

Melissa Marie Bruno

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“Exile is the archetypal condition of contemporary lives” –Eva Hoffman

To Assimilate or Not to Assimilate: Subjective Dialogues of Ethnic Difference in Judy Fong Bates’s *Midnight at the Dragon Café*

In Judy Fong Bates’s novel *Midnight at the Dragon Café*, the protagonist, Su-Jen, and her Mother, Lai-Jig, represent two opposing dialogues of [individual] diaspora vis-à-vis the simultaneous integration of ethnic subjectivity¹ alongside the emerging new acculturated self-consciousness², and, in contrast, the stasis of sacrosanct ethnocentric idealization, subsisting in memory, strongly resisting any influence by [hegemonic] appropriation. Both forms of diasporic consciousness are drastically different; however, both lend themselves to fragmentation: either socially-induced, or self-induced. As such, both females experience a genre of exile in the[ir] rural town of Irvine, Ontario: Su-Jen, in the form of an internal struggle between the tensions of her dual-consciousness at war, leaving her oscillating between her two internal subjectivities: her Chinese ethnicity and her English social-subjectivity, all the while fighting to fit in to the hegemony. Lai-Jig’s ‘condition’ of exile is the product of her rigid hostility towards her new rural life, breeding an excessive ethnic autonomy, privileging and enduring an ascetic ethnocentric existence by refusing to make any effort to integrate or adapt to her host-land. As a result, Lai-Jig endures a destitute life of sorrow and solitude, sabotaging any attempt at

¹ Specifically, Su-Jen’s Chinese self-conscious subjectivity.

² Su-Jen’s English self-conscious subjectivity.

happiness or progress by residing and clinging onto memories as her only form/outlet of happiness. Subjective fragmentation is permanently on the menu at the Dragon Café.

Su-Jen's mother clutches tightly to a notion of 'homeland idealism'; as such, she refuses to integrate and resists acculturation/ assimilation into her new host-land, Canada. Regina Lee describes 'homeland idealism' as a "kind of diaspora [which] represents itself as being trapped within an idealized historical space and time, thereby fashioning itself after a 'backward-looking conception of diaspora'" (59). As such, Lai-Jing embeds herself in her memories, making Hong Kong the ideal against which everything is compared. Su-Jen describes how her mother

was always talking about Hong Kong. Nothing here was as good as it was there.

In the years that [Su-Jen] and [her] mother had been in Canada, Hong Kong and China had for [her] become forgotten places. But [her] mother still talked about her old homes and when she gazed out the window at the near-empty street [Su-Jen] knew she was thinking about them, (Bates 70)

"lost in the memory of better times" (120). Lamenting her past life in China, Lai-Jing lives as a threnodic tribute to her 'idealized home', because, for her, "home would always be China. In Irvine she lived among strangers, unable to speak their language. Whenever she talked about happy times, they were during her childhood in that distant land" (48-9). Moreover, Lai-Jing makes no attempt to learn English, the hegemonic language of her new host-land. Edward Said purports that "the sheer fact of isolation and displacement [...] produce[s] the kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation, and community" ("Reflections on Exile" 183); therefore, Lai-Jing's

resistance seals her fate as a stranger in her own town, retiring hermitically to her memory for comfort.

Furthermore, Lai-Jing places herself in a self-imposed state of exile, thwarting any attempt at happiness or community by resisting any association with anyone in the town. Lai-Jing sabotages any possible chance at integration, refusing to participate in the affairs of her host-land. She asserts that “it was all right for [Su-Jen] to worship and believe, [...] but for her there was no point. In Irvine, she would be in a room full of *lo fons*, unable to understand a single word” (Bates 41). According to Said, “[e]xile is never the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure” (“Reflections on Exile” 186); therefore, “[b]ecause nothing is secure[,] [e]xile is a jealous state” (177), leaving one “[c]lutching difference like a weapon to be used with stiffened will[:] the exile jealously insists on his or her right to refuse to belong” (182). As such, Lai-Jing plays the role of the victim, invariably isolating herself, prescribing misery and solitude, complaining about the “dead town, nobody around to talk to, nobody speaking Chinese and these ugly *lo fon* customers, work in life, work in death, and still no money” (Bates 85).

In addition to being ‘jealous’, “exile, unlike nationalism, is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past” (Said, “Reflections on Exile” 177). Moreover, it is a discontinuous state by the sheer displacement. As such, Lai-Jing is so invested in her past, she ‘roots’ herself in her memory, inevitably preventing her from moving beyond it, thus placing herself in a stagnant stasis. Su-Jen describes how

there was so little left from her [mother’s] old life. [Her mother] said it was so long ago that sometimes it felt as if it had never happened. But she described her

life with such clarity and vividness that [Su-Jen] knew all those memories lived on inside her. There was so little in this new country that gave her pleasure. The good things she found were related in some way to China: an aria from a Chinese opera, a letter from a relative back home or from Aunt Hai-Lan in Toronto, written in Chinese, a familiar-looking script that I couldn't read and had nothing to do with my life in Canada. (Bates 49)

Lai-Jing clutches on to the past for comfort, clinging to an unchanging part of her [former] self. As such, Lai-Jing subsists on the contents of her memory, breeding/privileging a toxic form of ethnocentrism: being displaced from one's ethnicity while having it poison one's attitude and receptivity towards one's host-land. As such, her only solace is rooted in memory, revisiting the corners of her mind, entrenched in the past as opposed to progressing into the future, thus fragmenting herself temporally. Moreover, "[t]he pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question" (Said, "Reflections on Exile" 179). Lai-Jing articulates this 'condition' stating that "even if [Irvine] [was] the finest place in the world [she] would never belong. And [she] can't go back to China, not even if [she] wanted to. Everything there has changed. [She's] stuck, but [she] no longer [has] a real home" (Bates 93), invariably securing a "home in homelessness" (Chambers 246). Lai-Jing clings to her ethnicity, a construction conceived and fixed in her past, marginalizing herself by refusing to identify with anything outside of China.

Continuously, according to Berndt Ostendorf,

[t]he very act of emigration forces a disintegration of self, culture and society, and its subsectors. The self is pushed into marginality, and has to deal, from a

situation of reduced political participation, with two cultures in a stratified social relationship which assigns to his old heritage the role of subculture within an alien dominant context. (577)

Immediately, upon entering into Canada, Su-Jen's Chinese heritage is marginalized and subsumed by the Elementary School Principal's insistence that she "need[s] a new name for school, [...] a Canadian name" (Bates 20-1), suggesting that her Chinese ethnicity must be translated into Western terms, thus appropriating her 'ethnic self' for the sake of the demands of the hegemony. This subjective subordination of her ethnic identity/name in favour of "Annie", is sought to be consoled by the reassurance that she "will always be Su-Jen inside" (21), provoking/articulating the internal recoil of her 'ethnic' self, invariably retreating to marginal 'subculture' status. As such, this simultaneously creates and foreshadows the emergence of dualism manifest in Su-Jen/Annie by demarcating a divergence between internal and external conceptions of Su-Jen/Annie's identity. Either way, this suggests that her ethnic self need be subaltern to the acculturation and championing of Western authority, if even on a linguistic terrain: the act of naming.

The impulse to define one's position, through naming, as a means of establishing authority is astutely explored in Said's delineation of *Orientalism* as the "corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). In addition, Said purports that the "Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (1-2); moreover, "European culture gained in strength and identity by settling itself off against the Orient

as a sort of surrogate and even underground self' (3). To make better sense of these premises, for the purposes of this argument, Said's binary constructions/delineations of Western/European and Eastern/Orient, can, and should, be paralleled to the relationship between the hegemony and the ethnic minority presented in Bates's fiction. Returning to the aforementioned subjective fissure in the 'Su-Jen/Annie' construction, the notion of solidifying identity through negation is a means of asserting hegemonic cultural dominance by [de]forming Su-Jen's identity and issuing her a new one: Annie.

However, the institution of Su-Jen's 'new' identity, 'Annie', engenders 'other' schisms between Eastern/familial and Western/hegemonic values. Upon telling Su-Jen her new name, her father, Hing-Wun, cautions her to "[r]emember, *lo fons* put their family names last, [...] [n]ot like us. For us, the family name is so important, we put it first" (Bates 22). This [re]orientation of the position of her surname serves to foreshadow how the values of her Eastern heritage, the valorization of the family, will come into conflict with the surging emergence of her adopted Western rationality, almost fating her familial betrayal. Therefore, as Su-Jen's family name is relocated syntactically to adhere to the Western 'order', the sheer act of [re]naming her puts into motion a chain of events which serve to fragment Annie from Su-Jen. This fragmentation between selves starts with Su-Jen's socialization and internalization of *lo fon* language.

Through the internalization of English, Su-Jen acculturates the [coded/hegemonic] logos inherent within its signs of signification, enabling a new consciousness to articulate itself. This new consciousness is indebted to, constructed from, and transcribed in, language. According to Simon Glynn, "self-consciousness can only exist as experience or thought, and must therefore be mediated by the linguistic or

conceptual system which necessarily mediates all experiences and thoughts” (64).

Therefore, language forms subjectivity insofar as it provides the forum for self-consciousness to materialize linguistically. Moreover, Glynn purports that

the perception and understanding of the self, the self-consciousness which is an essential feature of a fully human subjectivity, [emerges] from the social/linguistic system, the symbolic order, upon which it is dependent. Human subjectivity is then entirely inconceivable independently of the social/linguistic system or symbolic order which constitutes it. (Glynn 65)

As such, through Su-Jen’s internalization of language, the self that ‘emerges’ is no longer strictly a Chinese/Eastern subjectivity. Her Chinese identity becomes fused with the English language, privileging English as the language of subjectivity, intelligibility and awareness. She describes how

at school [she] began to learn about [her] adopted country. [She] spoke English like a native, without a trace of an accent. [She] played, thought, and dreamed in the language of the *lo fons*. A few years later and [she] would no longer remember a time when [she] didn’t speak their words and read their books. (Bates 48)

Su-Jen’s Chinese consciousness is subsumed underneath the signifying structure of the *lo fons*’ English diction. As such, her Asian subjectivity supplements the overarching logos of English. The symbolic order of the internalized English language overpowers and suffocates the existence and autonomy of her Chinese subjectivity.

The competing linguistic identities (her original Chinese subjectivity/consciousness and her dominant English subjectivity/consciousness) serve to sever Su-Jen from being able to identify with one facet of her subjective self. As such,

the integrity of ‘Su-Jen’ (I would argue, her ‘Asian’ consciousness) is fragmented by her internalization of a more domineering language, English, producing an identity of linguistic schizophrenia: the double consciousness of an English subjectivity propagated and sustained by the dependence on the *lo fons*’ language paired with her original Chinese subjectivity. For the purposes of my argument, I would align “Annie” with the new emergent English consciousness constructed and sustained by an increasing reliance on the English language. This Su-Jen/Annie dual-consciousness creates competing identities, resulting in fragmentation not only in terms of linguistic subjectivity, but also in relation to her surroundings at large, particularly her family. Su-Jen/ Annie describes how her

ability to express [her]self in English had far surpassed [her] ability in Chinese. Through school and books my English vocabulary had grown. [She] came home wanting to tell [her] parents what had happened to [her] during the day, but [she] often found [her]self frustrated not knowing the Chinese words to explain what [she] had learned. (61)

The dualism in Su-Jen/Annie’s character serves to further divide and separate her [subjective] identities: Su-Jen at home amongst her family, and Annie at school amongst her friends.

Su-Jen/Annie, being a product of a dual-consciousness -- Eastern spirituality/values and Western rationalism/reason—is privy to a “plurality of vision giv[ing] rise to an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is *contrapuntal*” (Said, “Reflections on Exile” 186); however, this duality of vision serves to confuse Su-Jen/Annie, by making her unable to discriminate or negotiate between either facet of her

self. Su-Jen/Annie acknowledges the manifestation of this [in/eternal] tension: when her mother

shared [her] [spiritual] thoughts with [her], [she] tried to dismiss them. [Su-Jen/Annie] told [her]self that they made no sense, that they conflicted with what [she] was learning in school. But each spring as [she] crossed the bridge on the way to school [she] saw in the current of the river the shapes of underwater ghosts.(Bates 117)

This reveals that Su-Jen/Annie's mother's ancestral spirituality haunts her, preventing her from being able to embrace either facet of her identity. As a result, this internalized dualistic [con]fusion, growing and emerging inside of her, thwarts any singularity or autonomy within her own identity. As such, "although [Su-Jen/Annie] had argued with [mother] about her beliefs and I said that they made no sense, there remained within me a nagging doubt, making it impossible to completely deny the existence of spirits" (129). Even being fully aware, and slightly privileging, the Western ethos from which she had been educated and socialized, Su-Jen/Annie cannot shed the anxieties of fully surrendering to her own identity, surfacing as self-doubt and apprehension. Su-Jen/Annie's double-consciousness obscures what she believes in when she notes that "I knew my friends would think that believing in predictions and curses was crazy. [...] even though I knew they were right, I looked at the crack in the ice and wondered if the demons were rousing from their sleep" (212). However, the confusion engendered by her double-consciousness nonetheless exists (arguably) as melodic or harmonious in that there are not any dominate solos, stealing the spotlight.

Constantly oscillating between the duality of her Chinese and Western subjectivities, Su-Jen/Annie struggles to assert with affirmation either facet of her identity. She describes how

when [she] first arrived in this strange country, [...] China was far away. [She] spoke only Chinese and [she] had not met [her] father. Everything was new, yet [she] felt no fear. Now Canada was [her] home, [she] spoke English, and [her] father [she] deeply loved. [She] woke up the morning [her] mother would leave [them] and everything about [her] life felt uncertain, [her] heart aching and empty.

For the first time, [she] was filled with fear. (Bates 307)

This fear could be a product of a dreaded perpetual fragmentation, being unable to reconcile the dual-consciousness both subjectivities present within herself. When Su-Jen first came to Canada, her identity was fixed: Chinese. Now, finding a 'home' in Canada, she lives in a hyphenated reality, an in-between state, never knowing for certain who to trust or believe. As such, the threat of never being able to root one's self in anything concrete can be rather unsettling. Her Canadian identity lies in-between the constant negotiation of her Canadian and Chinese selves. Her mother held to the one thing she knew, her sense of Chinese heritage, constantly deferring to China as a means for escaping the burden of her everyday life. Possibly, the thought of losing her mother, the only person whom accompanied her throughout all her transitional stages, will unveil her fragmented nature, and open her up to the possibility of surrendering herself to the fact that she might never be whole.

Or, alternately, maybe this fear is derived from the fact that without her mother, the one person who clung so strongly to her past that she sacrificed a large portion of her

self, Su-Jen/Annie feels that her Chinese side might fade away into oblivion, and that she might succumb to the strong assimilating powers of her more dominant consciousness.

Submission to the dominant power may intimate to her the fading of her Chinese self.

Maybe the fear lies in just being Annie?

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