

IDENTIFYING PERFORMATIVITY IN *PAPER SHADOWS*

by

Alison Joan McDonald

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APPROVAL

Name: Alison Joan McDonald
Degree: Master of Arts (English)
Title of Thesis: Identifying Performativity in *Paper Shadows*

Examining Committee:

Chair: Dr. Tom Grieve

Dr. Sandra Djwa
Senior Supervisor
Professor of English

Dr. Kathy Mezei
Second Reader
Professor of English

Dr. Helen Buss
External Examiner
Professor of English
University of Calgary

Date Approved: August 6, 2002.

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Author:

(Signature) _____

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July 18/03

ABSTRACT

My thesis, "Identifying Performativity in *Paper Shadows*," examines Wayson Choy's memoir, *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood*, with regard to the author's productions of identity as multiple and unstable while operating under the guise of writing a life, a sense of self, that is coherent, singular, knowable, and "true." Based largely on the premise that the truth of Choy's identity is revealed to him in middle age, *Paper Shadows* offers the experience of reading a personal history, an identity, that ultimately remains elusive and mysterious. While promoting his novel *The Jade Peony*, Choy learned that he was adopted, over fifty years after the fact and after both of the parents he has ever known are dead. As a result, he experiences a crisis of identity and turns to writing in order to deal with the trauma of recovering/making sense of himself. That is, he writes his memoir in an attempt to author a return to the ideal of a knowable identity, an essential self that existed prior to the moment of telling his life story.

However, like many theories of identity, this memoir is far more sophisticated than it first appears. Much like the endless knot Choy describes in the memoir, the "true" story of his being is something difficult to unravel, much less reassemble in some unified, coherent way. As a memoir, *Paper Shadows* operates as a work of memory, and any notion of a unified, essential self is unsettled by the fragmentary and constructed nature of memory. What becomes important, therefore, is what is revealed by *how* Choy remembers/reconstructs his sense of self: the meanings that are in/evoked by his recitations of identity through the mediums of memory, language, and discourse. Theories of performativity prove useful for examining his process of producing identity within the act of (re)writing his life. In Choy's attempts to remember, to re-create his identity as a

coherent, unified, knowable subject, he instead performs, in the process, a sense of self that is knowable only as it is multiple, unstable, and transgressive. In effect, he narrates a life that is, in itself, performative.

DEDICATION

To my family. And to B. for never expecting too much.

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Permission to reproduce portions of *Paper Shadows* in my thesis is gratefully received from Wayson Choy.

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1.

“Where should I begin?": An Introduction

Let me tell you how I perceive my life, and maybe you can understand a little more.

~Wayson Choy¹

Wayson Choy is a self-described storyteller. While growing up in Vancouver's Chinatown in the 1940's and 50's, Choy was raised on stories. As part of a first generation of Canadian-born children, Choy, like many of his Chinatown cohort, was often left in the care of an older, immigrant generation while his parents went off to work². These "older women and 'bachelor men'," to entertain him, would take him to see the fantastic world of the Chinese Opera, and, they would tell him stories (Davis 269). This proved to be an effective strategy, as the mythic narratives of military battles and Monkey-Kings not only kept their charge entertained, but also came to reflect, for Choy, an important part of who he was to become.³ Discussing his upbringing, Choy remarks: "oral history was the way we discovered meaning. All of us who grew up in Chinatown absorbed those mythologies without thinking" (Bemrose 64); "to recreate the past, that's what I draw upon, this focused attention, my *inner ear*" (Deer 36); "as I grew up listening to these . . . stories, I was very attracted to storytelling and believed that one day I would tell stories and that, of course, I would write them . . . all of that to me was part of my history" (Davis 269).

Indeed, Choy has made a successful career telling stories that reflect the history of the community in which he was raised. His first "success" came early, when his short story "The Sound of Waves" was published in *Prism* magazine and in *Best American Short Stories* (1962). Some of his later work has drawn equal interest: his short story "The Ten Thousand Things" was picked for a collection of writing by notable Canadian authors, *Writing Home: A PEN Canada Anthology* (1997), and "The Jade Peony" has enjoyed critical success as part of the first anthology of Asian-Canadian writing,

Many-Mouthed Birds (1989).⁴ Choy is best known for his 1995 novel, *The Jade Peony: A Novel*, for which he shared the 1996 Trillium Award with Margaret Atwood, and he won the City of Vancouver Book Award in the same year. More recently, *The Jade Peony* was chosen as the inaugural book for the Vancouver Public Library's launch of a city-wide book club, One Book: One Vancouver, in 2002.⁵ In addition, his 1999 memoir, *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood*, and the focus of this thesis, was shortlisted for the 1999 Governor General's Award, the 1999 Drainie-Taylor Biography Prize, and the 1999 Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Non-Fiction.⁶

Despite such accolades, Choy admits that early in his career he felt excluded by "mainstream" Canadian literary culture and, after graduating from university, turned away from writing in order to pursue other interests. When pressed to explain his departure from what seemed to be a promising writing career, Choy has candidly remarked that he lacked confidence in his stories, that he did not feel the presence of an audience, and as a result, felt that he had nothing to say:

I was published with spectacular people like John Updike, Arthur Miller, Flannery O'Connor, and I was listed under "and others." I was then offered a scholarship to stay and continue my work, but I was tired of school and I also realized how difficult writing was, how hard it was to write well. So I thought, "No, I'll write later . . ." This was the 1960's when everything was booming and I had a lot of choices . . . And, most of all, I thought I had nothing to say . . . I thought, what would I write about? I looked back at my past and saw that it was not spectacular, it was not glamorous, there was really nothing to write about. And, of course, if you look at it cross-culturally, the feeling is that not only is it not that interesting but you wonder who would want to read it. (Davis 270)

As Choy links the presence/absence of his voice with issues of ethnicity, identity, and change, the detours in his path to literary success reveal much about the role his writing plays in his conceptions of his own identity. The stories that Choy writes in *The*

Jade Peony bear unmistakable similarities to what he reveals as his own life in his memoir, *Paper Shadows*. The novel uses a variety of perspectives to trace the secretive histories of Vancouver's Chinatown. Employing multiple narrators to present alternate points of view over a loosely chronological period of time, the novel has been described as "realistic" (Van Luven 28); that is, in telling stories, it reveals in life's most ordinary moments the most interesting aspects of the "life" of a community. As Marie Vautier notes about Choy's fiction, "storytelling around kitchen tables not only sustained the Chinese through their difficulties . . . but the storytelling in *The Jade Peony* offers readers a new view of histories of the Depression, the Second World War, and growing up in Vancouver's Chinatown" (30). Furthermore,

. . . the novel tells of life as it was for those living in the area: immigrant families with "paper stories" that hide complicated relationships from immigration officials; lonely, poor old men who worked on the railroad and who die alone in rooming houses; young girls who want to look like Shirley Temple; illicit cross-cultural love affairs . . . Choy makes history live by revealing to his readers the secrets and ordinary stories of Chinatown. (28)

For Choy's faithful readers, this is familiar territory. When asked in an interview about *The Jade Peony* if his novel is "autobiographical in any way," Choy responds, "Absolutely" (Davis 274). However, even the author could not predict the degree which he spoke the truth at that time. Ironically, it is by revealing "the secrets and ordinary stories" of the community in which he was raised that Choy learns of his own family secret, and the history of his "ordinary" life is rendered far more mysterious. For, strangely like his novel, which documents the secretive history of Vancouver and its Chinatown, Choy's identity, it turns out, is also haunted by a secret past: like one of the characters in his novel, he, too, is adopted.⁷

Faced with the information that he is not who he previously thought he was, Choy experiences a crisis of identity and turns to writing in order to deal with the trauma of recovering/making sense of himself. Choy contextualizes *Paper Shadows* from the start, positioning it as a response to the amnesia of identity he experiences once he learns the startling “truth” about himself. Asking that all-important question, “Where should I begin?” (4), Choy writes his memoir as if he is trying to answer the questions, “who am (was) I?” after learning that his formed identity is based on secrets and lies. As an author whose literary career has largely centred around, even depended upon, works of highly autobiographical fiction, the news of his adoption establishes a fertile ground for creativity, for storytelling, as Choy acknowledges and negotiates the fictiveness and, indeed, the tenuousness of his own subjectivity and sense of self.

We are told in *Paper Shadows* that it was the disruption of his autobiographical information, the shifting of his past, which led Choy to re-examine his memories through writing his memoir, and that his role as a writer continues to interact with his sense of self in seemingly unexpected ways. While promoting his novel Choy learned that he was adopted, over fifty years after the fact, and after both of his “parents” are dead. In hindsight, Choy has described the events of his own life as a “real-life drama” and as “the ultimate irony,” an “eerie echo of the life of one of [his] fictional characters” (*Paper Shadows* 280). These experiences of (mis)identification strongly resemble what autobiography theorist Sidonie Smith argues is the crux of autobiographical writing: the play of trauma that she relates to the “disruptive space of disidentification” (20).⁸ Or, here, the crisis of identity that prompts the writing of Choy’s memoir: his identity, what he previously knew to be “true” about himself, is ruptured by the news that he is adopted.

In response to this trauma, Choy returns to his past via the present, writing his memoir in order to overcome the trauma of “disidentification” and to write himself into “being.” Thus, writing and personal identity are inextricably linked for Choy as the working out of the mysteries of his shifting past becomes a working out of his shifting identities as he navigates himself through memory and through writing in order to negotiate what is “real” and “true” in the conflicting information about his past: what he thought he knew – what was “real” – and the so-called “truth” about his identity.

According to literary critic Barry Olshen, “autobiography can be described as the self’s inquiry into its own history – the self-conscious questioning of the subject by itself” (5). Questioning where his actual history ends and his remembered history begins, Choy writes his memoir in an attempt to author a return to the ideal of a knowable identity, an essential self that existed prior to the moment of telling his life story. Thus, by writing, he assumes a privileging of identity as “a coherent social self and the consequent ability to act in the world in a deliberate manner” (Buss 63). However, under the guise of revealing secrets, of truth-telling, Choy’s writing foregrounds a sense of self that is neither “true” nor singular, stable, coherent, or existing prior to the moment of narrating. Choy’s “I” is multiple and discontinuous – not only the self-referential “I” in the present, the narrating “I” of the memoir (of his own sense of subjectivity), but the “I” that is also, at once, the object of his question about himself, the narrated “I” whose past Choy consciously writes (his memories) in order to experience, in the present, a sense of self that accounts for what he previously did not know, and for what he thought he knew that is now rendered *unfamiliar*.

Paper Shadows begins with an “Author’s Note” that offers a particular claim: “this memoir is a work of creative non-fiction.” Foregrounded by this statement, any authority claimed by the rest of the text becomes ambiguous, if not problematic, raising questions about the extent one can trust the truths supposedly revealed in and by its pages. As Barry Olshen puts it another way, it can be difficult “to distinguish some kinds of autobiography from some kinds of fiction” (13), and “although details of the subject’s actions and achievements may be said to be documentable, the subject’s self never can be” (14). Thus, identification of an essential interiority is something that cannot be made clear, since autobiography may only “claim to tell historical truth” (14).

In his memoir, Choy’s childhood experiences are placed in the context of his life as a whole, where they become entwined with the complicated issue of his adult memories performing self-definition. His is a memoir whose own actualization is brought about by demands imposed by the startling revelation of the so-called “truth” of his known personal history. Here, the paradox of Choy’s self-identity resembles traditional biographical theorist Leon Edel’s description of biography, that nothing is ever as simple as it seems to be, “for everything is seen through particular eyes” (Edel 19).

Early in the memoir Choy writes:

These are the documented facts I have known all my life: I was born Choy Way Sun, on April 20, 1939, in Vancouver, in the province of British Columbia, to Nellie Hop Wah, age thirty-eight, and Yip Doy Choy, age forty-two, the gai-gee meng, false-paper names, officially recorded on my parents’ immigration documents. A midwife, listed as Mrs. Eng Dick, attended the birth. (14)

Of course, these “documented facts” are, indeed, fiction. Popular conceptions of the nature of contract in North America authorize information recorded on paper as binding; here it is as if it is unquestioningly true. Choy authorizes the “facts” that he has “known

all [his] life” as evidence of his “true” personal history, of seemingly inarguable information recording the history of his being, and therefore evidence of his “real” self. Of course, as we later learn, these “documented facts” are forged/faked just like the gai-gee meng, the false-paper names “officially recorded” in his parents’ immigration record. These papers shadow the authority of any type of record, and point out how constructed our identities really are. First his parents’ false paper names, then his own false birth certificate: Choy’s identity as he tells it was one which began in misinformation, in lack of information, and born from secrets: it is one of multiple “fictions.”

However, even this “truth” is cloaked in partiality, mystery, and potential (mis)information. As a memoir, *Paper Shadows* operates as a work of memory, and reads like a series of sketches, of flashbulb memories embellished in order to form a narrative. These memories are the threads that Choy, the writer and narrating I, weaves together in a complicated effort to comprehend the irony of his identity. In this sense, Choy’s autobiographical memory is a vital part of his identity, shaping his (now *unfamiliar*) personal history and his sense of who he is. Indeed, the nature of memory reflects the numerous, sundry, and complicated ways in which Choy comes to “remember” and (re)define himself. Memories, like identity, are active and constructive in nature. According to psychologist Marlene Maitlin, “when new information is added about an event, our memories often blend together information, actively constructing a new representation of that event” (155). Recollections change as people revise the past to satisfy their present concerns and reflect their current knowledge. Thus, memory combines, blends, and replaces information we have stored about events we have

witnessed (Maitlin 165). Memory, then, is less than perfect, true, coherent, and unified. Rather, it is transgressive, changeable, and malleable.

In terms of memoir, of writing a “life,” Choy’s identity, because it is remembered, is correspondingly rendered fundamentally unstable. As Annette Kuhn points out:

Memory has its own modes of expression: these are characterized by the fragmentary, non-linear quality of moments recalled out of time. Critics of autobiography have long realized that at least two ‘selves’ are involved in the writing of a life: the self then, and the self now, doing the writing. (Cosslett et al. 8)

Thus, Choy’s writing of his life in the evocative, constructed nature of memory demonstrates that “any notion of a self that is unified and stable is put under pressure by memory” (8). What becomes important, therefore, is what is revealed by *how* Choy remembers/reconstructs his sense of self: the meanings that are in/evoked by his recitations of identity through the constructed mediums of memory, language, and discourse.

Choy’s representations of self become explicit as constructions, and as selves in process which progress as they move across situations of varied geographical, cultural, and memorial terrain. Consequently, theories of performativity prove useful for examining Choy’s process of producing identity within the act of (re)writing his life. The related notions of *performance* and *performativity* derive from language theories dealing with speech acts – most notably the work of J.L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler. According to Austin, the function of language is not only descriptive, but also constitutive. As Terry Eagleton explains, “not all of our language actually describes reality: some of it is ‘performative,’ aimed at getting something done” (118). Language, speech, “acts”: to Austin, a performative refers to situations where “the issuing of the

utterance is the performing of an action” (6). While Austin acknowledges that the reiteration of the utterance and the strength of its effects might depend on the readability of the conventions that “bracket” its performance (Taylor 46), Jacques Derrida develops this idea even further: “Derrida underlin[es] the importance of the citationality and iterability in the ‘event of speech,’ questioning if ‘a performative statement [could] succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable statement’” (Taylor 46). Theorizing performativity has most notably been linked with theorist Judith Butler and her work on gender and identity. Tracing performativity in theory, Diana Taylor argues that Butler’s treatment of performativity is distinct from her ideological predecessors in the following way: “while in Austin *performative* points to language that acts, in Butler it goes in the opposite direction, subsuming subjectivity and cultural agency into normative discursive practice. In this trajectory, the performative becomes less a quality (or adjective) of performance than of discourse” (46-7).

In a recent re-issue of *Gender Trouble* (1999), Butler offers her own (re)consideration of the trajectory of her work. She writes, “In *Excitable Speech*, I sought to show that the speech act is at once performed (and thus theatrical, presented to an audience, subject to interpretation), and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions” (xxv). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler theorizes gender as performative – transient, changeable, outward, expressive, in contrast to fixed, coherent, unitary determinants. Gender as performative is initially transgressive as it supercedes ideas of originary, whole, biological concepts of gender as indicative or belonging to the notion of “sex” – that is, biological differentiation between what is “male” and “female.” Concerned primarily with discourse and language, Butler positions

the personal pronoun “I” as the active site of performativity in terms of identity: “language is not an *exterior medium or instrument* into which I pour a self and from which I glean a reflection of that self” (183), rather, “ my argument is that there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed,’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed” (181), “to write the experience of an ‘I’ is always already an interpretation” (in Hladki 35). As Hans Bertens explains, “If we have no fixed identities, then what I consider to be my ‘I’ is, as Butler puts it, ‘the effect of a certain repetition, one which produces the semblance of a continuity or coherence’ . . . in other words, a string of . . . similar performances takes the place of identity” (Bertens 227).

Paper Shadows might best be described as a text haunted by recitations of self-performativity: what autobiographical theorist Sidonie Smith describes as the *experience*⁹ of a coherent identity that is produced as a result of narrating one’s life story. In her article, “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance” (1995), Smith adapts Butler’s theories of performativity in terms of autobiography, arguing for the active production of selfhood, and accounting for the constructive role of memory within the process of narrating a life. As Smith argues, “sense of self as identity derives paradoxically from the loss to consciousness of fragments of experiential history,” and as Benedict Anderson writes, this “estrangement” necessitates “a conception of personhood, *identity* . . . which, because it cannot be ‘remembered,’ must be narrated” (Smith 18; Anderson 204). In this way, “forgotten” identity is re-created through the telling of the story: “the interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression of reflection is an *effect* of autobiographical storytelling” (Smith 18). Hence, “autobiographical storytelling is always a performative occasion, an occasion through

which, as Butler argues in theorizing performativity, the ‘power of discourse . . . produce[s] effects through reiteration’” (19).

To put it more simply, the sense of self is an effect of the act of writing/narrating your story, your experiential history which is “estranged” or forgotten. It is the performance of telling your story that produces the effect of realizing this lost identity. In *Paper Shadows*, the continuous repetition of an autobiographical “I” creates the effect of identity; the illusion of which produces the effect of realizing the “truth” about Choy’s fractured sense of self in the repeated assertion of his childhood memories. It is in this sense, as Smith argues about autobiographical performativity, a creation of identity that can never be “true,” as it is always a creation of a persona in reaction *to*. Consequently, Choy’s self is “re-membered” as pieces of lost experiences, as amnesiac limbs that are re-joined in attempts to create something akin to a coherent, unified, body of identity. It is by writing his stories that the role of a singular identity is acted or performed, and thus seemingly realized. In his attempts to remember, to re-create his identity as a coherent, unified, knowable subject, Choy instead performs, in the process, a sense of self that is knowable only as it is multiple, unstable, and transgressive. In effect, he narrates a life that is, in itself, performative.

However, like many theories of identity, Choy’s memoir is far more sophisticated than it first appears. Much like the endless knot he describes in *Paper Shadows*, the “true” story of his being is something difficult to unravel, much less reassemble in some unified, coherent way. This lack of fixity suggests, as Smith argues, that identity is unclosed and engaged in persistent change; however, it is not to say that identity proliferates unencumbered by boundaries of *expectation*. This takes us to what Smith

calls this the “scene” of autobiographical performativity: “the scene is at once a literal place, a location, but also a moment in history, a (sociopolitical) space in culture” permeated by “the many and non-identical discourses that comprise the sense of the ‘credible’ and the ‘real’” (19). As a result, we must consider the presence of implied audience, “a community of people for whom certain discourses of identity and truth make sense” (19). Audiences come with expectations of their own. These expectations are rarely homogenous; rather, they are, in Smith’s words, “heterogeneous collectives that can solicit conflicted effects in the autobiographical subject” (20). And since you can’t please everybody, the produced “self” is thus doomed to “necessary failure” (20):

It is as if the autobiographical subject finds him/herself on multiple stages simultaneously, called to heterogeneous recitations of identity. These calls never align perfectly. Rather, they create spaces or gaps, ruptures, unstable boundaries, incursions, excursions, limits and their transgressions. (20)

Therefore, an ability to meet expectations – to perform convincingly – is mitigated by an ability to identify and to comprehend what is expected of/as a certain kind of subject. Or, the “translation limitations” Choy suggests bind the ability to switch languages and cultural contexts:

There are always ‘translation limitations’ about going from one language to the other and from one cultural aspect to another . . . One of the problems I had in the writing of my novel was the naming of kin in Chinese . . . There are over one hundred and fifty terms for kin, not including nicknames and familial names . . . So I had to decide whether to gloss over it and tell the story or to be factually accurate. For a creative writer, the storytelling comes first. (Davis 282)

In Choy’s “life-story,” narrative form is often manipulated to embody the plural states of the subject through such devices as the use of the “remembering I” and the “remembered I,” marking the difference in self-referentiality between Choy’s memory of

himself as a child (the “I” he depicts in the past), and the person he claim to be in the present (the “I” now, doing the narrating). In *Paper Shadows*, the multiple stages on which Choy is called to perform further illustrate and implicate the multiplicities of cultural and identity expectations that direct the performativity that the remembering I constantly mediates between and meets expectations of. Choy’s identities are thus further multiplied, complicated, and confused as he mediates generational, cultural, and personal demands through creative memory. As Smith states, “autobiographical storytelling is the recitation of a recitation,” a sentiment Choy echoes when he states, “I think of my earliest memories” (*Paper Shadows* 6) – a statement that also points to the sometimes simultaneous, and therefore often ambiguous, referentiality of sense of self, the “I”s that make-up the story of his life. For example, it is unclear whether he is thinking chronologically (for example, I remember when I was five years old) or meaningfully (I remember a memory I experienced when I was five years old): a remembrance of a remembrance. The remembered I becomes the effect of the remembering I: the effects of the effects.

In constructing his memoir, in constructing his identities, Choy recontextualizes his memories in ever-changing cultural, geographical, and memorial landscapes. His many selves intersect, but ultimately avoid convergence (Smith 20). In one interview Choy states that “writers are probably born” (Davis 270). In doing so, he explicitly identifies with the notion of an essential self, the idea that the “truth” to his identity lies somewhere in his past waiting to be uncovered. He identifies with that which Smith, for one, argues against: that there is an “ontological and intergumentary relationship of

interiority to bodily surface and bodily surface to text” synonymous with the *I before the text* (Smith 17). Choy expresses similar sentiment in a later interview when he states:

I like to think that most of us have the need to make our lives more real by understanding that an object that someone gives us will now have the meaning, will now carry the weight of memory as a kind of triggering point. This object, like the Chinese reverence for jade, will emanate, even if only in our own eyes, as something that connects deeply with something both outside and inside ourselves. I love what Jung said, that *the outside is also the inside*. (Deer 39-40)

Even so, confronted with the issue of ethnicity as performance, Choy concedes, admitting that he does not “totally reject it” because he sometimes has seen people “consciously perform” their ethnicity: “I think it might be one of the steps towards creativity: that to get to a place where you are integrated with your ethnicity, you have also to perform it to make it more real” (Davis 281).

Perhaps, to Choy, the writing, narrating, and creating of his memoir is more comfortably conceived of as a conscious afterthought to the unconscious result of the act of self performativity: the constructive narrating of self in order to simulate convergence, to make it *seem* more real. Writing his memoir, narrating “a life,” is the experience of self. It is the realization of “the power of stories that are true” (Deer 44). According to biographical theorist Leon Edel, “the writings and utterances and acts of any subject contain many more secrets of character and personality than we have hitherto allowed” (32).¹⁰ He may be partially right. Choy resolves his initial question, “Where should I begin?” (Choy 4), by ending with this:

I have no answer.
There’s nothing to be done about the unknowable – the intricate shadows and silences between the facts that one feels so certain of – except to pause and be astonished. All lives are ten *times* ten thousand secrets. Even those who are quite sure of themselves, they, too, are made up of mystery, defined by secrets told and untold. (338)

Reading these “intricate shadows and silences” is a complicated process of creative interpretation. Throughout the memoir, Choy intersperses “factual” information about the history of Vancouver’s Chinatown with “invented” memories that he has about himself. Not only is he (re)telling his personal history, but also that of the larger Chinatown community – a community whose roots based in survival contributed to the secretive atmosphere that excluded Choy from knowing about who he really was. This functions, in many ways, to produce Choy’s identity, in his own words, as an “in-between soul” (234), “trapped between fact and fiction” (280) and as a “banana: yellow on the outside and white on the inside” (84). It also functions to produce the experience of reading a “life” constructed as a “string of similar performances” that remains difficult to define. In this thesis, I engage with three areas of exploration – hybridity, mode, and the gaze – that highlight Choy’s performances of identity as he writes his memories and as the text is (re)read. Thus, my focus is not to arrive at a sense of completeness, but to highlight the difficulty of attempting to locate a sense of identity in performative moments that contain and create a variety of different audience expectations and interactions. I examine the implications of how Choy communicates “secrets told and untold” and thus produces the sensation of identity-making by reading the shadows in and of the text.

In this thesis, my second chapter, “Performing Hybridity,” functions to highlight Choy’s “staging” of his identity within the scope of the larger history of the experiences of the Chinese community, and his experiences within that community as part of a generation of children who experienced conflicted demands on their identity. In terms of autobiographical performativity, the community acts in ways similar to that which Smith

characterizes as the interaction of audience with the narrated self: “solicit[ing] conflicted effects in the autobiographical subject” (20). Choy characterizes these conflicts as oppositional pulls, writing his sense of self as a product of the interaction/tension between a variety of binaries – white and yellow, east and west, English and Toisanese dialect, cowboy and Indian, “Canadian” and “Chinese”, past and present. Thus, he writes himself as a hybrid, and occupying a space that Bhabha claims in theorizing hybridity, lies “in between the designations of identity” (4).

In terms of Choy’s memoir, the “importance of hybridity is that it bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like a translation, so that hybridity puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses . . . giv[ing] rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Rutherford 211). This memoir finds identity to be relational, forged in the interstices between places, times, cultures, and languages. As subject and author of his memoir, Choy creates, by writing, a space for performing the human relatedness of identity-formation, or, the fluid and relational system that Butler describes. As Choy faces the problem of re-articulating his “historical inheritance in terms of a heterogeneous present” (Zhang 37), these in-between spaces, as he writes them, provide the “terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood” (Bhabha 1) that allow for the multiple and even conflicting demands placed on the narrating subject: a conception of identity that simultaneously foregrounds both the singular and the communal by initiating new signs of identity produced as sites of collaboration and contestation in the very act of defining the idea of subjectivity itself.

For Choy, the world is not polarized: by (re)writing his memories he is temporarily neither an adult nor a child. Rather, he shifts the past and imagines a world of memories that express a desire to return to that humanist ideal of a singular, knowable identity. His memory is transgressive and transhistorical, blurring boundaries of time and meaning through the active process of re-membling the past in the present, or, as Natov characterizes Kristeva's "language of the pre-oedipal period," through "the articulation of a continuum; as Irigaray said of woman's body, 'these streams are without fixed banks, this body without fixed boundaries'"(3). Interestingly, though, Choy begins his memoir with a crisis of identity that is also a moment of conception: as we enter the text, the ordering of its narrative seems to suggest an attention wholly focused on Choy's relationship with his (adoptive) mother. The news of his adoption is communicated via a stranger's seemingly innocent, but ultimately disruptive, statement: "I saw your mother last week" (3). In my third chapter, "Haunted by the (Un)Known: Semiotic Re-membling in *Paper Shadows*," I will draw on Jacques Lacan's notion of the symbolic order and Julia Kristeva's related concept of the semiotic process (*le semiotique*) to analyze Choy's use of syntax and discourse – his sentence-level hauntings – with an eye to the ways that he revises his past in order to frame/connect his unknown history to his childhood experiences: how he (re)writes his relationship with his adoptive mother that reflects the haunting presence of his absent biological mother through and in language. I will also touch on how Choy hints at the "true" identities of his biological parents, and how his writing withholds information that reveals far more than it claims to tell. Writing the incommunicable, the "secrets told and untold," Choy authors a text that is simultaneously nostalgic and forward looking; consequently, he authors a process of self-

becoming that predicates an examination of the shifting nature of the past, of memory, of language, of identity.

In my fourth chapter, “Performing the I/Eye: Gazing at the Self,” I explore how Choy’s “I”s also invoke the eyes and “I”s of his readers. That is, how Choy engages with Smith’s notion of audience interaction in autobiographical performativity. As both subject and author of the text, Choy engages with multiple aspects of identity, and undergoes a shifting between subject and object positions as a result of changing points of view and alternate defining gazes. Choy’s identity derives from the Other, and allows him to occupy different subject and object positions simultaneously. Smith points to a similar idea in autobiographical performativity when she writes, “it is as if the autobiographical subject finds him/herself on multiple stages simultaneously, called to heterogeneous recitations of identity”(3). Choy shifts identities depending on who is viewing. The act of reading, what some critics have described as “the interface . . . between cultures in conflict” (Harding and Martin 6), further reflects the role the audience plays in the operation of subjectivity in this text. Choy’s is a decidedly public work, one that calls its textuality to the fore with statements such as “Like a good mystery novel . . . one’s life should be read twice” (332), and his repeated reliance on the “banana metaphor” prior to and within later interviews about *Paper Shadows* to explain who he is: “I was turning into a banana: yellow on the outside and white on the inside” (Choy 84; Deer 40; *Wayson Choy*). Thus, this is also a theatrical text, one that is overt in its constructions and enters, as Diana Taylor defines theatricality, into “an economy of looks and looking” (48) that highlights the importance of the experience of subjectivity over any search for a singular “truth” to identity.

In addition, I will conclude this chapter by returning to Smith's theory of autobiographical performativity and her claims that it is through the act of narrating that one experiences selfhood, with an eye to possible implications this theory may have on a feeling, human, subject. One important area for consideration in autobiographical theory is the action of sexuality on the formation of subjectivity. This is an area of his own life that Choy hints at, but seems to choose to leave relatively unexplored, and in doing so suggests that there may be limits to performances of self that the subject, not the audience, ultimately retains control over.

2.

Performing Hybridity

Paper Shadows [is] based on the idea that all childhoods are the places where we begin our real life. Let me explain: no matter how old we are, when we go back to our childhood we begin again, we see anew what that childhood meant.

~ Wayson Choy¹¹

Soon, Chinatown began to fade, like a ghost. I was turning into a banana: yellow on the outside and white on the inside.

Many nights, I dreamed I was sitting tall in the saddle, posed heroically on a rearing palomino, speaking English words I pronounced perfectly: my face glowing like the moonlight, my eyes gunsmoke-grey, my cowboy hand waving a cowboy farewell – to silk, to jade, and, most of all, to boring arias.

~ Wayson Choy¹²

In her introduction to the 1995 PMLA issue on “Colonialism and the Postcolonial Condition,” Linda Hutcheon proposes that in place of a unitary subject, definitions of postcolonial should yield a “‘multiplication’ of identities . . . and the intersection of nation, gender, sexuality, class, and race, as well as history, religion, caste, and language.” She concludes that “race, class, gender, and sexuality all participate in the complex politics of representation,” and therefore suggest “multiple constituencies of postcolonial theory and practice” (11-12). As Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, “the move away from the singularities of ‘class’ or ‘gender’ as primary conceptual and organizational categories has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions . . . that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world.” This, in turn, yields,

a need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the *articulation*¹³ of cultural differences . . . Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (1-2)

The diverse and changing nature of how the Canadian literary community conceives of identity, home, and geography suggests a heterogeneity inherent to the ways we come to define our selves within changing national and cultural landscapes.¹⁴ Indeed, an increasing body of writers who bring different cultures to bear on the idea of nation and Canada have complicated themes of belonging within contemporary Canadian literature: this is because to simultaneously identify a “foreign” land with “home” is to

“reconstitute identity outside a discourse of nation that excludes displaced differences from the landscape of origin” (Zhang 36). Thus, the location of identities, their staging, begins to take on new meaning within the context of immigration and globalization. For, to come from elsewhere, from “there” not “here,” and hence to be simultaneously “inside” and “outside,” is to live at the “intersections of histories and memories, experiencing both their preliminary dispersal and their subsequent translation” (Zhang 36) into new and more extensive emerging arrangements of identity.

As S. Leigh Matthews cites in her article “‘The Bright Bone of a Dream’: Drama, Performativity, Ritual, and Community in Michael Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family*,”¹⁵ photography plays an important and dramatic role in life writing: “photographs ‘constitute a major component’ in many works of life writing, providing a sort of visual gallery whose pictures ‘dramatize’ descriptions of people and places” (353). Indeed, the window through which we enter *Paper Shadows* is a photograph depicting a typical rain-swept Chinatown street. Simply labeled “*Chinatown*” (3), the photo is undated, and the scene depicted therein seems as likely to have taken place sixty-years ago as sixteen years ago. Highlighting place over time, any sense of exactness is rendered unimportant, and, therefore, so is the ability to pin down an exact, “truthful” moment in time; instead, we are made aware of the immutable temporality of Chinatown as a place. In this way, the photograph’s temporal ambiguity sets the scene for Choy’s staging of his negotiation of an elusive sense of self within the protective (albeit invisible and unstable) boundaries of a community that endures; a community that also reflects the multiple stages on which he is called to perform.

Choy's remembered identity is arranged with a conscious attention to the times and places of his childhood. As the subtitle to his memoir reveals – *A Chinatown Childhood* – he positions the setting of his childhood memories as a formative part of whom he thinks he has become. Throughout the text, Choy intersperses “factual” information about the history of Vancouver's Chinatown with creative re-membrances that he writes about himself. This functions to set Choy's identity as a product of the places in which he was raised. Thus, Choy does not define himself by way of a recognition of the self as distinct from the other – the reflection of a distinct subjectivity by way of difference – instead, he re-collects personal and public memories that author self awareness as part of a system of meaning larger than what is justified by individuality alone. As Matthews suggests about Ondaatje's writing, Choy's self-reference in *Paper Shadows* appears “less individually centered and more communal” (355). Or, as Hladki conceives of autobiography, “autobiographies usually include reflections on lives other than the self – in other words, they produce biographies. Consequently, I understand autobiographical works as being as much about the ‘social’ as the ‘self’” (34). In *Paper Shadows*, Choy's self-reference is not a “conscious awareness of the singularity of each life” that Matthews takes on in her own work: that of the autobiographer's “need to oppose himself to all others” and to “feel himself to exist outside of others” (29). Rather, as the author and subject of his memoir, Choy creates, by writing, a space for performing the human interrelatedness of identity-formation, or, the fluid and relational system that Butler describes.¹⁶ Not only is he (re)telling his personal history, but also that of the larger Chinatown community.

Historically, the Chinese in Canada have been subjected to racism and systemic discrimination by the Canadian government since the first Chinese people immigrated over a century ago. While Chinese pioneers faced blatant discrimination from all levels of Canadian society, Federal legislation designed to limit Chinese immigration to Canada by imposing economic and humanitarian hardships were, perhaps, the most overt examples of entrenched discrimination, and therefore, perhaps the most telling. Laws such as the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885, which imposed a head tax on Chinese persons entering Canada, and its amendment in 1923 that limited immigration to students, diplomats, merchants, and the problematically defined “Canadian-born Chinese” were a part of the systematic and structural racism that was designed to counteract what Karin Lee terms the “threat” of Chinese labour to the white Canadian workforce (24) – a perceived “threat” which, (perhaps) ironically, resulted, in part, from the exploitation of Chinese workers as cheap labour machines (Yee 19-53; Chao). This exploitation extended beyond the limits of contractual obligation. The CPR, responsible for bringing many of the labourers to British Columbia with the promise of employment building the railway (and hence, one of the founding national myths of Canada) reneged on its contractual obligation to pay workers’ passages back to China at the completion of the railway. Meanwhile, familial and economic obligations, combined with political tumult in China, prevented many of the “overseas Chinese” from returning home if they desired to.¹⁷ Unable to afford the ticket home, and unwelcome in a new country, many of these sojourners in British Columbia were left in a perpetual state of displacement.

Consequently, early generations of Chinese immigrants in Canada, and in British Columbia in particular, turned inward, establishing their own communities as a response

to the powerful, displacing, influence of racism and of its often violent effects.¹⁸ Yet, as Karin Lee notes, “acting *in reaction* to white racist violence was problematic, as it placed the community in a defensive position, rather than aggressively fighting for their rights” (24). Benzi Zhang, in “Identity as Cultural Trans(re)lation” attributes this turning inward to a crisis of identity characteristic of Asian diasporans. Zhang writes, “although Asian diasporans in Canada vary in terms of their original cultural and national backgrounds, they face the same problem of how to re-articulate their ‘historical inheritance’ in a ‘heterogeneous present’” (37). Thus, after relocating in a new society:

Asian diasporans in Canada, particularly the early generations, tried to keep their original culture, language and practices as a defensive strategy to meet the overwhelming experience of disorientation and displacement . . . Some diasporans attempt[ed] to set up an ‘enclave culture’ in their adopted society and to build up cultural walls around their communities. (37)

Choy similarly describes the Chinatown of his youth as a “closed ghettoized space” around which the community drew “invisible borders”: “there was Chinatown where our life was and, although Chinatown was integrated at the edge with other ghettoized people . . . we all had a sense that we did not – should not – cross those lines” (Davis 276).

Anxious about protecting themselves and their cultures, the inhabitants of these “closed spaces” produced a desire for “home,” for a sense of the originary that often exceeded its repetition as, “in some cases” Zhang posits, some people “may even . . . have become more ‘Chinese’ or ‘Japanese’ than they were in their original countries” (37).

Despite an active creation of new culture, the Chinatown of Choy’s childhood, and, more specifically, his interaction with it, bears the “traces” of an originary culture. Indeed, in *Paper Shadows*, Choy depicts many people of his parents’ generation in

Chinatown like exiles from the homeland. Most of these characters, who are already well settled in Canada remain, however, oriented towards China, or what they interpret as traditional Chinese ways of being. While Choy's grandfather is the initiator of his family's re-settlement and establishment in Victoria and Vancouver, it is his offspring who cement the family's identity as being in flux. Choy's father, Yip Doy Choy (later known as Toy Choy), and his mother, Nellie Hop Wah (later Lilly Choy), arrive in Canada in "in-between" ways, and although the circumstances surrounding their actual arrivals are certainly different, the expectations each faces are similar in spirit. Yip Doy Choy is brought to Canada by his father as a way to re-unify family. However, the expectations that meet him in "Gold Mountain" are just as demanding as those that he left in China. As the first son of his father's disgraced first wife, he is expected by his father's second wife to work excruciating hours devoting his spare time and resources to raising her family. Choy's mother, Nellie Hop Wah, arrived in Canada by trading on the identity of another woman, a "paper bride" whose valuable passport and return passage was sold after she died while on a visit from Canada to China. In Canada, when her (paper) husband passes away, her status as a paper bride classified her as a widow, and, despite most of Chinatown knowing otherwise, she was expected to behave as a mourning wife and expected to play her role convincingly. As Choy writes:

[h]owever paper-phoney her widowhood may have been, the Chinatown community expected Mother to behave in a suitably mournful manner; otherwise, the immigration officials might get nosy. Many of the elders cautioned that the real Nellie Hop Wah might come back to haunt Mother. (298)

Wayson Choy, as the "result" of his parents' eventual coupling, is also caught between cultures as he is – sometimes forcibly – made to take part in his mother's active

life as part of Chinese-speaking Chinatown. This is not to suggest inflexibility on his mother's part to adapt to her new world. For, although she is mostly confined to Chinatown due to her language abilities and the realities of racism, she actively participates in "new" Chinese performances of being. With his father often absent while working on CP Rail Steamships, Choy accompanies his mother and her friends to the equally spectac(u)le(r) worlds of the Chinese opera and the late-night games of mah-jong that frequently followed these outings. Such late nights did not follow the accepted customs of "Old China" in "Gold Mountain" and they were kept secret from Choy's father since "Vancouver was not like Victoria . . . where all the married Chinese women, often pregnant, locked themselves away" (34). It is in these instances of "cultural trans(re)lation" (to borrow Zhang's term)¹⁹ that Choy gains access to an important system of cultural codes: the "rules of recognition" that Bhabha identifies as crucial to the authority of cultural discourse. These rules serve as reflections of "consensual knowledge and opinion" and mark, for Choy's mother, a sense of place to where she might "blend", that is, belong: "Mother took to mah-jong and her mah-jong friends as happily as they took to her . . . I played with whoever was there, while she gambled and gossiped and ate the midnight meal with her friends. Mother fitted in perfectly. I did, too" (36).

The feeling of being "in-between" is an experience often used to characterize Asian-Canadian literature, particularly those texts authored by people who, like Choy, are identified by their "own" communities as hyphenated products of (dis)placed nationalism.²⁰ In *Paper Shadows* Choy recalls being labelled by his community as "Canadian-born Chinese," and, officially, as a "Resident Alien" by the government (74).

Furthermore, the memoir tells a life revealed through the “recollections of people and stories” (Author’s note), through shaky remembrances that puzzle history and produce, as a memoir, an identity that seems perpetually elusive, located somewhere “between fact and fiction” (280).

As an adult, Choy recalls experiences vividly, suggesting that they have irrevocably become part of his “ethnic” experience as a Chinese Canadian and thus enter into the formation of his personality. He describes being caught between acting according to certain Chinese precepts and following his own gut feelings. Forced to attend Chinese school by his parents, Choy fails miserably at the basics of ideogrammatic brush-strokes and questions the “true” nature of his ethnic identity:

How could pointy brushes and smelly ink compete with efficient, no-nonsense steel nibs? How could ten thousand complicated ideograms compete with the clarity of twenty-six letters of the alphabet? How could a language divided by so many confusing dialects and tonal accents compete with the lyrics of “Cruising Down the River”? Or be belted out with such force as the Andrews Sisters’ rendition of “Don’t Fence Me In”? I was doomed. (219)

Yet, as his mother insists, “You Chinese . . . you speak Chinese” (83). His roles of identity are multiple, and even in opposition.

Thus, the stages of performativity that Choy navigates might best be described by Bhabha’s notion of hybridity: what he claims is a space “in between the designations of identity,” an “interstitial passage between fixed identifications [which] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4). Hybridity, then, is a concept, it is “an idea that there is no such thing as a pure, originary, and essential colonial or postcolonial self. Like any other sign in poststructuralist discussions, it is simply a space created by differentiation” (Chon 71).

As boundaries continually fluctuate, the concept of hybridity emerges as an “adulterated space ceaselessly negotiating and exchanging its attributes across its boundaries” (71). Janice Hladki, in her article, “‘Making a ‘Difference’ in/with/for ‘Autobiography,’” interprets Bhabha’s use of the terms *hybridity* and *hybridization* as part of his attempts to address “contested and shifting subjectivities and intersubjectivities and to displace notions of coherent and authoritative identities” (40). Bhabha describes hybridity as a “space of double inscription” (108), a phrase that Hladki notes “resonates with Derrida’s sense of trace and *différance*” (40): “whenever any writing both marks and goes back over its mark with an undecidable stroke . . . [t]his double mark escapes the pertinence or authority of truth . . . This dis-location (is what) writes/is written” (Bhabha, *Dissemination* qtd. in Hladki 40). Hybridity, then, posits subject positions that are ambivalent as they are hybridized, and which seem, therefore, to move beyond such strict dichotomies as colonizer/colonized, self/other, inside/outside, “ideograms”/ “alphabet.”

In terms of Choy’s memoir, “the importance of hybridity is that it bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like a translation, so that hybridity puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses. . . The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Rutherford 211). When Choy’s mother participates in the new structuring of family hierarchies in order to accommodate the bachelor society that was Vancouver’s Chinatown, she displays a loyalty to “Chinese values in Canada as well as a strong nostalgia for ‘homeland’” (Zhang 37). Even so, she still ascribes new meaning to those values in order to ensure their survival. In another example, Choy’s parents enroll him at the Kwomintang Chinese School in order to ensure

that his fluency in Toisanese – his “mother-tongue” – is not compromised by the invasion of English permeating Chinatown’s boundaries. When Choy promises his parents that he will study hard, his father’s response reveals where the value of the language, and of its real meaning, lies: “‘Yes, *dai gai tong-yu!*’ . . . ‘*We all be Chinese!*’” (215). Later, his son’s poor performance at the school reveals a similar anxiety amongst the Chinese community at large: the ladies at the mah-jong tables warn Choy’s mother, “Way Sun’s not going to be Chinese anymore” (240).²¹ In the Chinatown of Choy’s youth the value of language lies not in its operation as a system of communication, but, instead, as a sign of cultural identity and affiliation.

Ironically, it is as a result of his experiences at Chinese School that Choy begins to more specifically identify himself as occupying a hybridized subject position, as “neither One nor the Other but something else besides, in-between” (Bhabha, qtd. in Kapchan and Strong 245).²² This becomes explicit when he rationalizes the brutality he and other students faced at the hands of their “China-born” (233) teachers as stemming from more traditional notions of class and power:

Many of our Chinatown parents came from the poorest districts of Old China, from farming villages, but the teachers themselves, many of them refugees from the Sino-Japanese War, came from the modern cities of Canton and Hong Kong. They were barely able to tolerate our Sze Yup dialects. They saw our peasant faces, but not our in-between souls. Rather, many of them felt the in-between, local-born children were *mo-no juk sum* – *brainless bamboo stumps* – truly spoiled and utterly stupid. From their feelings of superiority at being traditional and Chinese, many of them saw us as beyond redemption, deliberately disrespectful, and needing more beatings than lessons. (234)

Recalling Bhabha’s claim that hybridity occupies a space “in between the designations of identity” (*The Location of Culture* 4), Choy’s naming of his cohort as “in between souls” operates to position him as belonging to a “new area of negotiation of meaning and

representation” (Rutherford 211). When Choy characterizes himself as a hybrid, he does so in an effort to recognize the communal difference experienced by his generation in Chinatown. As “Canadian-born Chinese,” they were not white enough to “pass” and be accepted by the dominant so-called “white” majority outside of Chinatown, nor “Chinese” enough to be trusted within its boundaries.²³ He unites them as part of a particular generation of “in between” children, who, despite being “local-born” are seemingly burdened with “in-between souls” that, despite their most creative efforts, fail to transcend the “conflicted demands” (Smith 18) for cultural performativity placed on them by a community anxious to ensure that they are still “one of them,” still Chinese, and therefore seemingly ensuring the continued survival/performance of Chinatown’s culture in generations to come.

Choy’s peer group exemplifies the complicated process of negotiating space for themselves “in between the designations of identity,” and of realizing a sense of control over what, for them, is otherwise a system of incomplete and uncertain cultural transactions. As a generation of children mostly educated in English at Canadian schools, their means of communication, their languages, become important sites/targets of cultural affiliation. “Ceaselessly negotiating and exchanging attributes across . . . boundaries” (Chon 71), they attempt to assert for themselves an identity of common hybridity; the enactment of which is anything but seamless, and comes to represent a sign of impending danger to the older generations of Chinatown. As Choy writes:

English vowels marked the rhythms and sounds my Chinatown playmates and I responded to. Our multiple family Chinese dialects would soon become a language many of us would use only in an elementary way. Mother understood what I was losing; she resisted. “You Chinese,” she said firmly, in Toisanese. “You speak Chinese.” I had heard from some of the older boys how I might reply, in English.

“No!” I said. “I speak *Chinglish!*”
 Mother’s knuckles landed smartly on my head, punctuating my Chinglish
 vocabulary.
 “Wait until I speak to you father!”
 But father said to her: “There’s more than one war going on back home.
 You don’t think we’ll ever go back to Old China, do you?”
 Mother looked at me and saw victory in my eyes. (83)

As Nikos Papastergiadis notes in his article “Tracing Hybridity in Theory,”
 “whenever the process of identity formation is premised on an exclusive boundary
 between ‘us’ and ‘them’, the hybrid, which is born out of the transgression of this
 boundary, figures as a form of danger, loss and degeneration” (174). Here we see how
 the effects of cultural dislocation cut across generations; for Choy’s father, his son’s
 emerging hybridity is tolerated as an inevitable effect of their “(dis)placment” in Canada;
 for Choy’s mother, hybridity might be selectively engaged as a tool for cultural survival,
 but it is not an ideal. When Choy names his language as a composite, as a hybrid blend
 of English and Chinese common to his peers, he signifies for his mother, and for the
 “cultural enclave” that was her generation’s Chinatown, a move towards what was, for
 them, “foreign,” and thereby signaled a danger to the continuing survival of a careful re-
 inscription of “Chineseness” translated onto the Canadian cultural landscape. Choy
 makes this connection more explicitly when in one interview, he states: “the people I
 knew didn’t tell us everything, they could not and would not tell us everything, because
 we were dangerous. My generation didn’t speak very good Chinese but knew a lot of
 English. What if we misunderstood what was told and then we passed the word along to
 the immigration people?” (Davis 272). Unable to recreate old cultural patterns in an
 extremely dissimilar social environment from that of many of their parents, Choy’s peer
 group of “in between souls” find themselves at the periphery of multiple cultural

contexts. Not easily definable in any terms, their experiences as hybridized subjects are as multiply othered.

For Choy, his position as an “in between soul” provokes a need to speak for himself; for others, it signals an inability to “understand the disruptions” (Smith 20) or, a breakdown in performative fluency. When Choy boasts to a classmate about how much more fun he has skipping Chinese school than attending it, he equates failure at mastering the language with a failure at cultural performativity:

When I told one girl how much fun I had at the museum or at the library, or at Larry’s house, she looked at me curiously.

“Don’t you want to be Chinese?”

I knew what she meant. If I could not read or write the language, if I could not learn to speak the Sze Yup Cantonese dialect that was being taught, how could I ever be Chinese? I thought right away of giving up on being Chinese.

“I’m Canadian,” I said.

Her braids wagged behind her as she laughed pityingly. (238)

Even though he is humiliated for his failure to fit in, that is, to perform convincingly, Choy’s attempt at self-definition is an act of declaration that transcends the efforts of his teachers, parents, even his classmate’s efforts to impose identity on him, and seems to suggest that part of the uncertainty that prompts self performativity may be a question of agency. By explicitly stating “I’m Canadian,” Choy tries to act for himself. Even so, his is still a performed sense of self displaying an urge to conform to some sort of normalizing principle of Hollywood ideals: the fantasy world of his beloved spaghetti westerns, the “cowboy-and-indian world” that “was infinitely superior because it was infinitely available” (81). “Like most Chinatown boys,” Choy remembers, “I wanted to ride in the saddle and shoot away at Bad Guys. I would be one of the Good Guys, of course” (81). He is either incapable or unable to escape the paradoxically totalizing and

essentializing principles of a highly racialized world, a world of binary opposition whose relatively simplistic constructions of the world attracts young “Chinatown boys” (81).

In his maligned assertion of “Canadian-ness” as personal hybridity, Choy tries to re-imagine his racially inscribed identity as a new term, one that rejects his “othered” and, now, “othering” position as a Chinese Canadian in favour of assimilation with the dominant white culture. Of course, read long after multiculturalism was entrenched into Canadian Law and, arguably, into the Canadian national imaginary, Choy’s assertion of “Canadian-ness” – that hybrid site of contested diversity and homogenization – takes on new meaning within the contemporary act of reading and within the scope of legislated cultural diversity. Furthermore, read now, in 2003, his remarks take on new “possibilities” of identification signifying the seemingly equally problematic and complex ties between gender, commerce, nationalism, and ethnicity, as it invokes the even more recent incarnation of the phrase “I am Canadian” in a popular advertising campaign for a national brand of beer.²⁴ In *Paper Shadows*, Choy’s invocation of these (now) stereotyped images, albeit not knowingly, underlines the interaction among different historical, political, and cultural discourses into new forms of identification. The trajectory of Choy’s re-membered identity further occupies no singular cultural or textual space, but is situated in what Benzi Zhang characterizes as a “web of social, economic and cultural links encompassing both global and local discourses” (36).

Bhabha’s skepticism about the achievements of dualistic models of thought and dialectical processes seem well founded, here, as Choy’s childhood experiences with competing modes of self-definition reveal idealistic positions about subjectivity that are not reflective of emergent states of cultural blending. He stages his childhood memories

in a seemingly binary world – a sociopolitical schema constructed along lines of opposition. The kinds of cultural identities textualized in Choy’s writing are shaped by sets of relations: between Canada and China, between “West” and “East,” between past and present. Moving between these and other terms, this memoir finds identity to be relational, forged in the interstices between places, times, cultures, and languages.

In fact, binary oppositions abound in *Paper Shadows* as Choy negotiates his sense of his ethnic self between what he sees as conflicted ideals of East and West. According to Bhabha, “the demand of identification entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness,” and “is always the return of an image of identity that bears the mark of splitting in the Other place from which it comes” (*Location* 45). Indeed, when Choy describes his childhood infatuation with cowboys, he invokes a system of “othering” in order to describe the appeal of the western ideal:

I began to wish I did not look like a Chinese boy. Good and evil became crayon strokes: Good Guys were handsome, and Bad guys ugly. Good Guys . . . rode smart white or palomino horses, and Bad Guys rode stupid dark-haired nags. Good-Guy horses could . . . outrace all other horses in the known world. (80)

His simple “crayon strokes” of Good and Evil describe “Good Guys” in what he takes to be desirable terms: “handsome,” “smart,” “white.” And, most importantly, “Good Guys” are able to “outrage” the “ugly,” “stupid,” “dark-haired,” “Bad Guys” that Choy fantasizes he is not, and which resembles the marginalized reality that undoubtedly confronted the formation of subjectivity for many of Chinatown’s citizens.²⁵ Likewise, Choy projects his childhood fantasies of performativity into “the black-and-white world of cowpoke heroes and dastardly villains” an admittedly “much simpler world than . . . the Sing Kew [Theatre]” (80), and one that was “infinitely available.” Here the “simple”

oppositions of good/bad, black/white, cowboy/villain are easy to “read”: their relative simplicity (and commercial availability) marks a kind of legibility that, for Choy, implies a realization of his fantasies into something “real.” Which, as Butler cites in her essay “Gender is Burning,” “nevertheless produce[s] occasional spaces in which . . . annihilating norms, those killing ideals of gender and race, are mimed, reworked, resignified” (*Bodies* 124-5). In this way, Choy’s performance of “western” ideals works to re-define his “eastern” self: he is “like most Chinatown boys” since “all the boys in Chinatown wanted to be cowboys” – ironically he becomes one of “them,” and finally, albeit temporarily, belongs.

Taking up these “western” norms, Choy re-presents himself along new lines of self-definition and aligns himself with westernized ideals that otherwise exclude him. Through play, he re-inscribes their signification in his own terms. Even so, the creation of belonging, of cohesive understanding, the measure of legibility that Choy equates with a Hollywood ideal, must remain a fantasy, as “there is also the kind of reiteration of norms which cannot be called subversive.” Such is the case when Choy dresses one of his Disney puppets in a costume approximating that of a Chinese Opera Doll:

I adorned the Disney creation with a Chinese warrior’s gilded cape by safety-pinning one of Mother’s embroidered handkerchiefs around his thick neck. In his right palm, I taped a thin bamboo skewer . . . and taped a miniature hand-made pennant to it. Though his eyes remained sky-blue, Dopey was now as Chinese as I wanted. (220)

Here, in play, through fantasy, hybrid modes of self-definition permit competing ideals to blend. In this instance, the toy may be as “Chinese” as he wants him to be, the implication being that Choy, as the puppeteer may, too, “act out” some control over what

he perceives as competing demands for self-performativity and take a sense of performative agency.

When Choy costumes himself in a similar fashion, however, the tension between competing expectations returns: “father spoke of the notoriety that my costumed dramas, now performed publicly on our front porch and in front of our house, were bringing to our household. My cousin King had been seen running down Keefer, waving a toy sword . . . I ran ahead with a real red pennant tied to a bamboo pole . . . a pole given to me by one of the actors from the Theatre” (63). While his cousin initially joins him in play, Choy remembers the laughter of other boys soon intimidated his playmate, and he is left to perform his costumed dramas alone (63). Indeed, his father’s reaction is particularly telling. When his play only consisted of dressing up in old clothes, his father “was charmed” (62). But that play was in his living-room, and this scene is in public, and follows the addition of make-up in order to make his performance more believable. It is as if there are boundaries of expectation; here, it seems as though his father’s expectations are informed by concerns of gender role behaviour, concerns that are echoed, in turn, by perceptions of the community’s reactions. Choy writes, “[a]mused neighbours gathered. Mrs. Wong applauded. Some grown-ups even threw me pennies and nickels; others walked away, shaking their heads” (63). And, while these reviews are mixed, his father is not pleased: “‘Everyone’s asking why a boy dresses up like that,’ Father complained. ‘Why do you let him behave like that?’” (63). By wearing make-up and by performing in public, Choy does not meet his father’s demands of identity for his son.

Interestingly, when Choy's obsession turns to cowboys-and-indians he remembers no protestations from his father. Like conceptions of self, this, too, can be read in multiple ways. His father's expectations of "masculine" performativity might be met more convincingly by him in the role of cowboy than as a boy playing with dolls and make-up (pastimes associated with little girls and femininity in 1940's Vancouver). Also, it may relate to Toy Choy's own "performance" in the role of father since Wayson is adopted, and it is later revealed that his biological – that is, "real" – father was likely a member of a Chinese Opera Company. For here it seems as though Toy Choy may be insecure in his sense of self through offering a convincing portrayal of his paternal role. Therefore, his rejection of his son's doll play and his following acceptance (implying demand) of his son's performances as a cowboy might be a demand of a type of "duet" performance: his self role as "father" playing to Choy's self role as "son." Later, when Choy rescues the "endless knot" from his father's ill-fated gift of wind-chimes and pins it to his opera puppets (248), the knot marks what Toy Choy might otherwise interpret as a painful reminder of his son's birth father – and perhaps the "failure" of his own performances as husband, father, man – as instead a representation of the inter-relatedness of their performances: when Toy Choy notices the knot tied to his son's opera puppets, Wayson Choy anticipated that he "was going to be upset." Instead, as Choy recalls, "Father looked pleased" (248). Thus, when he costumes his own body with the puppets and performs the roles of the opera he marks himself in the same way, with his father's gift, and thereby multiplies his performances as son. Certainly, his father's contradictory reactions indicate the presence of contradictory expectations that seemingly overpower emergent states of blending.

Papastergiadis argues that “the positive feature” of hybridity lies in its inclusivity in terms of identity since “it invariably acknowledges that identity is constructed through a negotiation of difference, and that the presence of fissures, gaps and contradictions is not necessarily a sign of failure” (170). Instead, hybrid identities emerge from what Bhabha terms an operative “third space,” from which “other elements encounter and transform each other” (Papastergiadis 170), and which “enables other positions to emerge” (Rutherford 211). Thus, identity “is not the combination, accumulation, fusion or synthesis of various components, but an energy field of different forces” (170). Enjoining hybrid identity with performativity, therefore, becomes a process of continuous emergence from which seemingly no fixed point arises: it is to unite two ambivalent, inchoate processes with one another, not a step towards clarity, but a movement towards greater dislocation.²⁶ Hence, the elusiveness of a utopian singularity; the desire for a recuperable sense of selfhood that vanishes before it can be fulfilled. Thus, in *Paper Shadows*, the value of hybridity lies more in its role as “a descriptive, [rather] than an analytic function” (Yao 4).²⁷

Hence, the experience of being in-between is also an experience that confronts Choy’s identity as a writer. As Jan Walsh Hokenson asserts in “Intercultural Autobiography,” “in an age of increasingly intercultural experience, writers face the new problem of expressive interculturalism or the narrated self experienced now as conjecture *between* languages and cultures” (92). Like Bhabha’s concept of hybridity, Choy’s self-concepts are not static, as subjectivity and culture are always moving targets, evolving as different cultures and individuals negotiate with one another in a complex and ever-shifting world. What becomes crucial for “reading” Choy’s life-stories, then, is the

practice of thinking beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities, focussing instead on those moments or processes of self-performativity that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. As Choy faces the problem of re-articulating his “historical inheritance in terms of a heterogeneous present” (Zhang), these “in-between” spaces, as he writes them, provide the “terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood” (Bhabha *Location 1*) that allow for the multiple and even conflicting demands placed on the narrating subject: a conception of identity that simultaneously foregrounds both the singular and the communal by initiating new signs of identity produced as sites of collaboration and contestation in the very act of defining the idea of subjectivity itself.

3.

Haunted By the (Un)Known: Semiotic Re-membering

In trying to remember the past in the present the autobiographer imagines another person, another world into existence.

~ James Olney²⁸

I'm reading my own book but I don't know how I'm writing it. It is one page at a time, one paragraph at a time, and one surprise at a time.

~ Wayson Choy²⁹

Haunted by the present, imbued with the past, *Paper Shadows* resonates with spectral identities. Faced with a crisis of identity, Choy asks himself the all-important question, “Where should I begin?” (4), and *begins* by writing his memories. Thus, he conceives of himself by writing his *self* into being; thus, tactically, he begins in and with language. He authors a sense of self that is situated within a paradox of temporal framing: a nostalgic return to memory through the highly constructive act of writing. He tries to use memory to connect with his own past by writing it into the present; thus, he writes a self as performative, as a self actively in process *after-the-fact*. The result is a personal history dechronologized by the limits of temporal framing that, in turn, imagines other versions of his self into existence. In these multiple “disruptive space[s] of disidentification” (Smith 20), spectral identities haunt his memories: “When I think of my earliest memories, I do not worry about family history . . . I think, instead, of first hauntings” (*Paper Shadows* 6). *Paper Shadows* is haunted by recitations of self-performativity through symbolic language, a medium that produces its own recitations of meaning within the boundaries of representation. Trying to remember who he *was*, Choy *begins*, then, by (re)turning to the moment when he learned of his adoption, making this his moment of conception – a moment that is simultaneously the death of the only mother he has “ever known” (4) and the birth of the *possibility* of knowing/re-connecting with his seemingly unknown biological origins. In the act of writing, of performing his memoir, Choy desires to construct a figurative re-connection with an absent biological mother through and with language. Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “optical unconscious” works well here: what feminist critic Maggie Humm defines as “that which we cannot represent but which is always at the core of our representations” (Cosslett,

Lury and Summerfield xv). Focusing on the haunting awareness that he is, indeed, adopted – that is, he is not who he previously thought he was – Choy evokes with subtle intensity the lurking “truth” in the reality of his remembered identity.

In her 1976 work, *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich writes that, of the mother daughter bond, “probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has laboured to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement” (Natov 1). Feminist and psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva generalizes similar sentiments to children of either sex when she proposes a developmental phase defined by a system of unique and powerful communication between mother and child: *le semiotique*, or, the semiotic process (Kristeva 1167). Firmly influenced by Jacques Lacan’s notion of language development known as the *symbolic order*, Kristeva offers a theoretical perspective that focuses on the language used to depict the original, preoedipal state of merging when the child lives in symbiosis with the mother. She strives to articulate what Lacan, in his interpretation of Freud, suggests is “submerged with the child’s entry into the symbolic order, which distances and symbolically transforms desire into the linear and hierarchical structures of the language of discourse” (Natov 3). The semiotic process, characterized by the language of the preoedipal, pre-symbolic period is, by contrast, the articulation of a continuum; it is the “creation of meaning through pre-verbal modalities associated with the infant’s intense attachment to and experience of the world through the mother’s body” (3).

Janet Giltrow and David Stouck, in their syntactical and discursive analysis of Willa Cather's "inexplicable presence of the thing not named," attribute Kristeva's semiotic process to writing that is characteristic of the pastoral mode (93). Careful to distinguish between a genre of literature that is based on rural subject matter located in a particular time and place, and a mode of writing that betrays certain characteristic motivations that are transhistorical, Giltrow and Stouck define the pastoral mode as "a mode of art based on memory" (92). That is, "in its simplest form," it

describes a retreat in time and place to an enclosed unseen world, a retreat expressing the human dream of a simplified, harmonious existence from which are eliminated the complexities of social ills (greed, poverty, and wars) and natural processes (change, decay, and death)[A time and place] when existence was ideally ordered and there was no conscious separation of self from the rest of the world: no separation of subject and object, all things bring an identity of being and purpose. (92-3)

In this ideal state, "the child experiences the world as whole or unitary because its symbiotic relation with the mother's body blurs all boundaries" (93). Pastoral literature, in this sense, attempts to restore the self to the body of the mother by articulating a return to what Richard Klein terms "the developmental moment before the institution of self and language" (69). And yet this return, because it necessitates the use of language in order to articulate itself, must remain *illusory*, as "the necessity of the myth is tied to the impossibility of thinking the unconscious of thought, of representing the Unconscious" (69), or, representing that "thing not named." Sidonie Smith, in her discussion of autobiographical performativity, characterizes the unconscious as "the repository of all the experiences and desires that cannot be identified with the symbolic realm and its laws of citationality, those calls to take up normative subject positions" (20); what Judith

Butler describes “haunt[s] signification as its abject borders or as that which is strictly foreclosed: the unlivable, the nonnarrativizable, the traumatic” (*Bodies* 188; in Smith 21).

In order to overcome/move beyond his amnesia of identity, Choy turns to his relationship with his (adoptive) mother. In the syntactical and discursive ways that Choy writes this relationship he performs the illusion of a re-connection with his absent biological mother, evoking her presence in the language he uses to write, to invoke, the occasion of his adoptive mother’s death. As Butler reminds us, “the power of discourse . . . produce[s] effects through reiteration” (*Bodies* 20) or, as Choy speaks about the dramatic role of the past in his writing, “the more we deny it, the more ominously the past will show up” (Davis 277). Here, Choy’s representations of his relationship with his (adoptive) mother resonate with the unrepresentable: although, in *Paper Shadows*, Choy seems to make no claims about who his “real” parents are, the way that he writes his memories of his adoptive parents resonate with the haunting possibility of reconnection with his biological parents. Writing these relationships not only allows him to re-experience his childhood with the only parents he ever knew, via remembering now, in the present, but also comes to communicate a desire to “think the unconscious of thought.” In *Paper Shadows*, the result is a highly pastoral text that is haunted by the presence of things “not named.”

The mysterious narrative in *Paper Shadows* unfolds within the constructive nature of memory. By telling his memories of his past self, Choy recontextualizes his present personal history, actively revising the past to satisfy his present concerns and to reflect his current knowledge. He, as both writer and subject of his memoir, therefore authors and experiences a conception of personhood that is performative in its associations. That

is, by writing his life through the reconstruction of his past, Choy performs autobiographical recitations of identity in perpetual acts of remembrance, experience, and re-negotiation. His shifting multiple selves, his remembering I and remembered I, occupy positions of unique pastoral perspective as they are re-enacted and realized on and off the page in syntax, discourse, and imagination in an effort to produce the effect of a familiar past and therefore a familiar sense of who he was/is: evoking a return to a unitary, enclosed world where “all things shar[e] an identity of being and purpose” (Giltrow and Stouck 93). Of course, as Leon Edel cautions, writing a life, revealing a sense of a known, essential self, is not so simple, since “everything is seen through particular eyes” (32). And, as James Olney has observed, “in trying to remember the past in the present the autobiographer imagines another person, another world into existence” (245). *Paper Shadows*, as Choy’s own “pastoral project,” takes place within a shifting past that, despite being “written” in Lacan’s symbolic order, realizes a sense of a return to the imaginary as Choy’s articulation of his memories evokes a present that is haunted by the past, imbued with hidden semiotic and autobiographic “meaning” communicated via his haunting language. This seems particularly fitting since it is through his role as an author that Choy learns of his adoptive mother’s very existence, and it is through language that he is able to re-member his identity, his sense of self, by retroactively writing the absence of a semiotic bond into the presence of his memories.

Turning to writing in an attempt to author a return to that ideal “simplified harmonious existence,” Choy begins “to use language as a means to bridge the gap that has grown between self and other,” between mother and child. As we enter the text, the ordering of its narrative events seems to suggest an attention wholly focused on Choy’s

relationship with his adoptive (M)other.³⁰ Indeed, we seem to enter the text through a construction of his (M)other and her body as the central source of all conflict and movement. Choy carefully remembers the occasion of her death, and he likewise records most of his childhood experiences within chapters that begin with mention of her.³¹ It comes as no surprise, then, that hearing a mysterious voice pronounce his mother alive in the statement, “I saw your mother last week” (30), triggers, for Choy, a return to the occasion of her death:

Not possible. This was 1995. Eighteen years earlier I had sat on a St. Paul’s Hospital bed beside Mother’s skeletal frame while she lay gasping for breath: the result of decades of smoking. I stroked her forehead and, with my other hand, clasped her thin, motionless fingers. Around two in the morning, half-asleep and weary, I closed my eyes to catnap. Suddenly, the last striving for breath shook her. (3-4)

The overwhelming presence of his (M)other’s body lends a reading that is seemingly reinforced by an exercise in collocation. Choy offers a list of body parts – “forehead,” “hand,” “fingers,” “eyes” – that appears to establish a semiotic reconnection between a mother and child. Yet, reading on a different level, we find that this is not actually the case. For, the passage is actually dominated not by themes of Rich’s “flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies,” but rather on the impossibility of such a connection. Reading syntactically, we find that Choy’s sentences are “top-heavy,” that is, their subjects and verbs are preceded by qualifying phrases that prolong entry into the events of the passage by re-focusing attention on, here, the passage of time. For example, the phrases “This was 1995,” “Eighteen years earlier,” “Around two in the morning,” and “Suddenly,” mark temporal framing as the passage’s “real,” syntactic theme. Coupled with his assertion “Not possible” in response to the voice’s insistence, Choy’s sentence level hauntings evoke the possibility of creating and finding a different kind of meaning

similar to the imaginary state. That is, communicating the seemingly incommunicable. To enter this text, then, is to encounter a haunting feeling that things are not quite as they seem to be. It is to encounter performances through Lacan's symbolic order of language that demand an immediate awareness of the haunting nature of the pastoral mode: to encounter "language [that] is always haunted by its origins in difference and absence, for to enter the symbolic order of language is, in Lacan's formulation, to be severed from the 'real'" (Giltrow and Stouck 93).

In order to discover the "true" nature of the mystery of Choy's identity that haunts his memoir we must, instead, turn to the "*real*" in his text. We must turn to the "imaginary state," what Kristeva calls the semiotic, or, the creation of meaning through pre-verbal modalities such as "rhythm, intonation . . . echolalias, glossalias" (Kristeva 1167), "gesture" and "melody" (Natov 3). Within this framework, the voice's identification of Choy's seemingly ambiguously identified mother, by its assertion, "No, no, not your mother . . . I mean your *real* mother" differentiates two different people: his "mother," and his "*real* mother" (4). Thus, this "voice" makes the important distinction for Choy that it is talking about someone other than "the mother [he had] known all [his] life" (4). It speaks of his "*real*" mother – a distinction that Choy highlights by using italics to mark difference; moreover, while this distinction is important, "the effects of the practices matter more than the nomenclature" (Miller 1).

Meaning haunts Choy's seemingly simple graphic representation between two things; these italics serve to mark not only one but the other while simultaneously gesturing towards psychoanalytic readings of identity and language. By not italicizing the word "mother" Choy implies an equality within the term that does not question the

reality/existence of the person and the role (for example he does not italicize one *mother* over another and thereby mark her as more worthy of attention on the page). Rather, by highlighting the word “real”, Choy draws attention to the (un)reality of the semiotic relationship that haunts his memoir. The “real,” then, denotes not only the very real existence of two mothers but further connotes conceptions of Lacan’s imaginary state and Kristeva’s preoedipal phase. Choy points to the conspicuousness of these concepts when he states, “the voice emphatically repeated the word ‘real’ as if it were an incantation” (4). That is, as a rhythm representative of preoedipal, semiotic communication, and the repetition of which forces a reading of the passage that focuses on the tension of the seeming (im)/possibility of preoedipal representation within language.

At his (M)other’s deathbed, Choy “snaps awake,” “conscious again of the smell of acetone, of death dissolving her body” (4). Although the “smell” of death might seem to indicate a sensuality within the semiotic process, it actually denotes a highly specific part of the natural process of death – itself marking a severe (and final?) separation between mother and child – by identifying acetone as the correct name of that particular smell. Sense, here, does not exist within the imaginary state, but occupies Lacan’s mirror stage.³² Even so, following this signification, Choy continues to write sensuously, only this time, the representation of sight and sound indicates of a feeling of departure. He writes, “the silence deepened; the room chilled. The mother I had known all my life was gone” (4). Here, Choy’s language is evocative: he does not name specific sounds or feelings but, by describing them, evokes through language the feelings associated with silence and cold. For example, silence, by definition, cannot grow more silent since there is nothing to “hear”; a room is not animate, yet Choy writes this noun as the subject of a

verb (“chilled”). Helen Buss’s characterization of memoir as a site of trauma recovery works well here, as if Choy is “testifying to an absence” (22). Even though he clearly remembers his (M)other’s death as a traumatic experience, *how* he writes the experience is haunted by the figurative presence of his biological mother – the experience of which does not have “satisfactory linguistic expression” (Buss 22), and further recalls the initial trauma of disidentification. As Buss reminds us, “one task of the writing process is to retrieve and recreate the experience” (22). The effect, in Choy’s writing, is thus not of the particular temperature of the room or of the presence of silence, but that of *experiencing* a mood: feeling an absence of sound and feeling a change in temperature that cannot be signified. He (re)creates the nonrepresentational sounds and feelings that are indicative of the pastoral mode (Giltrow and Stouck 93). Choy’s statement, “the mother I had known all my life was gone,” thus indicates the tension of a simultaneous presence and absence of multiple mothers, of (im)/possibility: one, the (M)other whose body he sits next to and, two, the insinuated presence of a mother outside of language, one whose existence is evoked by descriptions of sense and sound.

Recalling Adrienne Rich’s caution that, within the mother-daughter bond, “the materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the *most painful estrangement*”³³ the haunting presence in *Paper Shadows* too foregrounds a story of separateness and individuation. Choy uses punctuation to thematically express the (un)breakable link between two thoughts, between mother and child. For example, in his memory “[t]he silence deepened; the room chilled,” the strength of the bond between the experiences of these senses is reinforced by the semicolon that joins them, and thereby implies that their experience is as part of a larger, unitary relationship that is itself reminiscent of Giltrow

and Stouck's descriptions of pastoral writing as expressing a desire to return to an ideal state where the world is experienced as "whole or unitary" because the child's "symbiotic relation with the mother's body blurs all boundaries" (93). Therefore, to sever these into separate, distinct sentences would be to break this connection, to write a sensual experience that is instead one of death and severing (silence and cold) not (re)unification. Here, the semicolon serves to overcome the individuation of symbolic language as Choy uses punctuation "as a means to bridge the gap that has grown between self and other" (Giltrow and Stouck 93).

Further down the page, when Choy writes, "My real mother was dead; I had witnessed her going" (4), his semicolon suggests an inseparable bond between the death of his ambiguously identified "real mother" (no italics) and the act of witnessing her departure; thus, it links the authority of identity with the act of seeing, of identifying, of knowing the finality of the past. A later statement also points to the conscious nature of his (M)other-child relationship: "That afternoon, in my fifty-seventh year, a phone call from a stranger pushed me towards a mystery. The past, as I knew it, began to shift" (95). Here, Choy claims to *know* the past (marked by the qualifying phrase "as I knew it") and therefore positions this as a relationship formed after or outside of the preoedipal period of the "imaginary." Thus, at the level of language, the tension of the semicolon marks a link between his (M)other's death and movement away that, though sad, is not experienced as a final, traumatic loss marking the identification by the child of "an object (as) separate from itself" (Klein 68) because there is no symbiotic, in utero connection between adoptive (M)other and adopted child. Choy represents boundaries of identity by the act of witnessing: she, "her" ("I had witnessed her going"), is re-

membered as his non-imaginary, non-italicized “real mother” who is signified by the implied distance between their bodies that is necessary to witness (the other). Thus, the construction and punctuation of these sentences also indicate an eye to unique pastoral perspective since without the symbiotic relationship with the mother’s body that “blurs all boundaries” (Giltrow and Stouck 93) there is no idealized state behind the parent-child relationship that Choy can desire to return to.

The notion of perspective is later echoed in a passage where Choy describes his admiration for his (M)other in ways that seemingly reinforce the strength of a parent-child bond. He writes,

If I turn my head at a certain angle, I can still see Mother crying, her perfumed hankie above me, her face streaked with tears. And, in some other sphere, I see Mother laughing like the Buddha, her spirit unyielding, her mythic lies flying between us like bright pennants. (56)

The terms that Choy uses, however, actually emphasize the distance between them. Here, Choy’s individuation is explicitly written: he sees rather than feels his (M)other crying; he does not smell the perfume of her “hankie,” but sees it as an image above him. He locates “Mother”³⁴ in “some other sphere” and they are divided from one another by “mythic lies” that similarly evoke the mythic motivations of pastoral projects. Furthermore, the structure of these sentences harbours motivations communicated by the pastoral. These, too, are “top-heavy” sentences, sentences where the subject and verb follow some kind of qualitative, descriptive information: the phrases, “if I turn my head at a certain angle” and “in some other sphere” introduce Choy’s “I,” which, in turn, evokes the “eye” of the narrator, and the eye of the reader and thereby multiplies the evocative, haunting, subjects in these sentences.³⁵

As Bhabha has remarked,

. . . binary, two-part identities function in a kind of narcissistic reflection of the One in the Other, confronted in the language of desire by the psychoanalytic process of identification. For identification, identity is never an a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality. The discursive conditions of this psychic image of identification will be clarified if we think of the perilous perspective of the concept of the image itself. For the image – as a point of identification – marks the site of an ambivalence. Its representation is always spatially split – it makes *present* something that is *absent* and temporally deferred: it is the representation of a time that is always elsewhere, a repetition. (*Location* 51)

In this image of himself remembering, Choy's performed subjectivity is spatially and temporally fragmented: the narrator and the author might occupy the same site within the personal pronoun "I," but, within the constructive nature of writing and remembering, their referentially becomes re-complicated. In the words of Dorrit Cohn: "the temporal sequence of past events yields to the temporal sequence of present remembrance, and the past is thereby radically dechronologized" (182).³⁶ In this case, Choy's "I," writing autobiographically, operates as subject, author, and narrator of the text, and does so within the scope of writing about the life of one person remembering, as well as within the scope of "writing a life" (writing *about* a life) that is also "life writing": telling stories of life experiences that, gathered as a text, presumably produce the experience of reading one coherent "life." Thus, within the indeterminacy of textuality, Choy's sense of self is also performed as a function of reading and writing.³⁷ As Paul de Man contends,

. . . does the referent determine the figure, or is it the other way round: is the illusion of reference not a correlation of the structure of the figure, that is to say no longer clearly and simply a referent at all but something more akin to a fiction which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity? (*Autobiography as De-Facement* 921)

Certainly Choy's identifications, both of his "selves" and his "mothers," remind us, as Bhabha does, that "identity . . . is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality." In the "discursive conditions" in which Choy performs his remembered "past" *now* we never lose sight of his present point of view.

Choy indicates similar attention to the seemingly paradoxical nature of the pastoral project when he concludes, "The past as I knew it, began to shift." Here, the inclusion of the qualifying phrase "as I knew it" explains this as a past within a specific time and place: the past that Choy *knows*. Thus, this conscious past, as it shifts, opens up a space for writing his unconscious, what Smith understands as "the repository of all the experiences and desires that cannot be identified with the symbolic realm and its laws of citationality. . . [the] repository of that which is not speakable, not intelligible, not credible, the unconscious is an interiority of disidentifications nested inside the interiority of the identifying subject, an effect of an effect" (20-1). It opens up the possibility for a writing a transhistorical "retreat in time and place to an enclosed, unseen world" (Giltrow and Stouck 92). That is, the active retreat to a "new past" that embodies the paradoxical nostalgia expressed within the pastoral mode. Or, as Paul Alpers notes in his book, *What Is Pastoral?*, a "sharpness of foreground focus, a sense of the present" that "confirms the pastoral project" (377). Choy's project "renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present" (Bhabha, *Location 7*).

In this way, it might be useful to consider the pastoral mode as indicating a kind of double vision that looks not backwards, to the past from the present, but forwards *through* the past. Since the limits of the symbolic order negate any actual return to a

semiotic state, the pastoral mode of writing requires, by its very motivation to express that human dream of an ideal state characterized by a simplified, harmonious existence in which there is no conscious separation of self from the rest of the world, an active becoming in language that renders possible the actualization of this desire on the page. Or, what Buss characterizes as the “‘tranquility’ of the contemporary memoirist”: “the voice that re-experiences the event, reprocesses it more fully than it could have been felt and understood in the first instance, and comes to an understanding of the event” (15). The pastoral mode, therefore, is not passive, escapist, or sentimentalist, but is constructive and actively nostalgic *because* it is “a mode of art based on memory” (Glitrow and Stouck 93) that “implies the more complete understanding that comes from having done the hard work of remembering the past” (Buss 15). Choy’s pastoral memory, then, is transgressive and transhistorical, blurring boundaries of time and meaning through the active process of re-membering the past in the present, or, as Natov characterizes Kristeva’s “language of the pre-oedipal period,” through “the articulation of a continuum; as Irigaray said of woman’s body, ‘these streams are without fixed banks, this body without fixed boundaries’” (3). Choy re-stages the function of memory; he creates a haunting of identity that is transhistorical and signifies a semiotic presence that is marked by its absence.

For Choy, the world is not polarized: by (re)writing his memories he is temporarily neither an adult nor a child. Rather, he shifts the past and imagines a world of memories that expresses “a retreat in time and place . . . to a harmonious existence” marked by the unitary, symbiotic relationship between mother and child (Glitrow and

Stouck 92-3). How Choy uses language to render the impossible possible is itself performative, and is similar to how Buss conceives of the function of memoir:

. . . in the way “performative” language is understood by speech-act theorists. Language can be understood as a referential and descriptive in that it is used to denote real objects and describe actual circumstances. However, language can also be understood as “speech acts” in that the language causes the action it describes to happen. (21)

Despite the boundaries of language, Choy authors a life expressive of a continuum whose origins do not lie in difference or absence, but in the haunting effects of semiotic bonds.

Re-remembering his past, Choy transgresses boundaries of truth, language, and subjectivity, and, in the process, produces “a very powerful recognition” (Davis 277). As the author himself has remarked, “I write for people who . . . want to be aware that life means something, that the randomness of life can still make some final sense. To me, life makes sense in the moment” (Davis 286).

On a textual level, Choy’s memoir serves as an over-arching life-story, as a meta-narrative that functions to express a desire for recouping his sense of self as a “documentary repository running uninterruptedly from infancy to the contemporary moment, capacious, current, and accessible” (Smith 18). As a text, Choy’s life story is tangible, knowable, and seems to “make sense.” At the same time, it also exists as a gathering of narrative moments that, individually, may do more to reveal the both immediate and lasting effects of the trauma of disidentifications experienced at the level of language. By gathering the remembered – that is, fragmentary and incomplete – moments of his life into one “complete” text, Choy’s “ongoing process of identification and disidentification” (Smith 18) begins to “make sense”: meaning, here, is found in the process of reading his memoir. The meaningful moments that (de)construct *Paper*

Shadows are like Smith's concept of identifications: "identifications become 'nodal points' or 'fixations' which limit the flux of the signified under the signifier" (21). Here, there are limits to Choy's representations of emergent pre-oedipal states experienced in and through his evocative language that re-members. The presence of certain subjectivities – i.e. his biological mother – can only be represented in/by effects produced within the symbolic order. And, even then, they are re-presented as liminal beings depicted most strongly by the knowledge that these figurative reconnections are momentary and made possible only in the *act* of reading.

Paper Shadows, then, is also a theatrical text, one that "flaunts its artifice, its constructedness; it strives for efficaciousness, not authenticity" (Taylor 48). Indeed, some of its most theatrical moments involve Choy's memories of the Chinese Theatre, which he remembers attending with his (M)other. At the Opera, Choy plays the role of an observer and of a participant, and experiences for himself recognition as a subject. From his seat, Choy takes part in the performances on stage: "When Buddha laughed, I laughed. When Monkey rubbed his bum in regret, I rubbed my bum in sympathy" (48). When he is inattentive during a boring aria, his (M)other encourages him to play along: "'*Kay-dee. Stand up,*' Mother said. 'You be her guard.' I stood up, ramrod-stiff like a soldier, at attention" (51). Of course, he is not the only audience member affected by the events unfolding on stage. When the Gentlewoman sings of exile, Choy notes the powerful emotive effects that appear to hold the audience's attention: ". . . the audience – suddenly – responded with silence. . . . Listening to the sing-song evocation of Old China, the lyrics conjuring up images of a genteel country life and lost family, of the Gentlewoman's dream to be in her village home again, our elders and parents sat

transfixed . . . the audience gave her a thunderous ovation” (51). It seems no wonder that Choy does not experience the same rapture with this kind of “sing song” as the older generations in the audience do, since the emotive power of “Old China” appears to hold little hypnotic force on a “Canadian-born” boy. Instead, Choy is transfixed by a sense of personal significance born out of the sights and sounds that result from her performance: “the star bowed to the shouting audience. I bowed back” (52):

I lifted my head higher to see more, to hear more. If I had first supposed the theatre was a strange dream, thought the tales unfamiliar, there came a moment when I no longer felt separated from the stage. Suddenly, nothing about the opera was foreign to me: I belonged. I could not make out the words spoken or sung on stage, but my mind could trace the stories like a magician tracing fire in the air. (54)

He is part of the staging of the story, part of the meaning communicated not via the symbolic order – “I could not make out the words . . .” – but in magical effects akin to semiotic communication. Here, he feels he belongs – “I no longer felt separated from the stage . . . nothing was . . . foreign to me: I belonged” – and is connected to a unitary world where there is “no conscious separation of self from the rest of the world: no separation of subject and object, all things bring an identity of being and purpose” (Giltrow and Stouck 92-3).

In another example, Choy takes pleasure in the creative staging of scenes, and in the action, sounds, and feelings depicted on stage:

On the stage, poised at opposite ends, painted faces fierce in blood red and cobalt blue, the King and General made threatening gestures towards each other’s kingdoms: fists shook; swords waved menacingly. The King uttered stylized shrieks that melded with the majestic singing of the bold young Prince. With hypnotic force, the General sang counterpoint. When the Prince left the stage, the King and General broke into soliloquies of talkpatter, then dipped and darted at each other. With a clash of cymbals and drums, they both stormed away. (45)

Here, Choy enjoys the opportunity for creative imagining that the colours, sounds and staging of the scenes evoke in him: the opportunity for making meaning out of the emotive effects he experiences as a result of the stories that are told. Choy responds to the “rhythms, echolalias, gestures, and melodies” in these scenes. He begins by with an eye to the “efficaciousness” of the scene’s blocking – “On the stage, poised at opposite ends, painted faces fierce in blood red and cobalt blue, the King and General made threatening gestures towards each other’s kingdoms: fists shook; swords waved menacingly.” He writes seemingly nonsensical onomatopoeic “sounds” which, for him, seem to tell a more “real” story: the “stylized shrieks,” “majestic singing,” “talkpatter,” and “clash” seem to resonate in his ear, creating the feeling of “authenticity” in its “efficaciousness.” This affects a symbiotic reciprocity that Choy states explicitly. He writes,

The rising notes of the dulcimer stilled the audience; the pliant notes of the two-stringed *hu chin* and the violin dispensed quivering half-melodies. Cymbals shivered; gongs and drumbeats throbbed; a pair of woodblocks clacked.
 . . . All at once, I felt my heart pounding to a rhythm outside of myself. I was thunder-struck. I clenched my four-year-old legs, tightened my candy-stained fists: I wanted to pee. (43)

However, when the female lead takes the stage, her sounds and rhythms do not create sensations of arousal in the four-year-old, rather, they put him to sleep. Meaning here, is not made out of her “play” on the stage, but in the play of Choy’s language used to describe her: despite a “shrill veering rhythm,” Choy sleeps: “I might have closed my eyes then; I might even have napped. Eventually her aria concluded and I sat up, sleepily rubbing my eyes” (45). The modal “might” suggests an uncertainty to his version of the

story, like he cannot quite recall what happened. It is almost as if he is lulled to sleep by her rhythm, not in spite of her “screeching aria,” but as a result of it: he is unconscious of the events of which she sings seemingly as a result of her sounds returning him to his pastoral unconscious – in comparison to the musical instruments, this rhythm is not “*outside* of [him]self”³⁸ and there seems to be no “conscious separation of subject and object” – signifying a semiotic (re)connection between mother and child and thus suggesting the possibility of identifying her as his “real” biological mother. The “actual” story, then, does not take place in the words and songs of the Opera, but in the effects that their staging, their theatrical “discursive conditions” (Bhabha 51), evoke in him.³⁹

In these “moments”, the Opera acts as an immediate interlocutor with the formation of Choy’s subjectivity and proves meaningful because it reveals far more than its author may initially appear to be claiming to tell. For, as Choy reveals much later in the final chapters of *Paper Shadows*, his biological parents were likely members of Chinese Opera companies in Vancouver. And, in all likelihood, Choy probably witnessed actors on stage who were, “in reality,” his “*real*” mother and father. It seems no coincidence, therefore, that as an adult, Choy writes into his childhood memories comparisons between the actors on stage and his own parents that take on new references and meaning in light of this information: of the Princess Choy remarks, “I thought, she looked like Mother” (45) and of the Prince he writes, “the handsome Prince, looking like my father . . .” (49).

Writing the incommunicable, narrativizing the “unnarrativizable” (Butler, *Gender* 188; Smith 21), the “secrets told and untold” (*Paper Shadows* 338) Choy authors a text that is simultaneously nostalgic and forward looking; consequently, he authors a process

of self-becoming that predicates an examination of the shifting nature of the past, of memory, of language, of identity. As Butler herself posits,

Certain features of the world, including people we know and lose, do become “internal” features of the self, but they are transformed through that interiorization, and that inner world, as the Kleinians call it, is constituted precisely as a consequence of the interiorization that a psyche performs. (*Gender Trouble* xv)

According to classical autobiographical theorist George Gusdorf, the autobiographer’s story comprises “a second reading of experience . . . truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it” (38). Only, in Choy’s text, reading is not only of experience, but is the experience of reading, of “knowing” a more complete expression of a life as written/performed images “reconstructing the unity of a life across time” (Gusdorf 37). Gesturing to his reading audience, Choy teases us, suggesting “[l]ike a good mystery novel . . . one’s life should always be read twice, once for the experience then once again for astonishment” (332). Highly evocative, this memoir produces a sensation of mystery, and of multiplicity of meaning within the reading process.

Choy is not a mere observer watching as his past is played/laid out and his “true” identity is revealed to him. Rather, he re-writes his sense of self as part of a larger system of meaning seemingly outside the grasp of consciousness. “Weighted with a sense of mystery and meaning” (12) the fragmentary nature of his memories plays on the “dynamic tensions” between “fiction and history and between past and present” that one critic argues “most readers find so challenging and engaging” (Olshen 12). In any event, these tensions open up spaces for additional consideration of/by his reading audience. Therefore, by withholding and delaying information Choy produces new opportunities of self-performativity and, as such, (re)gains a sense of authorial control over the effects of

producing a sense of identity. Consequently, he locates performative agency in the (de)construction of his “life” through the act of writing a memoir – a mode of writing that lays bare the fragmentary nature of “moments recalled out of time” (Cosslett et al 8) that add up to “make sense” of the mysterious moments of his life.⁴⁰

4.

Performing the I/eye: Gazing at the Self

I'm a writer of a certain kind, and I write for the reader who understands intensely how moments, not plots, compose our lives.

~ Wayson Choy⁴¹

What's interesting is what happens when the book evolves a life of its own.

~ Wayson Choy⁴²

As literary theorist Paul de Man writes of Yeats' famous poem, "Among School Children," *Paper Shadows* is "about the possibility of convergence between experiences of consciousness such as memory or emotions . . . and entities accessible to the senses such as bodies, persons, or icons" ("Semiology and Rhetoric" 567). While de Man is strategizing Yeats' use of the rhetorical question, the significance of his meaning can be transferred to Choy's representations of himself in/with/through metaphor; in particular, his repeated assertions of himself as "turning into a banana: yellow on the outside and white on the inside" (*Paper Shadows* 84; *Deer* 40; *Wayson Choy*). The strength of the metaphor, characterized by its direct comparison that unites two seemingly unlike or unexpected ideas together on the page, is, here, compromised by Choy's characteristic hesitation to "fix" himself in any direct, concrete way. Instead, he points to a "*possibility of convergence*"⁴³ with the modal phrase "turning into" – "I was turning into a banana" – suggesting that this comprehension of himself is part of a process of identity formation that cannot be separated from the conscious acts of reading and writing nor from the unconscious, evocative effects of language itself. Additionally, the oppositional pair of yellow/white resonates with the figurative pairing of east/west,⁴⁴ multiplying the criteria that Choy manipulates to define his sense of self. Thus, a seemingly innocuous metaphor represents more than a postcolonial split subjectivity, a self/other dichotomy. Rather, its meaning is one of effect: of a blending of references, of "expectations," larger than a singular structure of binary opposition. As de Man similarly suggests about Yeats' rhetorical strategy, Choy, too, "disrupts and confuses the neat antithesis of the inside/outside pattern" (567).

Since the metaphor is contained as part of a memoir, it is subject to the ambiguous referentiality of the narrated/narrating “I” that it means to represent. Choy’s narrating “I” writes it as an interpretive representation of how he remembers feeling at that time, which, in turn, is interpreted by a reading audience who brings to the text sets of assumptions that influence their own interpretations of “meaning” for themselves. In terms of production of identity in the act of reading, the transfer of meaning between the couples yellow/white, east/west, inside/outside resonates with further possibilities such as appearance/reality, and actor/audience. Hence, an interpretation of subjectivity that is an active becoming in language seemingly without end and infinite in its possibilities.

In *Paper Shadows*, Hutcheon’s “‘multiplication’ of identities” occurs on several levels: Choy’s remembered sense of self changes according to the changing interactions he has with others; his remembering sense of self changes according to the addition of new information that he has learned over time, information that he blends with pre-existing memories to create new memories of himself. In addition to these interactions *within* the text, acting *on* it is the demands of Choy’s reading public.⁴⁵ As a celebrated author whose fiction bears similarity to events in his own life, Choy draws an audience that is simultaneously the reader of his memoir and the readers of his fiction prior to the writing of his life. As I mention in a previous chapter, Choy seems to point to this “reality” when he mentions the “eerie echo” of the events of one of his character’s lives in the events of his own, and when he writes, “[l]ike a good mystery novel, one’s life should always be read twice” (332). Indeed, Choy seems to trade on inscriptions of identity in his role as a writer, drawing on similar subject matter across his fiction and relying on the repeated assertion of his “banana metaphor” to explain how he sees

himself – the repetition of which begins to take on Butler’s “normalizing principles” of performativity. His role as a writer cannot be separated from his sense of himself, nor, therefore, can the interaction of a perceived audience on the formation of his subjectivity.⁴⁶ Choy thus produces a communal self, multiple not only in its own right, but also in its layering of performativity. Within one pattern of identity another emerges: the recomplication of identity negotiation as part of a conscious interaction between author and audience.

Paper Shadows can be characterized as a public work, one that exhibits a deliberate consciousness of audience. Literary critic Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s description of the interaction between audience and writer works well here, as the audience appears in the production of Choy’s life story “as an active catalyst and agent” (Lim 347) that contributes to the multiplicity of autobiographical performativity; what Lim terms the “double-voicedness” of autobiographical narration (348), and echoing what Sidonie Smith has defined as the “scene” of autobiographical performativity:

The “scene” is at once a literal place, a location, but also a moment in history, a (sociopolitical) space in culture. Permeating the scene are all those many and non-identical discourses that comprise the sense of the “credible” and the “real.” Then there is the “audience” or the implied reader. An audience implies a community of people for whom certain discourses of identity and truth make sense. The audience comes to expect a certain kind of performativity that conforms relatively comfortably to criteria of intelligibility. (19-20)

For Choy, whose audience is undoubtedly made up of many readers familiar with his earlier (and celebrated) works of fiction, this “community of people” is an audience that may likely be further conditioned by the reading of other prior texts by authors who write from similar subject positions.⁴⁷

Conditioned or not, as Smith warns, “audiences are never simple homogenous communities” (20), and audiences come with expectations of their own, expectations that are also rarely homogenous. Rather, they are, in Smith’s words, “heterogeneous collectives that can solicit conflicted effects in the autobiographical subject” (20). And since you cannot please everybody, the production of “self” in autobiographical writing is thus doomed to “necessary failure”:

It is as if the autobiographical subject finds him/herself on multiple stages simultaneously, called to heterogeneous recitations of identity. These multiple calls never align perfectly. Rather they create spaces or gaps, ruptures, unstable boundaries, incursions, excursions, limits and their transgressions. (20)

In Choy’s semi-fictional memoir, stages of performativity are certainly multiple and transgressive, as he shifts identities depending on who is viewing. In the neighborhoods of his youth, Choy’s “selves” shift, change, and respond to perceived expectations from his “audiences” as he attempts to negotiate their demands. The very nature of these “stages” are also multiple in their opportunities for meeting demands for self-performativity. These stages are broad because, geographically, literally, they are usually public places; for example, a street, a café, an opera house. Their expansiveness, however, does not do much to liberate the formation of his subjectivity; rather, it multiplies demands for recitations of performativity by multiplying the audience’s sets of eyes/I’s – the “multiple constituencies” that gaze upon the subject.

For Choy, the streets of Chinatown are also sites of cultural tension and identity politics when the viewing public is made up of many “elders” watching him very carefully in order to be sure of his affiliation with the community – his continuing “Chineseness.” This is something that he must prove by performing characteristic

behaviours and demonstrating qualities that inscribe his membership in the ethnic community. And, when Choy ventures beyond Chinatown's boundaries, his behaviour is also judged for "Chineseness," albeit for very different reasons. There, he is watched by non-Chinese patrons who often look for evidence reinforcing racist stereotypes of rude or uncouth so-called "Chinese" behaviour.⁴⁸ One very public example that characterizes such conflicting demands takes place when Choy describes a childhood visit with one of his uncles to a popular café, and his father's response to his behaviour afterwards:

Raised in the old peasant style, this uncle believed slurping was the way you took in a balance of *feng-shui*, of cooling wind with heated water. Slurping also showed others your appreciation of the beverage. "Sonny, you shouldn't slurp!" father, said, after Uncle Slurp (as he came to be known) had taken his leave. "In Gold Mountain, it's rude for children to slurp" . . . Father had studied the ladies of gentlemen of Victoria congregating at teatime; he had watched how the amber liquid slipped noiselessly from cup to mouth, and taught himself to sip his own tea and soup silently. From Father's stern look, I knew that if I were to make a symphony of sucking through two straws, I had best be with Uncle Slurp. The habits of East and West all depended upon who you were with and what the circumstances were. (78)

One "location" is therefore made up of "multiple stages" – the layering of expectations that Smith and Butler argue confronts the subject and result in identity formation. The habits of which, like Choy's "habits of East and West" (78), characterize the demands for performance, and therefore depend upon who makes the demands (the audience) and in what context, on what stage, one is expected to perform. Choy learns to "understand the disruptions" (Smith 20) in these performative moments on multiple stages. As a result, he mediates his performances of self by "adjust[ing], redeploy[ing], resist[ing], transform[ing]" the discourses of his autobiographical identity (Smith 21).

Even so, Choy recognizes that the dictates of "reality" and racial politics persist in identifying him by the equally dehumanizing notions of "race" and "appearance" – race

because it homogenizes and appearance because it connotes a simplistic and essential authority that fails to account for the complexities of human subjectivity: both are a “what you see is what you get” approach that, surprisingly, Choy himself seems to celebrate in one interview when he states “I love what Jung the said, that *the outside is also the inside*” (Deer 40).⁴⁹ A point that he seems to later contradict when he invokes another binary structure to characterize himself within totalizing notions of race and subjectivity by identifying himself as a banana: yellow on the outside and white on the inside. Here, the dictates of “reality,” of racial politics, persist in his own use of such oppositional terms such as “yellow” and “white,” and their implied counterparts “east” and “west.” So, despite how he claims to feel on the inside, it is his appearance on the outside, his racialized body, that continues to persist in what he perceives are the dictates of others about who he is; how others “see” him undeniably become a part of who he writes himself as.

The concept of the gaze carries currency in a wide sampling of theoretical writing. As Jeremy Hawthorn asserts, “this is partly because of its origins in diverse fields, from psychoanalysis to social psychology . . . from film studies to postcolonialism” (137). For my purposes, however, I draw mostly from the writing of psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan, whose concept of the gaze constitutes an important part of theories concerning the formation of subjectivity. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan explains:

[t]he gaze is presented to us only in the form of a strange contingency, symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience, namely, the lack that constitutes castration anxiety.

The eye and the gaze – this is for us the split in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field. (72-3)

Furthermore, “in the scopic field, everything is articulated between two terms that act in an antinomic way – on the side of things, there is the gaze, that is to say, things look at me, and yet I see them” (*Four Fundamental* 109). Slavoj Žižek explains that “the eye viewing the object is on the side of the subject, while the gaze is on the side of the object” (109). This gaze, according to Lacan, operates to define subjectivity from the outside. In explaining how the gaze operates, Lacan states, “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides” (72). He further proposes that identity comes from the other: “the subject, in initio, begins in the locus of the Other, in so far as it is there that the first signifier emerges” (198). Thus, if one is defined by what others see, then one’s identity shifts with one’s audience.

As both subject and author of the text – the narrating and narrated I – Choy engages with multiple aspects of identity, and undergoes a shifting between subject and object positions as a result of changing points of view and alternate defining gazes. Lacan explains how this shift between subject and object positions operates when he writes: “the world [that defines us] is all-seeing, but . . . it does not provoke our gaze. When it begins to provoke it, the feeling of strangeness begins too” (75). The relationship between narrator and narrated is intimately bound up with the relationship between narrator and the world that is narrated.⁵⁰ When Choy, as subject, sees himself seeing, he is unable to avoid confrontation with the gaze. His readers, therefore, are similarly presented with their own subjectivities produced from the text, or, the opportunity to “see themselves seeing.” Lacan posits that the essence of the gaze is a “gratuitous showing [resulting] in . . . some form of ‘sliding away’ of the subject” (75-

76). So, the gaze of the Other reduces the viewer's position/experiences to that of object.

With this sentiment Choy remembers a name-calling incident in a children's shoe department where a child mocks Choy's mother by pulling at the sides of his eyes to parody the "slanted" appearance of theirs:

. . . a tall, gangly boy paused by us. He stared at Mother until she looked up. Without any warning, he pulled back the corners of his eyes and made gibberish sounds. Mother stood up, ready to swing her purse. Laughing, the boy ran away.

"You think my eyes slant that much?" Mother asked me. "Do yours?"

I looked at us both in the store mirror. I was not sure how to answer Mother

Halfway home, my new shoes squeaking . . . I wondered if there was a machine that could tell how much our eyes slanted. Deep in thought, I did not notice the immensity of the North Shore mountains. (167-8)

When Choy's mother asks her son if he thinks their eyes really slant that much, he wonders if, like the x-ray machine used to measure the fit of his new pair of shoes, "there was a machine that could tell us how much our eyes slanted" (168). That is, he feels the effects of the exchange of the gaze by wondering if there is a machine to measure the degree of his Otherness, which, in turn, dehumanizes him by suggesting that a man-made, also constructed, thing can reveal something to him about himself (measure his degree of ethnicity and/or how well he, too, "fits" into conceptions of beauty and acceptance in the larger world). Here, then, he is doubly alienated: from the natural setting around him and from his remembered self as a feeling subject. In this scene he is not the actor, but realizes that he is equally acted upon. Thus, this episode represents the moment when he sees himself as object in the gaze of the Other. He is outed by the racist boy as a

racialized “other”; he is confronted by his own mother with his image in the mirror, as one who also falls under her gaze and, when she asks him if his eyes also “slant that much,” she reinscribes him as an object and as a result of yet another’s gaze – hers and the boy’s – transferring her experience as an Other onto him. Thus, his subjectivity is “construed in interaction with ‘others’” (Bertens 161) and he experiences identity by way of other perspectives and other views of who he is.

Furthermore, Choy’s identity as the author of this scene is clearly present, performatively interceding by drawing his readers’ attention to its particular construction as well as to the effects this has on their subject positions as readers; consequently, “the feeling of strangeness begins too” (Lacan 75). Mulling over the incident at the store, Choy moves suddenly to a description of the organic beauty of Vancouver’s landscape, albeit an inscription through negation: “deep in thought, I did not notice the immensity of the North Shore mountains.” By “not noticing” the striking beauty of the natural setting, Choy writes a striking comparison between what he “notices,” (what he “sees”) and what is “really there.” A comparison that, because of its immensity – the commercial vs. natural, confines of a store vs. expanse of mountains – flaunts its constructedness in such a way as to connote other relational dimensions.⁵¹ By quickly moving from the tangible, commercial, setting of a shoe-store to the organic, abstract immensity of the mountains, Choy provokes the gaze of his reading audience. The jolt of shifting perspectives fissures the text, calling attention to the viewer’s/reader’s own gaze, and therefore the materiality of the memoir itself.⁵² In this way, his readers experience themselves as objects: the text is gazing at them, signifying something about themselves.

Accordingly, Choy also captures the point of recognition of the gaze. Here, the gaze illuminates his audience as Other(s) as well as what he hesitates to recognize about himself: his recognition as a knowable, coherent subject is complicated by levels of identity and identification. The gaze, the Other, is elided, revealing the real object of his desire and the lack that it represents. His role as the writer/autobiographer and therefore the author of the “true” story of his life, and the experience of himself as a coherent subject, is undone by the gaze because this desire sustains the social reality of realizing his sense of self performatively, in/as the text.

However, when desire is revealed in the form of the “real,” subjectivity disintegrates (Zizek 95). Therefore, just as Choy mirrors his Mother’s gaze in the store, so, too, does he mirror the audience’s gaze with a shifting perspective that calls the materiality of his memoir to the fore and thereby calls attention to its ambivalence as a product of the act of reading. He disrupts the reader’s interior world with the gaze of another reality that inscribes the reader in his perspective (Zizek 95).⁵³ In one interview, when Choy is asked about “the impulse to write about space and relate it to identity and self-formation,” he answers: “I see the endless sky. I am aware of the mountains even when I’m here in Toronto. I think, in the West Coast, we can only be so much, because the mountains give you a dimension that you see yourself against” (276). Thus, we can look at *Paper Shadows* as a performative representation of the gaze through the signification of himself as a subject. The telling of Choy’s story in pieces that are themselves fractured and discontinuous confronts his reading audience with the gaze(s) of the Other, moving that Other from object to subject and thus threatening their own subject positions.

This gaze, however, does not refuse to acknowledge Choy's own power and privilege as author of the text, and thereby confronts and subverts a "colonial gaze" that "unconsciously represses knowledge of power hierarchies and its need to dominate, to control . . . [thus] an objectifying gaze, one that refuses mutual gazing, mutual subject-to-subject recognition" (Kaplan 78-9). By calling attention to his role as author of the text, as well as the presence/awareness of a reading audience imposing on his text their own demands for performativity, Choy writes a gaze that is relational and that produces experiences of subjectivity as "a series of social relations mediated by images . . . [that] ties individuals into an economy of looks and looking" (Taylor 48). That is, he succeeds in calling attention to the unwritten: by returning the gaze of his audience he subverts any easy inscription of meaning onto his text, or, the capture of his elusive sense of self by/through his reading audience.

Thus, Choy's imagined relationship with his audience⁵⁴ proves to be co-operative, even though it may unsettle readers to realize their own involvement in the indeterminate textuality of a "life." This imagined relationship is interactive, further multiplying the stages on which Choy is called to perform recitations of autobiographical performativity: multiple not only in its formation, but, perhaps more importantly, in its possibilities. Indeed, within the text, some of his performative scenes reveal that he is not so self-centred as to exclude the possibility of multiple performative relationships intersecting. While watching (and therefore participating in)⁵⁵ an Opera performance, he is aware of the Theatre's audience watching him reiterate the events on stage. He writes, "I looked, only dimly aware that other eyes followed my every move. On either side of us, well-to-

do lady friends . . . turned their amused heads to see how my eyes widened, how I kicked into the air – the same kick Buddha gave to naughty Monkey” (48).

As Chon suggests about Rushdie’s writing, “His subject is not only split; it occupies different positions and performs different functions depending on the circumstances” (75). Thus, as Smith observes about autobiographical performativity, Choy’s many selves may “intersect” but, ultimately, they “avoid convergence.” Choy’s contacts with the various dimensions of his life, his selves, are fraught with tensions. Authoring a life that is itself performative is, like metaphor, an attempt at balancing politics and poetics. It is not the Utopian singularity of an essential self, the “here I am” approach to writing autobiographically. Instead, Choy’s poetics open up spaces of possibility where the tensions of negotiating identity in an often-conflicted world are rendered visible.

“Turning into a banana,” Choy challenges problematic intersections of appearance and reality, the spaces “between fact and fiction” that he writes as occupying his memoir, as well the equally ambiguous intersections of the personal and political, subjectivity and history. Here, Choy’s banana metaphor exceeds Bhabha’s notion of hybridity, what Chon reads as a “fusion and adoption of existing identities” (71). His sense of self is not a composite blend of “white” and “yellow,” a hybrid shade of beige, but is, ironically, something else that, because it cannot be pinned down, is rendered far more “real.” By theatrically flaunting the artifice of his “true” identity, Choy accounts for his inability to meet perceived expectations for self performativity; by flaunting its constructedness, Choy’s metaphorical representation of “reality” acknowledges his sense of self’s incompleteness, its dissonance, its incommensurability. Consequently, this memoir

demands a simultaneous reading practice that confronts totalizing dimensions of “race,” “truth,” “origins,” and essentialism within the scope of cultural and autobiographical theory. There is a transformation of the idea of what is “real” and “true” about the establishment of self to a more inclusive dimension that accounts for identity’s ultimate elusiveness, and raises questions about the implications of theories of performativity on autobiographical writing.

One important area of examination that cannot be ignored in autobiographical theory is the action of sexuality on the formation of subjectivity. This is an area that Choy skirts in his own memoir, never outright stating that he is homosexual, preferring, instead, to hint at this information. His references to sexuality are vague: he writes about a strange tingling sensation experienced during child’s play, felt most strongly while riding on the shoulders of a “paper uncle” during a piggy-back ride. He leaves us in his concluding chapters with references to Dante: “I love, as Dante wrote, the other stars” (337), reinforcing the connection between reading, writing, and the experience of subjectivity. Choy’s unwillingness to explore his sexuality in such a public text seems to suggest that some areas of a person’s selfhood must remain beyond the public’s (one’s audience’s) grasp – suggesting, also, that there are limits to how far a subject will concede when called to “perform” convincingly. The idea of performativity and sexuality is also contentious because it raises the tired debates about “lifestyle choice” versus “biology” that (unfortunately) still dominate popular public discourse. The ongoing Surrey, British Columbia school board dispute regarding elementary school curriculum that includes children’s books depicting same sex parents only serves to demonstrate the vitality of said “debates” within the Canadian public. To enjoin

performativity with questions of sexuality may be to enjoin two incommensurate sensibilities with one another or, at least, to tread carefully in (potentially) dangerous ground. For example, the rejection/non-reliance within performativity might add fuel to a fire that rejects arguments of biological “fact.” At the very least, these implications only serve to highlight the importance of the experience of subjectivity over any search for a singular “truth” to identity.

Theories of performativity are important for reading this memoir because they are one of the few critical approaches that explain how Choy acts both in and on his text and which allow me, as a reader and as a critic, to interpret his production of sense of self as part of an interactive and duplicitous process – one that plays on conflicting assumptions and the continued production of new expectations of identity-making. Performative approaches to autobiography do not demand a definitive explanation about Choy’s sense of whom he “is.” Rather, they allow for and encourage a realization of sense of self as part of a process that is incomplete and engaged in persistent change: the play of identity inside, outside, and as a result of writing a “life.”

Paper Shadows begins by revealing the “truth” of Choy’s identity (his adoption) and sets up an expectation that this mystery will be explained as we progress through his memoir. However, this expectation is soon subverted and replaced as Choy rearranges his past personal history to account for the introduction of new and de-familiarizing information about his personal history. By withholding and hinting at information Choy subtly performs a sense of self that is evoked within the memoir’s pages but takes place outside of them – within the imaginations of his reading public. In performing the language of his memories, Choy responds to and engages with his reading audience’s

expectations by writing information that hints at “facts” unknowable; that is, he ironically supercedes expectations and produces the experience of identity by manipulating the ways that his audience may attempt to make meaning. Thus, he interrupts the desire for a sense of completeness in reading about his life. Instead, we can only “make sense,” as he says, in the “moments” that seem to reveal *something* about his writing.

Many of these moments take place within his recollections about the Chinese Theatre. On first reading, Choy’s childhood memories about the Theatre seem to reflect awareness that these memories play an important role in how he has come to know himself. Even so, it remains indefinable. On second reading, the experience of this awareness becomes highlighted: there is something intangible about the way that Choy writes himself re-membering that appears to be a self-reflective recognition but is actually a self-conscious performance of creative imaginings. His autobiographical performativity re-places a now fractured sense of self back into his childhood memories in such a way that makes conscious the addition of new information *after-the-fact*. In this memoir, Choy, as the author, is not merely reflecting on his past experiences, but, under the guise of reflection, is actively performing a revision of his personal history that is a re-vision of his identity as a product of the non-exclusive acts of writing and reading. His “I” is not only the self-reflexive pronoun of the autobiographical narrator, but is also the self-conscious subject of a desire for selfhood that authorizes what he chooses to tell, what his audiences read, and, ultimately, how he conceives of himself as a performative subject.

Thus, Choy’s account of his childhood experiences with the Chinese Theatre function like a precursor that sets the stage for reading (and re-reading) his adult

performative experiences and acts as a master metaphor of autobiographical performativity within the memoir. It is here where some of the interactions between my three foci are most visible: a performance in which ethnicity, mode, and the gaze is important, and in which identity is confused. Also, it seems probable that at the Theatre Choy viewed his parents without knowing they were his parents. What he initially saw as a child is not what he now sees as a remembering adult although the initial performance contained many of the elements that he later explores and interprets.

My own choices of exploration – hybridity, mode, the gaze – highlight the difficulty of attempting to pin down any easy definition of performativity or of identity within a text that operates under the guise of self-reflexivity while relying on audience inter/ intra-action in order to make meaning out of pieces of memory that, on “second reading,” begin to take on lives of their own. In writing this thesis my focus was not only to explore performative moments in the text, but also the performative moments that grew out of it while acknowledging the interactive role that a reader plays in producing a life that is written. In *Paper Shadows* Choy either points to some of these ideas himself or they occur as a result of his writing and of my reading of his text. The issue of autobiographical performativity, therefore, is complex in this memoir in terms of my foci and these issues further complicate it. In a sense, I am Choy’s “twice” reader and I am caught between making meaning from his words and from his memories, and making “sense” out of the meanings that are evoked in the moment of reading outside of what is located in/on its pages.

Choy’s autobiographical performativity is re-complicated by the notion of agency: while authoring his life, he authorizes a conception of himself that involves a

reading audience, but does not acquiesce to what he perceives to be that audience's expectations. While he cannot control what his readers might do with what he tells them, he can take agency by affecting the manner in which his writing communicates information. By writing, Choy is able to exhibit some control over the "facts" his readers receive and, indeed, the ways in which they receive them; by manipulating language and playing with meaning he displays identity not as something that he writes about but as something that he *does*. *How* Choy writes reveals *what* he writes and allows him to take agency by writing his life performatively – ironically, by writing a sense of self that depends upon on a perceived presence of, and interaction with, other performative subjects. In narrating his life Choy re-collects his memories and expresses the experience of a knowable identity – one that makes sense in the seemingly incommensurate moments of his life "lived" thus far. As he writes in *Paper Shadows*, "the many ways to understand life . . . cannot be counted" (32); as Smith cites Jerome Bruner, "the life as lived experientially is itself performative. The living of a life becomes the effect of the life as narrated" (21). "Whose life," Choy wonders, "is not an endless knot?" (338).

NOTES

¹ See Davis (271).

² The history of immigration from China to Canada is a long and complicated one that, like all histories, is still being documented. Choy, himself, labels his “generation” as the “first” generation born in Canada. I understand him to mean that his generation was distinct as it was the first to be made up of a large number of children born in (English speaking) Canada, and the first to be almost entirely educated in English speaking schools while communicating mostly in their various Chinese dialects at home and in the community. Much has been written about the history of Chinese Canadians. See Choy’s interviews with Rocio Davis, Glenn Deer, and Don Montgomery for his own descriptions of the early part of his life. Also see Paul Yee’s *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese In Vancouver* for a lively and accessible account of the history of Vancouver’s Chinatown, as well as Kay Anderson’s *Vancouver’s Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980*, for further information.

³ In Deer’s interview, Choy links the “voices” of his childhood storytellers with the syntax and rhythms in his writing, claiming that “the language memory I have inherited from Chinatown has somehow transmuted into the narrative voices in my writing . . . through these voices I can go back to those places in time” (35).

⁴ *Many-Mouthed Birds* grew out of a need to recognize the important and numerous literary contributions of Asian Canadian writers. The idea for the anthology was closely tied with issues of identity, and was co-edited by Jim Wong-Chu, one of the founders of the Asian Canadian Writers Workshop. See the ACWW’s website, www.asian.ca, for more information. Sylvia Yu’s article, “Birth of a Genre,” found at www.langara.bc.ca/prm/1999/WongChu.html, explicitly links the success of *Many-Mouthed Birds* with Choy’s burgeoning writing career. Choy’s short story, “The Jade Peony” has been anthologized more than twenty times, and was recently re-published in *West By Northwest: British Columbia Short Stories* (1998).

⁵ The book club, One Book: One Vancouver, has proved to be tremendously popular, drawing members not only from Vancouver, but from across the Lower Mainland of B.C. to sold-out appearances by Choy, screenings of films related to the author and his work, and walking tours of Chinatown. Consult the VPL’s website, www.vpl.ca, for more information.

⁶ Choy continues to write, and is currently working on a sequel to his novel, *The Jade Peony* called, fittingly, *The Ten Thousand Things*.

⁷ The second narrator in the novel, Jung-Sum, Second Brother, is an adopted son who experiences the tension between old and new ways, Canada and China, and whose section has been described as “mythologizing all of Chinatown as one extended family” (Vautier 29). See Marie Vautier’s article “Canadian Fiction Meets History and Historiography: Jacques Poulin, Daphne Marlatt, and Wayson Choy” (1999) for specific examples from the novel.

⁸ For further reading on *disidentification*, see Smith, Sidonie, “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 10.1, (Spring 1995), and de Laurentis, Teresa, “Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness,” *Feminist Studies* 16 (Spring 1990): 115-50.

⁹ Emphasis is my own. For further reading, consult Dorrit Cohn's *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (1978).

¹⁰ This is an interesting comment for Edel to make since in his essay "The Figure Under The Carpet," he seems, in most respects, to argue that there is an essential self to every subject, and it is this essential truth that is revealed in the pages of a text.

¹¹ See Davis (285).

¹² *Paper Shadows* (84).

¹³ Emphasis is my own.

¹⁴ See the special issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* (Winter 2000) devoted to rethinking Northrop Frye's famous question "Where is here?" for lively and divergent explorations of Canadian national (literary) identity.

¹⁵ Matthews cites Evelyn J. Hinz's discussion of drama in biography from her essay "Mimesis: The Dramatic Lineage of Auto/Biography." *Essays In life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*. Marlene Kadar, ed. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992. 195-212.

¹⁶ Choy also seems to share the idea of transformation through repeated acts of negotiation, at least in regards to cultural exchanges, when he remarks "I think we've gone past multiculturalism now, into what I consider an 'intercultural state.' Multiculturalism suggests to me that we are divided by our cultures and that we can coexist. But, in fact, that never happens in a relationship. What happens is that the young and the people who may be at the edges of their culture start 'interculturally' exchanging things. . . we also interact on the level of the human personality and spirit, we integrate while retaining essentials from our separate cultures. The separation cannot last, because we are involved in a continual exchange" (Davis 279).

¹⁷ As Lee notes, "From the turn of the century to the fifties, China itself was in turmoil: the 'foreign' invasion by European and Japanese powers and the bitter civil war between the corrupt Nationalist government headed by Chiang Kai Shek and the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Tse Tung, culminated in the inevitable Communist Revolution in 1949"(24), and, therefore, China shutting its doors to immigration and the return of expatriates to their "homeland."

¹⁸ See Paul Yee's *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver* for a thorough tracing of events such as the Janet Smith trial, and the actions of the Asiatic Exclusion league as very real examples of violence against Chinese people in Vancouver.

¹⁹ According to Zhang, "trans(re)lation . . . challenges the locality of a singular cultural dominance by relocating the site of identity articulation in a discursive domain of plural inter-relationships" (35).

²⁰ Fred Wah explores the politics of writing hybridity in *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity, Critical Writing 1984-1999* (2000), as well as in his own autobiographical narrative (what he refers to as a "bio-text"), *Diamond Grill* (1996).

²¹ Throughout *Paper Shadows*, Choy uses the more anglicized "Wayson" to refer to himself, and "Way Sun" to echo the dialects of Chinatown's older citizens.

²² That Choy often chooses “Chinese School” over the proper name “Kwomintang” (213, 221, 222, 225, 231, 232 . . .) seems to reinforce the notion of learning to “be” a certain kind of subject over learning a language. When coupled with his references to “English School,” this also reinforces his use of binary opposition to foreground the conflicted effects he experiences as a performative subject.

²³ See Davis.

²⁴ This invocation has taken on even further (and unfortunate) meaning for me when the student speaker at my own undergraduate convocation ceremony appropriated its use from the beer commercial in her unfortunately structured address to the student body (one not known for its sense of collegiate community) entitled: “I am S.F.U.”

²⁵ See Yee’s *Saltwater City* for further reading.

²⁶ My thanks to Jes Battis for suggesting the term “inchoate” to describe the kind of relationship produced by this particular interaction.

²⁷ Literary critic S.G. Yao offers a similar conclusion about the work of Asian American poet Li-young Lee: “in its very breadth, the term elides important differences between the vast range of possible strategies for joining together and negotiating . . . various cultural resources. Consequently, the model of ‘hybridity’ serves more of a descriptive than an analytic function” (4).

²⁸ Olney (245).

²⁹ From Michael Glassbourg’s documentary about Choy’s life, *Wayson Choy: Unfolding the Butterfly (Secrets and Memories)*.

³⁰ From here on, unless otherwise stated, I will use the term “(M)other” to refer to Choy’s adoptive mother, and the term “mother” to refer to his biological mother.

³¹ In “Part One” of *Paper Shadows*, Choy begins six of eleven chapters by introducing his mother into the narrative: four of these chapters do so by way of language, two through photographs.

³² That he can identify (name) the smell signifies Lacan’s mirror stage – the way in which the child is said to enter the world that is represented by way of language (the *symbolic*).

³³ Emphasis is my own.

³⁴ Additionally, Choy explicitly names her as “Mother” in this passage.

³⁵ See my next chapter for a discussion of the interactive and performative relationship between audience and author.

³⁶ See Dorrit Cohn’s *Transparent Minds* for a thorough analysis of the interaction between reading and narrative form.

³⁷ Barry N. Olshen hits some of the “highlights” of the history of autobiographical theories of the self in his article “Subject, Persona and Self in the Theory of Autobiography,” and includes a

brief but useful discussion of Deconstructionist theories of identity and their potential impact on the “autobiographers themselves” (10).

³⁸ Emphasis is my own.

³⁹ As Trinh T. Minh-ha argues, “repetition sets up expectations and baffles them at both regular and irregular intervals. It draws attention, not to the object (word, image, sound) but to what lies between them. The element brought to visibility is precisely the invisibility of the invisible realm, namely the vitality of intervals, the intensity of the relation between creation and re-creation” (191).

⁴⁰ Buss’s distinction between memoir and autobiography is interesting to consider here. Buss understands memoir as a “form of life writing practice” that “does not claim to be a ‘complete history,’ but rather the testimony of a writer who has ‘personal knowledge’ of the events, the era, or the people that are its subject” (2). For Choy, the secretive nature of his adoption would seem to render highly suspect any claim to possess “personal knowledge.” However, the way that he writes the unknown – his evocative language and his withholding strategies – seems to bring his incomplete knowledge to the fore and thereby normalizes its opacity (and his text’s constructedness) through repetition.

⁴¹ In Davis (286).

⁴² In Davis (272).

⁴³ Emphasis is my own

⁴⁴ In his editorial, “Asian North American in Transit,” Glen Deer effectively intersperses historical accounts of the use of, desire for, and impact of such racial discourse on his own subjectivity. For further reading, consult Roy Miki’s *Broken Entries: Essays on Race, Subjectivity, and Writing*.

⁴⁵ Subjectivity may also be multiplied even further as the readers’ encounters with the text also affect their own subject positions.

⁴⁶ De Man seems to point to an audience’s desire for comprehension in “the act of reading and interpretation” when he suggests that “by reading we get, as we say, *inside* a text that was first something alien to us and which we now make our own by an act of understanding” (567).

⁴⁷ For example, writers like SKY Lee, Paul Yee, Larissa Lai, Jim Wong-Chu, Fred Wah, Evelyn Lau, and Rita Wong who also draw on Vancouver’s Chinatown, and/or issues of identity as a Chinese Canadian in their writing. Some of these authors are also members of the Asian Canadian Writer’s workshop, of which Choy, too, belongs.

⁴⁸ See Yee (75-107) for an historical account of race politics in and around Chinatown at that time.

⁴⁹ Emphasis is how it appears in the interview.

⁵⁰ See Cohn.

⁵¹ For example, he establishes a linked comparison between beauty, nature, race, and hierarchy.

⁵² This also calls to mind Smith's trauma of disidentification that fissures any claim to a unified or coherent identity by the autobiographical subject.

⁵³ See Zizek for further explanation.

⁵⁴ Benedict Anderson accounts for the creation, function, and influence of imagined communities of readers in terms of national identity in his text, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

⁵⁵ See my previous chapter.

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