



Looking In, Looking Out: The Chinese-Caribbean Diaspora through Literature-Meiling Jin, Patricia Powell, Jan Lowe Shinebourne

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Looking In, Looking Out: The Chinese-Caribbean Diaspora through Literature— Meiling Jin, Patricia Powell, Jan Lowe Shinebourne

JUDITH MISRAHI-BARAK

Although Chinese American literature has been an expanding field in the US, not many scholars have been interested in Chinese Caribbean studies, be it in history, anthropology, sociology, literature, or the arts. I would like to interrogate some of the modalities of such neglect and voice concern over the lack of acknowledgement of the Chinese minority in the Caribbean—as we know, it is never a good sign when a society ignores its minorities, however small they may be, and the blind spots are often the most interesting ones. Walton Look-Lai, Trevor Millett and Andrew Wilson are among the few scholars who have invested the Chinese diaspora in the Caribbean and have led major research in the field. Meiling Jin, Patricia Powell and Jan Lowe Shinebourne are among the few authors who have actually written about the Chinese diaspora in the Caribbean in their fiction. Their novels and short stories testify to the little space that has so far been granted to Chinese Caribbean studies. They are also opening new horizons by reading and writing the Chinese Caribbean people and writers (back) into (textual) existence.¹

The history of the Chinese in the Caribbean started in 1806 in Trinidad. It had been hoped that a substitute for the Atlantic slave trade could be found in an island recently acquired by the British (1797), at a moment when the Abolitionist movement was gaining momentum in the UK and when it was felt that the slave trade, if not yet slavery, would have to be abolished soon. The French islands were also threatening to propagate the revolutionary fever that was going to prove so efficient in Haiti (with major slave revolts in 1791, and the first Black Republic being declared in 1804).

The Fortitude, belonging to the East India Company, landed in Trinidad on October 12, 1806, bringing 192 Chinese. However, the whole experiment was aborted: within a few years, only twenty to thirty Chinese remained; the others had gone back. In order to ensure future success, women were essential (not a single woman was among the 192 original emigrants and only twenty percent of migrants before 1870 were women) and emigrants would have to be selected according to the agricultural needs of the colony.²

After another “stillborn effort at recruiting Chinese labour for Jamaica, British Guiana and Trinidad in 1843,”³ the idea of a Chinese settlement in the West Indies was actively revived in the 1850s. The slave trade had long been abolished in the British Empire (1807) as well as more recently slavery (1833), which forced planters to look for labor other than among former African slaves. Even though Chinese immigration had started as early as the sixteenth century, migration from the mainland to the Western hemisphere intensified in the nineteenth century due to increasing domestic crises, social upheavals and trade pressures, as well as greater Western imperialism, which culminated in the two Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860), which exacerbated migratory movements.⁴

About seven and a half million Chinese left China for overseas destinations in the nineteenth century. 600,000 went to the Americas (Central and Latin America, and the Caribbean), and about 20,000, mostly from Fujian and Guangdong provinces (formerly Fukien and Kwangtung), went to the British West Indies. The peak of Chinese emigration to the Caribbean occurred between 1853 and 1866, but it actually ended in 1884. About 3,000 Chinese went to Trinidad between 1853 and 1866; about 13,500 to British Guiana between 1853 and 1879; about 2,500 to Surinam between 1853 and 1873; and about 1,000 to Jamaica between 1854 and 1884.⁵

Comparatively, some 700,000 Indian people went to the Caribbean as indentured workers, or contract laborers, from 1838 to 1917. In the two cases of the Indian and Chinese migrations, push factors were stronger than pull factors, and the whole system of indenture contracts was state-sponsored and state-regulated by the British, often involving onsite government agencies. In the case of the Indians, the push factors were poverty, debt and famine as well as oppressive social traditions like the caste system or plain slavery. The *arkatis*, or sergent-recruiters, hired by the British, often exaggerated the positive elements beyond the *kala pani* (the dark waters) and lured Indian peasants into migrating. The Indian migrants came predominantly as indentured workers on a five-year contract (including return passage to India). However, there were three possible ways of emigrating from China: one could pay one's own way and go as an individual free migrant; one could be sponsored and have one's passage paid for reimbursement later; and one could obtain a contract as an indentured worker, which was the case for the minority of Chinese immigrating to the Caribbean. In spite of tentative negotiations, no provisions were made for a return passage to China at the end of the indenture period.

The Indian and the Chinese migrations have often been put in the same bag as migration from Asia; yet it is interesting to see how different they are. Even the attitude towards migration seems to have been different since a majority of Indian migrants remained in the Caribbean whereas the Chinese often migrated to other destinations. Only after 1870 were efforts made to improve family migration of men and women. What was also different was the interest and competence in agriculture. Because of Indian competition, the Chinese rapidly developed other skills which would soon enable them to upgrade their status of agricultural laborers once their indenture contract came to an end. 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.”⁶ Their ways of organizing migration also differed, with the Chinese implementing a system of clubs and associations.⁷ This networking would allow the Chinese to attract new waves of migration in the twentieth century, and by the 1940s, the Chinese stood as “an example of a successful immigrant minority group within West Indian colonial society, building on the achievements of their nineteenth century predecessors.”⁸ As conveyed by the example of Trinidad and the words of Trevor Millett, “[b]y the 1960s, the 8,000 Chinese in Trinidad had become well entrenched in the business life of the country.”⁹ As elucidated by the historical and sociological record, the Chinese, contrary to the Indians, for a number of factors assimilated gradually into West Indian and Caribbean society.¹⁰ This assimilation, however, often associated with economic success, did not fail to generate anti-Chinese sentiment.¹¹ Increasingly, the Chinese tended to be assimilated with white people, or those who were “off-white” or mixed-race. In the 1970s, the Caribbean Black Power movement would help reduce the Chinese population to a dwindling minority.¹²

Examining the diaspora must first and foremost include the relationships between the homeland and the country of residence, be it on an individual or on a collective level. As has been suggested above, the idea of China has long gone beyond the borders of China itself. However, only recently has the relationship between China and the Overseas Chinese gained attention. The impact that the diaspora has had on the mainland, and the role it is ready to play in China, is just as interesting as how the mainland considers its diaspora.¹³

Since the Chinese Caribbean minority is small, its literature is expected to be “small” too. However, it is far from “minor,” reflecting the well-known definition of “minor literature” provided by Deleuze and Guattari: “Une littérature mineure n’est pas celle d’une langue mineure, plutôt celle qu’une minorité fait dans une langue majeure.”¹⁴ The three main characteristics of a “minor literature” are the deterritorialization of its language; the close association of the individual and the political; and a collective organization of enunciation. Chinese Caribbean literature has exhibited all three traits, defamiliarizing the dominant language and stretching it to its limits.

Looking back to the nineteenth century paves the way to a new awareness of the Chinese in the Caribbean, and more generally speaking of the paradoxical and complex situation of minorities in a cross-cultural creole society like the Caribbean. However, there are no indenture narratives to revisit: neither the Indians nor the Chinese found it possible to voice any of their concerns and suffering at the time of indenture.¹⁵ I suggest that the most obvious reason for this is the fact that slavery had already been abolished in the British Empire by the time of their arrival; thus it had become less urgent to contribute to the work of anti-slavery societies by providing evidence of the horrors of slavery through personal narratives—one of the aims of the original slave narratives published in English. The lack of a collective organization of enunciation made it even more difficult for the Indian and Chinese diasporic groups to claim a full-fledged self-awareness. Instead of revisiting and rewriting original slave narratives as African American writers did in the 1960s, Indo and Chinese Caribbean writers, and those interested in these diasporas, went straight to the fictionalization of history. Indo-Caribbean literature has emerged only in the past twenty or thirty years, and Chinese Caribbean literature in the past ten or twenty years, slowly extracting out of oblivion the history of a forgotten slavery, all the more painful because it was not considered enslavement but indentured servitude.

A Caribbean writer from Guyana with Chinese origins, Jan Shinebourne has been living in London for decades. Her first novel, *Time-Piece*,¹⁶ focuses on the Guyanese context of the late 1960s, fictionalising Sandra Yansen's lifestory as she leaves her village, Pheasant, to go to Georgetown to try her luck as a reporter in the aftermath of the period following the 1964 Wismar anti-Indian massacres. There is not a word about the Chinese community, and the focus is on the character-focalizer's search for independence against the backdrop of racial conflict between the Indo-Guyanese and the Afro-Guyanese. Sandra's family name, Yansen, is one of few clues suggesting her Chinese ancestry, but it remains ambiguous: it could also have a different origin (the book cover exhibits more Indian elements than Chinese, further reinforcing this sense of vagueness). Her second novel, *The Last English Plantation*,¹⁷ focuses on the political and social situation of Guyana in the 1950s, thus predating *Time-Piece*. It centers on the childhood of June Lehall and acknowledges the Chinese family in ways that *Time-Piece* does not. June's father is mixed Indian and Chinese, while her mother is Indian. The name Lehall was created by immigration officers who could not spell Li-Hau (132). This is actually revealed to the young June as she rebels against her mother's will to provide her with a West Indian-British education. Lucille, June's mother, rejects her own Indian past and wants like her daughter to consider herself first and foremost British. The following passage, often anthologized, shows Lucille ranting after her daughter: "All right! Stay at home then! Turn into a coolie! You used to be a coolie and I manage to turn you into a civilized person, now you want to turn coolie again. . . . this is the West Indies, not India, not Africa, not China, the West Indies! We are British!" (126–128).

Nani, the Indian Hindi-speaking paternal grandmother, is the one who reveals the secret of her name, at which time the reader understands that June's rebellious attitude is related to the fact that she has not been told the complete story of her genealogy and that her Chinese ancestry may have even been deliberately downplayed and/or erased. A passing acknowledgement of the Chinese element in the novel is also signified on the back cover of the book through an emblem that resembles a Chinese ideogram. However, even though *The Last English Plantation* foregrounds the history of the Chinese in the Caribbean more than *Time-Piece*, it still remains marginal and definitely at the periphery of the main action of the novel, perceptible only to the readers who look for it.

Meiling Jin and Patricia Powell belong to the next generation of Chinese Caribbean authors, writing a decade after the publication of Shinebourne's two novels (1986 and 1988). Jin, in some of the short stories in *Song of the Boatwoman*,¹⁸ and Powell in *The Pagoda*,¹⁹ both set their works in the nineteenth century. Yet, the underlying focus is present-day Guyana and the Guyanese diaspora in the UK in Jin's case, and Jamaica and the Asian American diaspora in Powell's case. However in both works, a detour through the historical past appears to be the shortest route to the present. Jin's first story, entitled "Victoria," is set in the 1909 Rose Hall estate, Berbice, and reflects many unknown historical elements—for instance, the arrival of the Chinese in British Guiana from 1853 to 1879, and their eventual immigration to other islands (Victoria goes to Trinidad, leaving behind her family's indenture past): "Victoria grandfather, Ho A-yin, come over from China to work for Lainsi up at Kamuni creek. Lainsi pay the passage from China and, in return, they work for him in the charcoal pit. If any of the boys wanted to leave, Lainsi would kill them and throw them in the pit. All except Ho. He escape. He walk through the bush day and night, day and night, until he come to the Demerara" (7).

Song of the Boatwoman not only includes stories about the indentureship period like "Victoria," but it also focuses on the present day in order to understand what has become of the descendants of the Chinese emigrants who went to the Caribbean or other parts of the world. The setting of "Good Night, Alice" is a South Asian lesbian retreat in Santa Cruz; the protagonist of "Short Fuse" a Chinese Guyanese woman. The foreground is London where Gladys lives with her husband and son, but the immediate background is British Guiana before it became Guyana in 1966. British Guiana (BG) is still referred to as "home," and they all would like to "go home." The violence and the hatred they confront in London, symbolised by Gladys' attack by the landlord's vicious dog, only finds its equivalent in the violence that is being unleashed in British Guiana (the 1960s were a time of confrontation between the Indo Guyanese and Afro Guyanese).²⁰ Home country and host country are thus reflected in a mirror. As Gladys' husband says, "Black against East Indian and we Chiney in between. Gawd. Things proper bad. . . . The old BG done. . . . Better to stay here" (84). The fact that the story ends with Gladys feeding the dog a sausage full of rat poison is hardly comforting and does not offer bright prospects for this

postcolonial family. One story, “Homecoming,” is a story of return: going back to China with her lesbian partner, Margaret wonders about “something she could call home even though it had long ago ceased to be somewhere she belonged” (105). This split between *home* and *belonging* is the diasporic paradigm *par excellence*. One can even paraphrase for the Chinese diaspora the question that Salman Rushdie poses about the Indian diaspora: what does it mean to be a “‘Chinese’ outside of China?”²¹

The title story “Song of the Boatwoman” belongs to another territory altogether—the imaginary and fantasmagoric. The main focus is on a community of women who have taken a vow never to marry (the punishment is death by suicide in the Western Lake). Gender and gender discrimination are also central foci of the story, which deals with a young protagonist who is being rowed across the lake by a boatwoman/woman poet/ghost—one of those women who threw herself into the lake to avoid marriage. The tale transcends time and place, universalizing its message while conveying Jin’s desire not to restrict herself to the past, nor the present, but simply to raise a few questions about the paradoxes of diasporic existence, possibly hoping to overcome a few contradictions on the way. Whereas in “Homecoming” the reader had the impression that the term “Chinese” no longer has ethnic or linguistic connotations but is rather connected to geography, in “Song of the Boatwoman,” the term seems to be endowed with a certain essential *Chineseness*, what Shu-mei Shi calls “a core *Chineseness*” one cannot shed even if s/he wanted to, implying “concentric circles of *Chineseness*.”²² The whole story brings forth a fantasmatical idea of China that stands in strong contradiction to the other stories of the collection. Is it a way of paying tribute to a certain idea of ancestral and cultural China? Is it a way of putting an idea of China on the same level as that of a more diasporic China? How can a Chinese individual living outside China grapple with the dual domination of his native country and of his host country? All the stories of *The Song of the Boatwoman* seem to revolve around these concepts and interrogations, almost deliberately butting against the contradictions involved.

Powell’s novel, *The Pagoda*, describes in detail the trials and tribulations of nineteenth century Chinese immigrants to the Caribbean, especially their tortuous journey and the racism and dehumanization they faced:

Then suddenly it struck Lowe that for the years he’d been coming, all they talked about was home. The treacherousness of the Chinese there, the horror of the conditions that drove them away. It was as if the bitterness they carried could only be directed at the crimps, those Chinese who had sold them per head like rats to barracoon agents, owners of receiving vessels. It was as if that betrayal was greater than any humiliation they had suffered while chained up in those barracoons and beaten

daily until their wills were broken, greater than the punishments doled out by the captains of foreign ships during the crossing, where many of the ships fell apart in the ocean—only one third of them ever survived the passage—their bones scattered, sunken in beds in the middle of the Atlantic. They never talked about the man markets that greeted them on the Island once they arrived, how they were made to stand naked so the throng of planters could prod their open jaws and hanging testicles before buying them, how planters chopped off their glossy imperial queues and emblazoned, in bold and red letters on their skins, the initials of plantations. It seemed as if nothing could be as bad as that, as bad as being sent to this bondage by your own. (45)

This description could well be a description of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and it is precisely Powell's point to shed light on the silent histories of these emigrants, exposing and equating their experiences to those of Africans or Indians. To use Toni Morrison's words, the *unspeakable* must be *spoken* at last, and that is the function of these works:

The older immigrants never talked about the condition of the lives they lived there on the Island, how planters rarely abided by the contracts they had signed back in Whampoa, in the pigpens. They never talked about Chinese on plantations who walked off cliffs from overwork, who hung themselves with pigtails looped round tree limbs, who tied stones to their feet and jumped in rivers or sat on banks waiting for the water to take them, how those that escaped the plantations were hunted down and strapped to rafters and left there swinging, for birds to pluck. They never talked about how the Negro and white people looted and burned down their shops, heaped hostilities on them. (44–45)

This is what happens to the protagonist of *The Pagoda*, Lowe: his shop is burned down and looted. The novel is full of such “virulent stories” of “the woeful conditions” (43) that awaited Chinese immigrants in the Caribbean. After the shop is burned, one of Lowe's Chinese friends comforts him: “You just have to open up another shop, quick. You have to pretend things not so bad. You can't show them we weak. You have to just accept it as bad luck. Man, you can't stop to think. They going murder we in this place” (38). Lowe “had always known that he was there on sufferance. They told him to his face” (11).

The novel is also full of the “virulent stories” of “the woeful conditions that drove [the Chinese] out of China” (43) and of the bleak conditions on the ships: “[Lowe] had never told anyone about the hell he lived on that ship after he was caught; how Cecil locked him up inside that cabin that barely had air, barely had light for weeks and months” (37). Lowe also uses the word “belly” (22) to describe the ship, reminding readers of the concept developed by Edouard Glissant of the plantation as the belly, or matrix, of the Caribbean—“la véritable Genèse des peuples de la Caraïbe, c’est le ventre du bateau négrier et c’est l’ancre de la Plantation.”²³

Patricia Powell finds the origin of her story in one of the historical elements explained above—the fact that very few Chinese women actually emigrated to the Caribbean and that it was one of the reasons why Chinese immigration was not as successful as that from the Indian sub-continent. Lowe is revealed to be a cross-dresser who, as a woman uses male clothing to escape China, transgressing gender roles as well as geographic boundaries. Cecil discovers the stowaway on the ship, and uses the situation to his advantage:

The man lit a match. The light wavered. Leaving a white curl of smoke. The man lit another and another and another. Finally a blue flame, burning. Lowe tried not to bawl out, as the pads of fingers traveled the puffy contours of his bloody face, as the insides of his head drummed with the boom-boom of blood.

Then the clumsy fingers were busy at the humid throat, ripping open the padded jacket, groping for a thumping heart, searching for a slow-moving pulse along the hardened chest plate, the mass of ribs, only to wade into a banded chest, a banded chest and beneath that a ruffle of smooth lambskin and the dense weighty mounds of woman’s flesh. Woman’s flesh! (49)

The Pagoda is thus a story of cross-dressing and secrets—hidden and revealed yet not quite revealed. Lowe gives birth to a daughter she conceives after being raped by Cecil on the ship, but continues to live as Mr. Lowe seemingly married to a Miss Sylvie in the Jamaican community, which explains why Lowe is referred to throughout the novel as *he*, since it corresponds to the social face that Lowe presents to the outside world. The lesbian relationship between Miss Sylvie and Lowe therefore develops both publicly and privately. Cross-dressing as a man also allows Lowe to “cross over” his Chinese past; yet, the novel revolves around a link to the past that is maintained and destroyed: Lowe has a daughter who believes that he is her father. Lowe’s attempts at revealing the truth through letters he writes and never finishes constitute one of the axes of the novel. The other axis is his desire to build a pagoda, bringing together his Caribbean present and his Chinese past, his

individual yearning and the collective diasporic existence of his community. Through the letter-writing and the pagoda-building, he is trying to “save his daughter from the amnesia he had brought upon them both” (53), “trying [his] best to blot out the memories of [his] own middle passage” (75), as if it could bring to a conclusion the “unfinished business . . . brought over from generation to generation” (76). He finds it impossible to write a letter that will reveal the truth to his daughter—that “Miss Sylvie was not her mother, but that Cecil was indeed her true father and not him, Lowe” (63), he finally makes the journey to see his estranged daughter. Instead of telling her the truth, he only tells her about the pagoda, “a little place where we can have the ceremonies and the like, a place so you little boy there won’t forget” (77). The pagoda thus becomes a monument of the Chinese diaspora, functioning as the perfect diasporic paradigm, the symbol of the eternal link to China, remembered and imagined at the same time, bringing together trauma, mourning and loss—all concepts developed by Vijay Mishra for the Indian diaspora—but also resilience, agency and the multiplicity of a *translated* identity.²⁴

Powell’s narrative weaves together more threads than Jin’s and Shinebourne’s short stories or novellas. More is at stake in Powell’s work; however one cannot forget that Jin’s and Shinebourne’s earlier texts paved the way towards a greater awareness of the Chinese condition in the Caribbean. Ironically, the final push towards this greater public awareness came from a writer who does not have Chinese ancestry: Powell is from Jamaica, where the Chinese community is quite noticeable, but she is of African Caribbean extraction, and she is American. In other words, she is an “outsider” according to the Chinese Caribbean community. Whereas individual and collective self-awareness came from the Indo-Caribbean community itself, it has taken an outsider to focus on the Chinese community in the Caribbean, possibly because the Chinese Caribbean community does not consider itself “Chinese,” at least not in the same way that Indo-Caribbean people consider themselves “Indian.” According to Clem Seecharan, this Indian identity was shaped in the colonial world through an “imagined Mother India” which reinvented itself through India’s historical, religious and cultural legacy. The slow development of such an identity helped, in turn, construct what would become an independent postcolonial India, thus contributing to the dual emergence of the “East Indian nation” and of Indian nationhood²⁵.

Such a dialectic construction did not exist between mainland China and the Chinese diasporic community in the Caribbean. The reasons require further investigation. Did the creolization process in the Caribbean facilitate the assimilation of the Chinese community more than the Indian community? Was it simply because of a difference in numbers? One would think that the smaller the community, the stronger it would resist assimilation. The Chinese have often been considered a discreet diasporic community, trying to blend in without calling attention to themselves. After all, there was much less friction between the Chinese and other communities than between the Indo-Caribbean and the African Caribbean people, for

instance. The Chinese intermarried or had interethnic relationships much more frequently than Indians, who married within their own community. Look-Lai suggests that it was necessary for the Chinese to assimilate because of the early absence of women among the migrants.²⁶ They also allowed their languages to disappear, more than the Indo-Caribbean people who tended to speak Hindi among themselves. This is probably due to the difference in their socio-professional activities: the Indians spoke their native languages in agricultural communities that were sometimes ghettoized. The Chinese, on the other hand, had to deal with all social and linguistic categories because they were running shops and small businesses. In fact, the “Chinese Caribbean community” did not even seem to exist until Powell, an “outsider,” reminded the Chinese Caribbean diaspora that they possessed a distinct ethnic identity. Jin and Shinebourne did not initially present themselves as Chinese Caribbean authors, but simply as Caribbean authors; nor did they market their work as Chinese Caribbean. At least, not until recently.

Almost two decades after the publication of her first two novels, Shinebourne published a third book, a collection of short stories entitled *The God-Mother and Other Stories*,²⁷ which suddenly acknowledged her Chinese heritage. Perhaps inspired by the inroads made by Powell, the cover bears her full name, Jan Lowe Shinebourne—which her latest novel also does; however, *Chinese Women*²⁸ also emphasizes the adjective “Chinese,” thus fully acknowledging and foregrounding “the Chinese.” It is clear that several detours have been necessary to get to this point—the autobiographical detour as well as the fact that it is often from the diaspora that a community gains a better knowledge and a deeper consciousness of itself. Nevertheless, *Chinese Women* holds a few surprises in store for readers who expect to read a novel about the eponymous “Chinese women.” Even though the cover presents a “Chinese” engraving of two nineteenth-century women, the diegetic focus is on Albert Aziz, a Guyanese Indian Muslim who grows up on a sugar estate and migrates to Canada, becoming a millionaire and reinvents himself as an Arab Muslim. Through first-person narration and internal focalization, the narrator, who writes after 9/11, reminisces about fifty years of traumatic existence, providing readers with insight into how he almost became a radical Islamist.

Albert’s fixation on Anne Carrera, the wife of one of the overseers (he wonders if she is “white” or “Chinese”), and Alice Wong, a fellow student in Berbice, provides the novel with its title: “When I met Alice Wong in 1961 I was only fourteen. I met Anne Carrera in 1961 too. Both of them left me with a love of Chinese women that lasted almost fifty years and is strong enough to last another fifty. That is why I decided to look for Alice again in 2006 and marry her, though almost forty years had passed with no contact between us” (7). Yet this fixation lacks conviction and verisimilitude, thus failing to win the reader over. Albert narrates the accident that wrecked his body, and his existence: “In 1957 I fell a hundred feet and broke all the major joints in my body when I climbed to the top of a genip tree to reach a bunch of the delicious purple fruit” (8). This image of the falling and failing body, of the

disjointed body with its damaged limbs and slowly setting bones, dominates the whole book, slowly turning into a metaphor of the trauma of coloniality. He is reduced to standing on the side, being the spectator of other people's lives, particularly white people's lives:

I was sure I would never be strong enough to swim or play tennis. My right elbow had not set well, nor my knees. My arms and legs would never be straight, my elbow and knee joints did not work smoothly, and never would. I could not rely on them to make me fully mobile. In 1960, I knew I would never be able to play sports. Playing tennis or swimming like the Carrera boys was out of the question. I accepted I would always be a cripple and a spectator. (30)

The anxiety of not being able to live on equal footing with the white people who run the sugar estates haunts the young Indian Muslim who spends the remainder of his life “watching the white men play their sports—tennis, cricket, snooker, darts—studying and admiring their agility and skills, knowing I could never be like them” (30). Gradually, what emerges is the fusion between the different traumas, or rather the layers of trauma, one lying on top of the other while concealing each other: “The worst fate of the Black slave or the East Indian coolie was to be a spectator of the white man's lifestyle, knowing it was unattainable, knowing that he was forever orphaned from the white man's high standard of living, his wealth, property, luxuries, and his women” (30–31).

In spite of perceiving himself as “the dark Brown Indian teenager with the disjointed arms and legs, who moved like a robot, a clockwork creature that was once broken and had to be pieced together again by a white doctor” (31), Albert finds “relief from [his] fear and terror of East Indian poverty” (38), and from his own depreciated body and self. It is the “Chinee shop”—with its sweet-smelling cake, its warm kitchen, its sitting room and bedroom (38–39), that provides him with an image of family life that would not only challenge the surrounding relationships of power, but would also resist subjugation:

In the Caribbean, the Chinese were the most tenacious of all the ethnic groups, in how they settled there in spite of the inhospitable conditions. . . . They did not suffer the degradation of being enslaved and subjugated to regimes of brute labour . . . , and even though they were treated like outsiders and subjected to racial taunts and torments, they did not complain or give up. They kept aloof from the degradation around them. . . . Their dignity was like a miracle to me, a child from a Muslim family destroyed by

the brutality the Chinese endured and overcame with stoicism. (52)

Moreover, because the Chinese are not “implicated in the racial politics of the country” (53), Alice Wong is attractive to Albert because she is neutral with respect to the ethnic struggle between the Indo and the Afro Guyanese communities, almost as if representing an alternative way out of the predicament of history and trauma.

When Albert is finally asked not to come to the shop anymore, he has to let go of Alice, his dream of feeling accepted and welcome, his fantasy of moving out of his painful body, and out of his ailing community. Finding Alice in London again in 2006 and being rejected a second time only rekindles the hurt Albert suffered the first time Alice refused him in Guyana: “She was not going to marry me unless [her family and friends] approved. It took me back to the culture of surveillance on the sugar estate, where we had to pass through unwritten tests set by the overseers before we were allowed to live with them” (72). What surfaces is the trauma of living in a hostile society, and of being rejected, and rejected again, scorned as a “rejected lover” as well as an “unwelcome guest” (53), possessed and dispossessed in one’s own community. When Albert says “I think my fall from the tree left me with a half-dead body and that afterwards I moved among the living like a ghost” (52), he indicates the underlying trauma, obscured by other traumas: how can one stop being a ghost when one has been forced to become one?

Some twenty pages later, however, the skeleton comes out of the closet as Albert reveals to Alice the family secret that wrecked his life more than the fall from the tree: “I told her my final, biggest secret, ‘Rupert is not really my Brother. His father is not my father. My father had him by another man, a Hindu overseer at Enmore named Sukdeo. The day I went up the genip tree in 1957, Sukdeo was with my mother in our house. I was trying to see what they were doing in the house. I saw them having sex. That is why I fell’” (76). The reader has finally reached the source of Albert’s original trauma, which governs the narrative. However, is it actually possible to distinguish between primary and secondary trauma here? Individual, family, collective and historical traumas are all fused into one, all wrapped up in guilt—the guilt of having seen what should not have been seen, the guilt of being Hindu and not Christian, or of being Muslim and not Hindu, the guilt of being a *coolie*. Albert’s fascination for Chinese women may have been an unconscious attempt at washing away the *coolie stain*, at trying not to “be a coolie any more” (72). Through Albert, Shinebourne speaks of her own ancestors’ resilience and of the necessity to reclaim its individual, family, collective and historical significance.

Thus Jan Lowe Shinebourne’s *Chinese Women* is not actually about a radical Islamist who reaches self-consciousness after 9/11, nor is it about Chinese women—it is about the complexities of the historical process that has kept the Chinese Caribbean community in silence and self-denial. It is also about the reclaiming of consciousness and the confused acknowledgement of the detours needed to reach

this a goal. Shinebourne weaves the history of Chinese indentureship with that of East-Indian indentured workers in Guyana; Meiling Jin merges past and present, as well as ancestral mainland China and modern diasporic China in the stories of *Song of the Boatwoman*; and Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda* directs public attention towards the Chinese community of indentured workers in Jamaica. All three writers expose how convoluted and complex the route is. From the ghost that hovers across the lake ("Song of the Boatwoman") to the one that wanders between Guyana, China, England and Canada (*Chinese Women*) to the one that has become the other of itself (*The Pagoda*), what is most forcefully underlined is the necessity to continue to construct narratives that will allow individuals and communities to *re-member* their disjointed bodies and fractured minds, agregating what Shu-mei Shi calls the "new combinations"²⁹ of the diaspora.

Notes

¹ I will be using Walton Look-Lai, *Indentured Labour, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1993); Walton Look-Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies, 1806-1995: A Documentary History* (Kingston, Jamaica: University Press of the West Indies, 1998); Walton Look-Lai, ed. *Essays on the Chinese Diaspora in the Caribbean* (St Augustine, Trinidad & Tobago: University of the West Indies, 2006); Trevor M. Millett, *The Chinese in Trinidad* (Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago: Inprint, 1993); Andrew Wilson, *The Chinese in the Caribbean* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2004).

² Look-Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies*, 22-23.

³ Ibid., 47.

⁴ Look-Lai, *Indentured Labour*, 39-40.

⁵ Look-Lai, *Essays*, 9.

⁶ Look-Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies*, 210.

⁷ See for instance the Chinese National Association in Trinidad, the Chinese Benevolent Society in Jamaica, etc. See Trevor M. Millett, "The Chinese Community in Trinidad and Tobago." *Entrepreneurship in the Caribbean: Culture, Structure, Conjuncture*, eds. Selwyn Ryan and Taimoon Stewart (St Augustine, Trinidad & Tobago: University of the West Indies), 183-188.

⁸ Look-Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies*, 234.

⁹ Millett, "The Chinese Community in Trinidad and Tobago," 190. The Chinese in Trinidad has now dropped under 4,000. Often they do not even appear in the census for Guyana, and in Jamaica they are around 50,000.

¹⁰ Look Lai speaks of “the gradual loss of the language . . . , the frequency of interracial marriages and liaisons, . . . [and the fact that] race relations between the Chinese newcomers and the larger society developed in a less frictional atmosphere than that existing between Blacks and Indians.” Look-Lai, *Indentured Labour*, 204. One also has to mention that assimilation was encouraged by the lack of Chinese women. Mixed marriages were more frequent among the Chinese than among the Indians.

¹¹ See the anti-Chinese riots in Jamaica in 1918 and 1938 for instance. See documents in Look Lai, *The Chinese in the West Indies*, 263-276. Other anti-Chinese riots erupted again in 1965. Look Lai, *Essays on the Chinese Diaspora in the Caribbean*, 9.

¹² Millett, “The Chinese Community in Trinidad and Tobago,” 197.

¹³ India is one of the only countries that has set up schemes of citizenship that take people living outside of India into account: Non-Resident Indians (NRI), and Persons of Indian Origin (PIO), replaced since 2006 by Overseas Citizens of India (OCI), a scheme that allows Indians to acquire the citizenship of their country of residence while maintaining Indian citizenship, which was previously impossible. Zhiqun Zhu, “Two Diasporas: Overseas Chinese and Non-Resident Indians in their Homeland’s Political Economy.” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 12.3 (2007).

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka–Pour une Littérature mineure* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1975), 29. “A minor literature is not the literature of a minor language, rather it is that written by a minority group in a major language” (my translation). In particular, I am referring to Chapter 3, “Qu’est-ce qu’une littérature mineure?,” 29-50.

¹⁵ See Clem Seecharan, *Bechu: “Bound Coolie” Radical in British Guiana 1894–1901* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 1999). Bechu was one of the very few Indian indentured laborers who actually published, in the local press, critical accounts of the work situation of contract laborers. However, those articles cannot exactly be said to be *indenture narratives*.

¹⁶ Jan Shinebourne, *Time-Piece* (Leeds, UK: Peepal Tree Press, 1986).

¹⁷ Jan Shinebourne, *The Last English Plantation* (Leeds, UK: Peepal Tree Press, 1988).

¹⁸ Meiling Jin, *Song of the Boatwoman* (1996) (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2007).

¹⁹ Patricia Powell, *The Pagoda* (1998) (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999).

²⁰ Forbes Burnham was in power from 1964 until his death in 1985, first as Prime Minister, then as President during the last five years of his life. In 1950, he established the People’s Progressive Party along with the Indo Guyanese leader Cheddi Jagan from whom he split five years later. Burnham set up his own People’s National Congress in 1958, rigging his first election in 1964, and leading a pro-Afro Guyanese policy from then onwards, discriminating against the Indo Guyanese. The culminating point of Burnham’s policy of

racial violence was the Wismar massacre of May 1964, when during two days, from May 24 to 26, the Indo Guyanese living in the villages of Wismar and Christianburg were raped and killed and their homes looted and destroyed. Since British Guiana is not yet Guyana in the short story, but the troubles are mentioned, it probably set between 1964 and 1966.

²¹ “What does it mean to be an ‘Indian’ outside of India?” Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books, 1992), 17.

²² Professor Shu-mei Shi gave the keynote lecture at the conference “China Inside Out” that took place in Edinburgh, on March 11-13, 2010. Shu-mei Shi’s lecture was entitled “Between the Sinophone and the Anglophone.”

²³ Edouard Glissant, *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 35. “The true Genesis of the peoples of the Caribbean is in the belly of the slave ship, it is in the den of the Plantation” (my translation).

²⁴ “[H]aving been borne across the world, we are translated men,” Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 17.

²⁵ See Clem Seecharan, “India’s Awakening and the Imagining of the ‘East Indian Nation’ in British Guiana.” *India and the Diasporic Imagination*, eds. Rita Christian and Judith Misrahi-Barak (Montpellier, France: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, Forthcoming 2011).

²⁶ Look-Lai, *Indentured Labour*, 204.

²⁷ Jan Lowe Shinebourne, *The God-Mother and Other Stories* (Leeds, UK: Peepal Tree Press, 2004).

²⁸ Jan Lowe Shinebourne, *Chinese Women* (Leeds, UK: Peepal Tree Press, 2010).

²⁹ See note 22.