13,500 Chinese went to British Guiana between 1853 and 1879.<sup>25</sup> This is Shinebourne’s centre of interest, connected to the fact that one side of her family had come from China and she was born in Berbice, British Guiana, where she grew up on Rose Hall estate.<sup>26</sup> The events recounted in *The Last Ship* occur at the very end of the Chinese migration to British Guiana, featuring

the *Admiral* as carrying on board the Wongs, as well as the Cheung (Chung) family. When reading the first chapter “The Old Lady”, simple arithmetic tells the reader that, if Clarice Chung died at seventy-three in 1946, she was six when she arrived in British Guiana in 1879. Shinebourne brings to the fore the family history of the Wongs, Chungs and Leos over three generations, with a sharpened focus on four women;<sup>27</sup> they are Clarice Chung, born in China, married to John Wong in British Guiana; Susan Leo, born in British Guiana, married to James Abdul, an Indian Muslim born in Kashmir; Mary Leo, married to Frederick, Clarice’s elder son; and Joan Wong, granddaughter of Clarice and Susan and daughter of Mary and Frederick, born in British Guiana and raised in Guyana. Joan Wong is the one who researches her grandmothers’ history. How Clarice settles in British Guiana, how Susan has two of her daughters marry into the Chung/Wong family, and how Joan arrives at the decision in 2000 to travel back to China, form part of the family saga.

The writing of *The Last Ship* originates from the burning desire to unravel the history of a whole community through characters like Clarice Chung, who rarely spoke and “remained a mystery” (loc. 116 of 1923). The following three examples illustrate how the text creates opportunities for the reader to mine the silenced history of the Chinese Caribbean people and understand to what extent it can be probed into.

Cordelia, the black servant who works in the shop and who has a child with Harold out of wedlock but has never obtained any acknowledgement, is the unsuspecting witness of one of the rare moments in the novel when Clarice vents her frustration:

. . . just once, when they were sitting in silence in the shop, her sense of injury and betrayal so overwhelmed her that she began to complain bitterly to Cordelia about the injuries she had borne in her life.

. . . It was difficult because to tell her story Clarice mixed Creole with some random Mandarin words she had brought from China. She spoke some Hakka, too, and this was also mixed in. It was in this eclectic language that Clarice told Cordelia every single thing about herself, about her memories of the China she left in December 1878. It was a language filled with grief, bewilderment and anger that this was how she had ended up – a Chinese person, whom no one understood, on a remote, poverty-stricken sugar estate in British Guiana, far from the homeland she would never see again. (loc. 126 of 1923)



In such a passage, the three narratological elements of narrative voice, focalisation and language are the tools the writer uses to ensure that the reader, like Cordelia, remains outside, quite unable to investigate any deeper. The third-person narrative voice is combined with external focalisation, thus precluding any possibility of getting close to Clarice. Additionally, the text is in English, reporting indirectly what may have been said by Clarice while exhibiting the impossibility of direct access to what she allegedly said. The mixed/creolised language, combining Creole, Mandarin and Hakka, is left to haunt the text in English, a frail attempt at *translating* the presence-absence of the other languages, bound to remain incomplete, fragmentary or, simply, lost. The reader can only remain outside, struggling to look beyond what features in the text and to listen to its echoes, grappling with the promises that still haunt it – a direct narrative access, a view from within, a linguistic bridge to cross over.

After Cordelia, Susan Leo is the second character whom the author brings in to provide a glimpse of Clarice's mystery. After receiving a letter from her cousin Elizabeth Chung, a doctor in Georgetown, telling her that her laundress, Susan Leo, is looking for a husband for one of her daughters, Clarice agrees to a marriage match. The third chapter is entirely devoted to "The Marriage Match" between Mary and Frederick. Clarice will get two Leo daughters for her two sons for the price of one, as Harold eventually marries Lily. Making sure that she can benefit from the deal, she will also arrange for the other two Leo daughters, Jean and Sally, to get married to Joe Persaud, her dentist, and Jimmy Chu, her carpenter and mechanic, respectively.

When Susan Leo comes to Canefield with her four daughters, Clarice takes the first opportunity she finds to talk about their respective status and mark out the differences between the Chungs and the Leos:

. . . I is real Chinee, I ain't no Hakka Chinee. Me and me family was last real Chinee come he' 'pon the last ship that bring Chinee people. We come here fresh fresh, pure Chinee, we was not like allyou Hakka Chinee that come here long time and get chil'ren with black an' coolie people, eat black and coolie food an' forget China. I ain't forget China; it still in me brain, not like all you Hakka that stay here so long you can't remember nothing. I come 'pon last ship from China, so I remember China. I is still like how I was when I come from China. I is a real Chinee; you no real Chinee.

. . . I is Chung too, I is Clarice Chung! Me name change to Wong when I married John Wong; he was Hakka Chinee, but I ain't no Hakka, me Chung family was Punt, so I keep me Chung name . . . We Punt has land and property in China.

Dem Hakka people dat come here din have nothing, nothing! Me family was royal Chinee! Emperor Chengzong was me family! Dey send we here to build this country! In Hong Kong, *Xian Gang*, we build plenty big property; that is why they send we here, to build this country! (loc. 204–15 of 1923)

This time, the reader, like Susan, is made to hear Clarice's own voice, in creolised English and in direct speech, as the reader can imagine she might well have spoken. The direct speech above is one of the very few instances of a dialogue which involves Clarice. As such, it uses *real time* and endorses *showing* over *telling*, thus shoring up the impression that the scene is happening in front of our eyes, producing, in the words of Roland Barthes, "un effet de réel" (an effect of reality).<sup>28</sup> In many ways, it is meant to satisfy the reader's fantasy that Clarice's story can be approached, delineated, understood. Yet, the singularity of the passage paradoxically enhances the fact that such characters as Clarice Chung, Susan Leo, Mary Leo, and Joan Wong are most often only character-focalisers and are generally denied the status of narrator-focalisers who would speak in their own voices. The reader yearns for *Clarice* to be *clarified* but she remains "a mystery", her inaccessibility enhanced by the complex textuality of the narrative.

The following excerpt exemplifies one more narrative strategy to address the difficult negotiations implied in the reconstruction of the diasporic world:

The most painful thing about coming to British Guiana was never to be understood. She had come [to British Guiana] with her father and his four brothers. The eldest brother was Cheung Chang Bo, who later changed his name to Arnold Chung; his wife, Jun, changed her name to Margaret Chung. They came with their two sons, Ming (who became Joseph Chung) and Ling (who became Jacob Chung). Her father was the second of the brothers. His name was Cheung Mu Bo but he changed it to George Chung. Her mother's name was She, but she changed it to Sheila. The third brother was Cheung Sam Bak; he became Peter Chung and married a Hakka woman, Gloria Lee. The youngest brother, Cheung Wan Bak, became Bertram Chung; he, too, married a Hakka, Henrietta Chin. (loc. 257 of 1923)

Neither direct nor indirect speech, this stands between the two as free indirect speech. In a somewhat tenuous way, one can almost hear the explanations given by Clarice in a voice that comes from *outside* herself, under the guise of a seemingly omniscient narrator but through a focalisation that could be hers but is not quite hers. The distance that can be sensed from the probing

and the softly humorous tone, *sotto voce*, are also part of the interrogation. In such lines, Shinebourne subtly raises these crucial questions connected to the identity tussle during and after migration. Who were they and how was I related to them? Who was I then and who am I now? How much have we remained the same and how much have we changed? How can we grasp all the heavy lifting that happened then, and all the wheeling and dealing that is happening now? How can anyone understand what happened if not everything is clear for me in the first place?

Bringing into play different combinations of the third-person narrative voice, internal and external focalisation, oblique transcriptions as well as direct, indirect or free indirect speech, the text implements a whole array of narrative approaches in its attempts to come as close as possible to Clarice's character. In all three cases, the text invests in the echoes that can be heard in, and beyond, language. The work on the narrative is subtle, quite low-key and almost demure. Yet, if one pays close attention to its ploys, it is efficient and powerful in the depiction of Clarice's complex relationship to her own story, and the very (im)possibility of its narration.

The unostentatious use of such narratorial strategies is one route that Shinebourne takes in her investigation into Clarice's identity tussle. Clarice's obsession with what she considers her "purity" and unadulterated Chineseness is one of the prevalent narrative threads throughout *The Last Ship*, and one that both links and separates the two clans of the Chungs and the Leos. It is also one that is highly significant in the depiction of the construction of British Guiana in the first place, of Guyana then, and of what it is to be a diasporic Guyanese finally. Clarice leads the way. In order to create a new life for herself and her family in a new environment, she designs a phantasmagoric heritage that is supposed to give her a higher status in the host country. In transnational migrating contexts, this reinvention of one's history often helps make sense of oneself.

### A "real Chineese"

What is it that makes the migrations from China specific, and different from the ones from India? What is it that connects Chinese indentured immigrants to the Indian ones, or keeps them apart? With a few exceptions, historians, social scientists and anthropologists have tended to examine those migrations separately rather than in a global, interconnected way.<sup>29</sup> If the Indian immigrants

came predominantly as indentured workers on a five-year contract (including a return passage to India, at least until the end of the nineteenth century), there were three possible ways of emigrating from China. One could pay for oneself and go as an individual free immigrant; one could be sponsored, having one's passage paid for and to be reimbursed later; or, one could get a contract as an indentured worker. In spite of tentative negotiations, no provisions were made for a return passage to China at the end of the indentured period. The majority of Indian immigrants remained in the Caribbean whereas the Chinese often re-migrated to other British colonies. Only after 1870 were efforts made to increase family migration, which is exactly the context of *The Last Ship*.

From her early novels *Timepiece* and *The Last English Plantation*, Shinebourne is one of the few Caribbean writers who have paid heed to interactions between the Chinese and the Indian communities.<sup>30</sup> Her angle is to interrogate the specificity of the bond with China, the myriad ways it is remembered and daily reenacted; how it is forgotten, put at a distance, or fantasised; how mourning is mitigated or transmuted; how immigrants have built solidarity or thrived on enmity; how different diasporic communities are interconnected or kept apart. *The Last Ship* is committed to highlighting the interactions, whether willing or reluctant, between Indian and Chinese indentured migrants in British Guiana.

One of the elements of these exchanges is the attachment to the home country and the alleged "purity" of one's origin. When Clarice is contemplating marrying her sons off to two Leo daughters, she boasts about being a "real Chinese", as we have seen, and she is full of scorn for Susan whose four daughters are "half-Indian":

Clarice demanded to know if Mary was pure Chinese.

"No, Miss Chung, she is only half Chinese and half Indian. All my girls here have the same Indian father, James Abdul, but he lef' me and I had to raise me children by meself." (loc. 172 of 1923)

Yet, Clarice's environment shows the inevitable creolisation that went on among Indo-, Sino- and Afro-Guyanese people. While she does not seek to minimise the violence that happened or deny that violence, this is the point Shinebourne is making against Clarice: "purity" can only be a constructed fantasy, but unveiling the circuitous routes of such constructions takes time and painstaking care, as was shown in the first section of this article on the narratorial strategies adopted by Shinebourne.

Before Clarice manages to marry her son Harold to Mary Leo, he has already had a son with the black servant, Cordelia:

One day, her belly started to grow, and her mother came to the shop to tell Clarice that Harold was the father. Harold denied it and Clarice backed him up. All through her pregnancy, and after she had the baby, a boy called Winston, Cordelia would come to the shop and sit there waiting to be given the recognition she wanted. In future years, when anyone asked the boy his name, he said “Winston Wong”. The customers understood very well that by her silence Clarice was denying that the boy was related to her. (loc. 105 of 1923)

One of Clarice’s daughters has also already opened the family’s horizons, despite all the efforts made to cover things up: “There was also little mention of the child, Doris, whom her oldest daughter Norma had conceived in her teens for an Indian man. Norma had been sent away to New Forest, where the child lived with her father” (loc. 95 of 1923). James Abdul and Henry Singh, the former a Muslim and the latter a Hindu, ignite a feeling of shame in Clarice who has spent her whole life nurturing her pride in being “a real Chinese”.

This is not the only silence in the family: “They also kept hidden away Clarice’s younger daughter, Anna, who was an epileptic. Her fits were so severe she would foam at the mouth, collapse and shake violently; then her siblings would tie her with ropes and lock her away” (loc. 95 of 1923). The reader is left to wonder which predicament is worse for Clarice: associating with East Indians or having an epileptic in the family.

In a desperate endeavour to put her family back on the tracks of Chinese tradition and of what she refers to as “purity”, Clarice hires a matchmaker who arranges a match between her granddaughter Doris and Willy, the son of the Chow family from Hong Kong. When Willy and his father Mr Feng Chow arrive with the matchmaker, Clarice explains to them that she is “a pure Chinese person, a Puntis with a royal ancestor” (loc. 858 of 1923), how her family came to British Guiana out of a sense of obligation to the missionaries who wanted them to convert the Hakkas here to Christianity, and how “her family had fled China to escape the Hakka Taiping Rebellion” (loc. 858 of 1923). After using the services of an interpreter and wriggling out of a potential brawl over the fact that the Chows’ ancestors were Hakka people and had participated in the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64) to rid China of emperors, the deal is finally sealed, and it does not matter that Doris and Willy can hardly understand each other.

Everybody gets happy and the Chows go to the forest to hunt some animals:

They caught a giant turtle, a young tapir and a baby alligator and brought these creatures, still alive, back to Clarice's shop where they let them loose. When they untied these creatures, Norma was there with Doris and Anna. All the women screamed in terror when the tapir began to run around the shop and the alligator slithered around, snapping its jaws. The Chinese men attacked the animals with axes, cutlasses and cleavers. Frederick and Harold had to help them take the dead creatures into the yard where they skinned the tapir and chopped it into pieces. It was more difficult to kill the turtle and chop it up. The turtle resisted all their efforts to break its shell. For a long time, it lay on its back with its underbelly heaving. (loc. 876 of 1923)

This short evocation told in a humorous tone that associates animal slaughter with laughter echoes another dramatic and funny moment earlier on in the narrative when Harold goes on a rampage after Clarice reprimands him. He takes a cleaver and tries to "chop off her head, cut her into small pieces and throw her body parts into the canal" (loc. 85 of 1923). This is not exactly in keeping with the construction of the myth of an industrious family leading a virtuous life. However, nothing can dampen Clarice's pride in getting her granddaughter married to a man from Hong Kong: "Doris's marriage had brought a real Chinese person into her family. She could die in peace knowing that Doris would have pure Chinese children who, by virtue of their pure Chinese blood and culture, would be rich and successful people" (loc. 916 of 1923).

In the same concatenation of episodes, Clarice's own wedding to John Wong is brought back to her memory. Her uncle Arnold had agreed to pay for the wedding on condition that it would be "a truly Chinese wedding" (loc. 486 of 1923). The memory provides the reader with one of the analepses in the novel, a few pages tucked away in the chapter "The Chinese Wedding": neither Clarice nor John seem to have cared about any of those rituals in their youth.

When Clarice dies in 1946 just after the wedding between Doris and Willy, the irony is obviously not lost on the reader: Clarice's two sons, Frederick and Harold, married mixed-race Leo daughters, Mary and Lily; Harold had a mixed-race son with the black servant, Cordelia; Anna, her epileptic daughter, is the only one who does not have any children and commits suicide; Clarice's granddaughter, Doris, the mixed-race daughter of Norma and Henry Singh, finally marries a Hakka man; her two other granddaughters, Lorna and Joan, are also half-Indian and half-Chinese since they were born to Frederick Chung

and Mary Leo. Shinebourne will use Joan to drive the point home at the end of the novel where the mystery will be unravelled and the fake story exposed: any family narrative that would spin a story of “purity” can only be a fantasy. Yet, the descendants should certainly try to understand the difficulties their ancestors faced upon arrival in a new host country, and the writers retrieve the submerged story, beyond silences and lies, through memory and family stories, through non-fiction but also fiction writing and reinvention, however paradoxical it may seem. In all its renewed interest, its inventiveness and creativity, fiction writing contributes to that reconstruction.

Before we reach that point, however, Shinebourne creates tensions in her narrative between Clarice’s projected fantasy of “purity” and her own counter-discourse that pulls apart the fantasy of her character. She is intent on showcasing an aspect that may not have received enough attention: the encounters, connections and mixing of blood between the Guyanese of African, Indian and Chinese descent. Her figure of choice is Susan Leo: “[She] looked Chinese but she was dressed like an East Indian; she was wearing the short white organza ornhi that Indian women wore on formal occasions, along with a nose ring, gold bangles, earrings and necklaces” (loc. 163 of 1923). Susan does not hide her love for Indian men. In the chapter that is devoted to her halfway through the novel, after Clarice has died, she takes her granddaughter Joan to meet her dying grandfather for the first time before it is too late:

James Abdul signalled Joan to come closer, and he said, “I am your grandfather; my name is James Abdul, I came from Kashmir.” He emphasized *I*, tapped his hairy chest, as if to say he was the only man who could possibly be her grandfather.

This puzzled Joan, but later that day, she understood why her grandfather had spoken that way. Susan had taken her to the room in Albuoystown where she had once lived with James Abdul, and where, after he abandoned her, she had continued to live with their six children. It was with a sense of wonder that Joan stepped into the room where her mother and her aunts had lived. It felt like being in the past, but the man who was living there now was not from the past. Susan told Joan that his name was Motilall; he had come from India only two years ago and did not speak English well; he worked at Stabroek market as a porter, which was where they met when he started to help her at her stall. (loc. 1169 of 1923)

After James Abdul has left her, Susan lives with Motilall and does not bat an eyelid at Clarice’s scorn. The chaotic association of the Chungs and the Leos, and the interactions between the Indo-Guyanese and the Sino-

Guyanese, continue to be represented in *The Last Ship* through the way Frederick and Mary settle in Canefield to run the shop, and Harold and Lily the bakery. The development of the grocery shop is another element of the history of the Chinese in the Caribbean that Shinebourne has chosen to emphasise.<sup>31</sup> By the 1940s the Chinese already stood as an example of a successful immigrant minority group in the Caribbean, building on the achievements of their nineteenth-century ancestors. This evolution is exactly what is shown through the management of Clarice's shop in Berbice and her obsession with ensuring that she has many descendants.

The irony is, of course, that the one who takes over and learns best how to run the shop in Berbice is Mary, her mixed-race daughter-in-law, the one Clarice has always spurned because she is half-Indian, making her feel worthless. After Clarice and Susan, Mary is another character Shinebourne devotes her attention to in *The Last Ship*. The tragedy is that Mary will reproduce with her own daughters the unfairness and unhappiness she suffered from Clarice in her youth after she got married to Frederick: Lorna looks more Chinese, develops a rare ability in mathematics, is granted a scholarship to study in Georgetown and eventually in London, and will come back to run the shop and look after her mother: "Lorna had become the light that could banish the darkness inside [Mary]" (loc. 1035 of 1923). Mary does not see that her unhappy childhood "haunted her so much that she could not resist inflicting the same suffering on Joan" (loc. 1066 of 1923). Mary treats her daughter Joan like a servant, as she herself had been treated when Susan had placed her with Evadne Williams as a child. Joan's reading and writing skills go unnoticed until she also wins a scholarship and is the one who lands a job in a bank, starts running the shop for a while and looks after her mother until her death, understanding how the burden of expectations put on her sister has ruined her life.

### Retrieving and revealing

Joan may well embody Shinebourne's presence in the novel: the one who has a passion for reading, writing and learning, and, more importantly, the one who contributes to retrieving the family's past and revealing the whole story. The last five chapters focus on how Joan emancipates herself from her two grandmothers, the one who wanted to be Chinese and the one who wanted to be Indian, and on how she becomes truly Guyanese after gaining some political



consciousness through race riots between Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese people in the 1960s, those same race riots Meiling Jin's family had fled in 1964. She visits England in 1968. When a distant cousin, Annie Chung, gets in touch with her, Joan moves in with her in Georgetown. In a singular twist of fate, Annie lives in the luxurious house Joan's aunts, Jean and Sally, had lived in. When Joan settles in, she feels a little lost: "She had not moved into the future but into the past, from which she thought she was free when she left home" (loc. 1430 of 1923). This is another instance where the reader can peek into possible resemblances between Shinebourne's personal life and what her characters go through in Georgetown in the late 1960s (Joan Wong in *The Last Ship*, or Sandra Yansen in *Timepiece*). As she explains in the autobiographical piece mentioned earlier,

[I]n Georgetown, the Chinese were always identified as an affluent, successful middle class. When I tried to tell people I was not, that in fact I came from a poor rural sugar estate in Berbice, no one believed me, because the rural sugar estates were assumed to be inhabited only by very poor Indian people, and Indian people were assumed to be backward and uneducated. They preferred to slot me into the Chinese middle class; they could not see me as having Indian peasantry ancestry or as coming from "Coolies" as such people were referred to.<sup>32</sup>

But this is not the only myth she debunks. The other one is connected to the family history. Within her small circle of Chinese friends, the ones who stay in Guyana, Annie nurtures the same dream of maintaining the "old hierarchies of race, wealth and culture" (loc. 1471 of 1923) as Clarice had. She is the one who pushes Joan into contemplating going to China to take Clarice's ancestral heirlooms back there, those very objects Clarice had wanted to bury with her, which reminds the reader of an earlier tragi-comical incident:

Only when her coffin was placed in the grave, which was full of water from the heavy rain, did Frederick remember that they had forgotten to place her heirlooms in it, but he reasoned this was just as well since her coffin would be full of water, and this would have destroyed the scroll painting of the Emperor, so it would have been no use to Clarice when she got to heaven. (loc. 950 of 1923)


In her will, Annie requires Joan to take "the scroll picture of the Emperor Chengzong, the silver coins and purse of seeds of the plum tree and soya beans that their Chinese ancestors had brought from China in 1879" back to China

(loc. 1723 of 1923). When Joan finally goes to Hong Kong in 2000 to look for the passenger list of the *Admiral*, it does not take her long to discover that those alleged heirlooms can be found at every street corner: “They were mass-produced in the thousands, the kind of so-called scroll that could still be bought cheap in any market in Hong Kong” (loc. 1838 of 1923). The university professor she consults confirms that the Chungs were Christian missionaries who had gone to British Guiana on behalf of the Church but that they were Hakkas:

It had all been a lie. The Chungs had not come from northern China; they were not descended from Chinese aristocrats; the artefacts they took to British Guiana were fakes . . . [I]t was a relief not to have to carry the burden of a fantastic myth, which, all along, had been a delusional lie. (loc. 1838 of 1923)

More important than the revelation that the whole family myth was constructed on a lie is the final focus on Joan: how she throws the silver coins, the scroll and the seeds into the sea, the relief she feels, the joy at finally being able to let go of the heritage that has been passed on to her, and the final promise she makes to herself – “never to relinquish her freedom for such ties” (loc. 1848 of 1923).

The reader might have expected a grand saga to narrate the tribulations of three generations between 1879 and 2000. But to address the urgent need to unravel the “delusional lies” and silences woven not only by the colonial oppressors but also by the immigrants themselves and their descendants, Shinebourne has steered her ship on a different route. As the emperor’s scroll and the family heirlooms turn out to be fake instead of the most precious heritage they were believed to be, the reader realises that what has been captivating all along is the sheer process of narration, as the perspective keeps shifting and alternative vantage points emerge. Throughout the narrative, unexpected prominence is given to elements that might have been deemed negligible – the characters’ internal perspectives, subsidiary stories in the form of vignettes, comical incidents, portraits reimagined of ancestors long gone, and so on. The subtle narratorial interplay between the voices of the narrator and the author constantly point to how complex it is to engage in narrating a story that is both individual and collective, and how domination does not only come from where it is expected. In *The Last Ship*, Shinebourne searches for narrative strategies that authorise the reinvention of a self one did not know existed, not by creating more lies, but by revisiting a part of history that needs to shift its focus. To debunk

family and community myths of “purity”, Shinebourne deliberately keeps her distance from grand narratives and expected genres. In an unassuming way, with formidable delicacy and textual ingenuity, she achieves the recreation of individual and collective self. 

## NOTES

*Epigraph*: Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 14.

1. Anne-Marie Lee-Loy, “In Another Moment: Exploring Chineseness as Caribbean Diasporic Identity”, *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 12, no. 1 (May 2015): Article 1, <http://doi.org/10.33596/anth.278> (accessed 16 August 2020).
2. Meiling Jin, *Song of the Boatwoman* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1996).
3. British Guiana and Guyana will be both used in the article, depending on the period of reference, before or after 1966.
4. Patricia Powell, *The Pagoda* (New York: Knopf, 1998).
5. Raphaël Confiant, *La Panse du Chacal* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004).
6. Raphaël Confiant, *Case à Chine* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2007).
7. *Ibid.*, 109 (my translation).
8. Jan Lowe Shinebourne, *Timepiece* (Leeds: Peepal Tress Press, 1986).
9. Jan Lowe Shinebourne, *The Last English Plantation* (Leeds: Peepal Tress Press, 1988).
10. Jan Lowe Shinebourne, *The Godmother and Other Stories* (Leeds: Peepal Tress Press, 2004).
11. Jan Lowe Shinebourne, *Chinese Women* (Leeds: Peepal Tress Press, 2010).
12. Jan Lowe Shinebourne, *The Last Ship* (Leeds: Peepal Tress Press, 2015), Kindle ed. Subsequent location references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.
13. See an earlier article that examined the increasing visibility of Chinese Caribbean literature and wondered how one travels from Jan Lowe to Jan Shinebourne and finally to Jan Lowe Shinebourne: Judith Misrahi-Barak, “Looking In, Looking Out: The Chinese-Caribbean Diaspora through Literature – Meiling Jin, Patricia Powell, Jan Lowe Shinebourne”, *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 4, no. 1 (June 2012), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/opn2w8cs#page-1>. In many ways, the present article starts off where the earlier one ended.
14. Jan Lowe Shinebourne, “Autobiographical Influences in My Fiction Writing”, *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 12, no. 1 (May 2015): Article 4, <http://doi.org/10.33596/anth.289>. Volume 12 is entirely focused on the Chinese Caribbean and is available at: <https://anthurium.miami.edu/20/volume/12/issue/1/>.

15. Meiling Jin had also not visited China until 1981.
16. Lomarsh Roopnarine, "The Last Ship Review", *The Caribbean Writer*, 25 October 2016, <https://www.peepalmtreepress.com/books/reviews/last-ship-review> (accessed 31 March 2020).
17. Helen Atteck and Philip Atteck, *Stress of Weather: A Collection of Original Source Documents Relating to a Voyage from China to Trinidad, West Indies, in 1862: In Conjunction with a Family Chronicle* (St Catharines, Ont.: Wanata Enterprises, 2000).
18. Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838–1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
19. For details of the history of the Chinese in the Caribbean, see Look Lai, *Indentured Labour, Caribbean Sugar*; Walton Look Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies, 1806–1995: A Documentary History* (Kingston: The Press, University of the West Indies, 1998); Walton Look Lai, ed., *Essays on the Chinese Diaspora in the Caribbean* (St Augustine: University of the West Indies, 2006); Trevor M. Millett, *The Chinese in Trinidad* (Port of Spain: Imprint, 1993); and Andrew Wilson, *The Chinese in the Caribbean* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2004). See also F. Rajkumar, "The Chinese in the Caribbean during the Colonial Era", *Caribbean Atlas*, <http://www.caribbean-atlas.com/en/themes/waves-of-colonization-and-control-in-the-caribbean/daily-lives-of-caribbean-people-under-colonialism/the-chinese-in-the-caribbean-during-the-colonial-era.html> (accessed 31 March 2020).
20. Look Lai, *Chinese in the West Indies*, 22–23.
21. Look Lai, *Indentured Labour*, 39–40. See also Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy – *Sea of Poppies* (Toronto: Viking, 2008); *River of Smoke* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011); and *Flood of Fire* (London: John Murray, 2015) – which elaborates on the crossing of the Indian Ocean to the West towards Mauritius and on the Opium Wars between China and the British empire in southeast Asia.
22. Look Lai, *Chinese in the West Indies*, 47.
23. Some 1,250,000 indentured labourers were taken from India to Fiji, Mauritius and the Caribbean. Scholars generally agree on just under 240,000 Indians going to British Guyana; about 144,000 to Trinidad; 36,000 to Jamaica; 67,000 to Martinique and Guadeloupe; a little more than 60,000 to Fiji; 26,000 to Reunion Island; and 454,000 to Mauritius. For more precise figures and analyses, see the first chapter of Clem Seecharan, *Tiger in the Stars: The Anatomy of Indian Achievement in British Guiana, 1919–1929* (London: Macmillan Education, 1997); Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra, Australia: Journal of Pacific History, 1983); and Lomarsh Roopnarine, *Indo-Caribbean Indenture: Resistance and Accommodation, 1838–1920* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2007). Steven Vertovec recapitulates on different sources and offers a very useful cumulative table that gives

- the detailed numbers of Indian immigrants per country, over the different periods of indentureship in “Indo-Caribbean Experience in Britain: Overlooked, Miscategorized, Misunderstood”, in *Inside Babylon: The Caribbean Diaspora in Britain*, ed. Winston James and Clive Harris (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 165–78.
24. Besides fiction writers, the following have made a significant contribution: Gaiutra Bahadur, Crispin Bates, Marina Carter, Gaurav Desai, David Dabydeen, Isabel Hofmeyr, Maria Kaladeen, Brij Lal, Kumar Mahabir, Brinda Mehta, Vijay Mishra, Mala Pandurang, Lomarsh Roonarine, Brinsley Samaroo, Clem Seecharan, Hugh Tinker, Khal Torabully, and Steven Vertovec, among others.
  25. About 7.5 million Chinese left China for overseas destinations in the nineteenth century, of which 600,000 went to the Americas (Central and South America, and the Caribbean). Some 20,000 of these, mostly from Fujian and Guangdong provinces (formerly Fukien and Kwangtung), went to the British West Indies. The peak of Chinese migration to the Caribbean occurred between 1853 and 1866, but it really ended in 1884. Approximately 3,000 Chinese went to Trinidad between 1853 and 1866; about 2,500 to Surinam between 1853 and 1873; and some 1,000 to Jamaica between 1854 and 1884 – see Look Lai, *Essays on the Chinese Diaspora in the Caribbean*, 9.
  26. See Jan Lowe Shinebourne, “Rose Hall”, in *Re-imagining the Guyanas*, ed. Lawrence Aje, Judith Misrahi-Barak, and Thomas Lacroix, Horizons Anglophones series (Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2019), 53–60.
  27. The focus on three generations is well represented in Indo-Caribbean fiction and non-fiction. See Judith Misrahi-Barak, “Ramabai and Gainder, Gaiutra and Sujaria Are Turning Tides: Great-grandmothers’ and Great-granddaughters’ Odysseys and Narratives of the *Kala Pani*”, in *Turning Tides: Caribbean Intersections in the Americas and Beyond*, ed. Heather Cateau and Milla Cozart Riggio (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2019), 73–87.
  28. Roland Barthes, “L’effet de réel”, *Communications* 11 (1968): 84–89, <http://doi.org/10.3406/comm.1968.1158>.
  29. See, for instance, Brinsley Samaroo, “Chinese and Indian ‘Coolie’ Voyages to the Caribbean”, *Journal of Caribbean Studies* 14, nos. 1 & 2 (2000): 3–24. To understand the specificities of the Chinese diaspora, see Emmanuel Ma Mung, *La Diaspora chinoise, géographie d’une migration* (Paris: Editions Ophrys, 2000); and Pierre Trolliet, *La Diaspora chinoise, Que sais-je?* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2000). In “Continuité temporelle, contiguïté spatiale et création d’un mode propre: Le cas de la diaspora chinoise”, *L’Espace géographique* 41, no. 4 (2012): 352–68, <http://doi.org/10.3917/eg.414.0352>, Emmanuel Ma Mung demonstrates that the Chinese diaspora developed through multipolar and inter-polar migrations, with multiple connections between the different locations targeted by the migrations.
  30. See also Merle Hodge, *Crick Crack, Monkey* (London: André Deutsch, 1970), and

Olive Senior, *The Arrival of the Snake-Woman* (Harlow, United Kingdom: Longman, 1989).

31. Maybe because of Indian competition, the Chinese rapidly developed skills that would soon enable them to upgrade from their status of agricultural labourers once their indenture contract had come to an end (market-gardening, domestic service, but mostly small business and trade). By the 1890s, the Chinese “had moved out of agricultural life completely, and taken up their new roles as economic trader middlemen within the class/colour hierarchy of West Indian plantation society” – see Look Lai, *Chinese in the West Indies*, 210.
32. Shinebourne, “Autobiographical Influences”.