

Does Anglophone Chinese Diasporic Avant-garde Writing Exist?

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Judging from the prevailing criticism of minority literature—in the United States, whose critical practices I am most familiar with, and in the wider Anglophone world—one could almost say that ‘minority’ and ‘the literary’ are mutually exclusive categories for most literary critics, even those of the highest calibre. Texts by racialised minorities, including Asian American and Asian Australian writers, are almost always read for content—ethnic, ethnographic, sociological, autobiographical, and so on—with virtually no attention paid to the form, especially the literary aspects, of this body of literature. This mode of apprehending Asian American (and Asian Australian) literary writing as extended Chinatown tour or as the rendered truths of a native informant is particularly problematic when one is reading minority experimental writing—writing, for example, that has no visible markers of ethnicity or a stable autobiographical ‘I’ or other recognisable signs of ethnic writing.

In their attenuated treatment of recognisable ‘content’, such writing can be seen as test cases highlighting the problems with current modes of interpreting minority literary texts. In this article, I focus on two such texts, Pamela Lu’s 1998 *Pamela: A Novel* and Brian Castro’s 2009 novel *The Bath Fugues*.¹ Though the United States and Australia share some obvious links—English is the official language in both countries, both are white settler former colonies of England that flourished after the genocide and displacement of the aboriginal populations, both share remarkably similar histories of racism and discrimination against non-white minorities, and so on—there are also significant differences between the American and Australian contexts and histories of Anglophone Chinese diasporic writing, such as Australia’s location in the Pacific; the existence at one time of an official ‘White Australia’ policy and, now, an official multiculturalism; the absence in Australia of both the institution of chattel slavery and a very visible and powerful Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, in thinking about diasporic literature, the differences between and among various literatures might be as salient as the similarities.

By reading minority writing primarily in terms of ‘content’ with little or no attention to its formal or literary properties, critics reveal their assumptions that minority literature is somehow not ‘real’ literature. In the United States, Asian American has a tertiary status. Not only is it read, like other minority writing, as a ‘subset’ of American literature, but even within the category of minority literature, it shares with Latina/o and Native American writing second-class status in relation to African American literature (for various reasons, one of which invokes hierarchies of suffering). Asian Americans have the added honour of being considered, among the various American ethnic minorities, the most irredeemably alien to the idea of ‘Americanness’ and, thus, are read as constitutively non-native to the English language as well.

Judging by Brian Castro’s remarks about critical reception of his work, the critical reception of Asian Australian writing in Australia—even with the differing historical contexts, both social and literary, of Asian Australian and Asian American writing—exhibits some similar tendencies. He writes that ‘[a]lthough one should never confuse the author with a character or anything said in a work of fiction, some critics were doing anything but this. I was, in effect,

classified immediately as being or representing my characters' (*Writing Asia* 13). That remark was made in 1995 and, from all available evidence, the situation has not drastically changed.

Given the view of Asian American literature as secondary to real American literature, the move to read Asian American writing as part of global diasporic literatures seems promising—to read it as much for its horizontal links as its vertical ones and to see the larger global context of this writing in contrast to its more provincial and minor status within national boundaries.

This embrace of the diasporic has not been the province of Asian American literary scholars alone. Even before Barack Obama became the first black President of the United States, there was much talk in the academy of moving 'beyond race', both among academics and in the popular media (see e.g. Michaels; Gilroy *Against Race*).² Within the academy, one has seen certain trends and movements towards shifting into a post-race—certainly post-identity—mindset.³ To escape the glamourlessness of US minority politics, usually associated with Ethnic Studies programs and identity politics, not a few American academics have rushed headlong to embrace the rubric of diaspora studies,⁴ with its sheen of the global and cosmopolitan. As the editors of a recent issue of *French Cultural Studies* dedicated to the topic noted: 'The term "diaspora" has become increasingly, and astonishingly, fashionable' (Astbury, De Smet, and Hiddleston 251).

The concept of diaspora can indeed offer new and exciting ways of thinking—for example, Brent Edwards' idea of the diasporic as interventionary and focusing on difference rather than similarity (see 'Uses' and *Practice*)—but, as not a few critics have pointed out, it might also have more disquieting consequences.⁵ The 'diasporic', for example, could be used, usually unconsciously, as a means to circumvent dealing with the continuing traumas and discomforts of American (and Australian) domestic racial politics and racism. We would do well to ask what is lost, as well as gained, by what Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur identify as the 'uncritical, unreflexive application of the term "diaspora"' (3). What are the benefits and costs of moving away from the notion of Asian American literature as a minor US literature towards the idea of Asian American as part of the Anglophone Asian literary diaspora? What are the politics of the turn to diaspora?

Like the other 'secondary' minority literatures, Asian American literature has yet to gain full legitimacy in English departments across the country, yet the category 'Asian American' may soon face obsolescence, trailing clouds of the 1970s and 1980s behind it. With the 'rise of China', English departments at prestigious institutions (e.g. the Universities of Chicago, Columbia, Harvard) have hired scholars who are fluent in Chinese and/or other Asian languages to teach Asian American literature in a more transnational and 'cosmopolitan' context, melding Asian American literature with Asian-language literatures and subsuming it under various rubrics such as Pacific Rim, Asian diasporic, trans-Pacific or pan-Pacific literatures. This conflation of Asians and Asian Americans has long been a fact in American popular media.⁶

While I am certainly not advocating a US-centred and monolingual approach to the study of Asian American literature, I remain wary of this move to conflate (or re-conflate) 'Asian American' and 'Asian': first, because, as I have said, the greater American populace has never fully accepted that Asian Americans are indeed Americans and not Asian nationals,

and second, because conflating Asian and Asian American raises both old theoretical issues (e.g. Asian Americans viewed as perpetual foreigners, ‘fresh off the boat’) and new ones—such as the ways in which Asian American studies literature might be (mis)apprehended disciplinarily, institutionally, and conceptually in the decades to come.

The rush to embrace something called the Asian diasporic or trans-Pacific does not obviate the difficult questions that vexed and continue to vex the category ‘Asian American’ and ‘Asian Australian’. The fundamental questions remain, namely: What constitutes the very category ‘Asian American’ or ‘Asian Australian’ or ‘Chinese diasporic’? What are the fundamental assumptions underlying these two categories? What links the texts (horizontally and vertically) in both these categories? In other words, the racial binding element—the ‘Chinese’ in the ‘Chinese diasporic’—must still be contended with, even if de-tethered from the national boundaries of US racial politics.

If the study of, say, Chinese American literature presumes a shared history of racial interpellations and other experiences in the United States, then what is one to do with texts written in English⁷ by those of Chinese descent, spread across different continents? These diasporic texts may share the two main qualities of having been written by ethnically marked (here, Chinese) subjects, and having been written in the English language, but what happens to shared histories in a shared societal (national) context when the bonds and bounds of a specific national—or local or geographical—frame are ‘removed’? And if Chinese ethnicity and the English language are what Anglophone Chinese diasporic writers share, then what is one to do with, say, an Anglophone Chinese diasporic text that exhibits no ethnic markers at all except for the author’s last name or first name (or, in some cases, a photo) identifying her as ‘Chinese’? Or, as in the case of Brian Castro, with his Latino last name, not even those markers. Mixed-race authors such as Castro pose an obvious challenge to our customary ethnic and racial notions and categories. And experimental texts, such as *The Bath Fugue* and *Pamela: A Novel*, force us to question the assumptions and criteria underlying the categories ‘Chinese American’, ‘Chinese Australian’, and ‘Anglophone Chinese diasporic’, as well as the nature of the literary.

Published two years before the new millennium by a small Bay Area press founded by the experimental Language poet Lyn Hejinian (one of Lu’s teachers) and Travis Ortiz, *Pamela: A Novel* was written by a then twenty-something Chinese American poet living in northern California. *Pamela: A Novel* is both experimental and deeply old-fashioned—its title self-consciously and somewhat ironically makes reference to Samuel Richardson’s foundational novel. If it is a novel, it is one that is non-narrative, with no ‘story’ or clear-cut sequence of events to unfold; filtered solely through the consciousness of a Chinese American recent college graduate (denoted by the letter P); devoid of any plot or dialogue; lacking in fully-fleshed out characters and, needless to say, in character development; and speculative in multiple senses. Its sentences are philosophical, extremely ‘well-written’, almost self-consciously so, with lots of subordinate clauses.⁸ It has been acclaimed as ‘the last masterpiece of the twentieth century’ (Wilson, ‘Tracking’ 9) and ‘one of the finest books to emerge from the ardent, experimental writing scene in the Bay Area’ (Glück par. 1).

Pamela: A Novel’s very being refuses all attempts to categorise it along generic, identity-based, or ‘diasporic’ lines. Though written in the first person, there are no overt declarations of the narrator’s ethnicity, sexuality, gender, or class. In fact, within the text, the narrator and main character, P, criticises those works that capitalise on marginalised identities:

For it was never simply being sexual or being a minority or being a sexual minority that mattered in itself, but the various combinations thereof that produced confusion and triggered those politicised art-forms that repeated clichés of ‘displacement’ and ‘diaspora’. (18)

The narrator calls these works to task for their confused, self-serving, and clichéd depictions of identity.

Yet never does the speaker dismiss the significance of one’s being a racial or a sexual minority and retreat to the idea of the universal subject or its American corollary, the ‘individual’, de-linked from social and historical contexts. There is no question that the text unfolds and is entirely filtered through the consciousness of a racially and sexually minoritised American (‘P’) who at no point forgets her social interpellation in the world. Indeed, I argue strongly, this minoritised consciousness is crucial to and inseparable from the tale the book tells—that of P and her friends, many of whom are also minorities of various sorts (racial, sexual, economic)—if the book can be said to tell any tale at all.

Pamela is not, as some might have it—for example, Walter Benn Michaels⁹—a book refreshingly free of issues of racial identity. Rather, it is so deeply informed by a racialised (and diasporic) subjectivity that it need not announce its concerns with mere thematic markers because its very language—most notably, its syntax and tone—is inseparable from this subjectivity and worldview. It can be said that Lu forces the reader to inhabit the consciousness and point-of-view of P so fully that we begin to see and feel the world *as* a minoritised (and diasporic) subject. But never in a clichéd manner.

Many critics have read Richardson’s 1740 novel *Pamela or, Virtue Rewarded* as not only a founding text in the genre but a seminal novel of modernity, one embodying the constitution of the modern (female) subject. In many respects, Lu’s *Pamela: A Novel*, written over 250 years later, inaugurates a new postmodern millennial subjectivity, one that, like Richardson’s servant girl, breaks forth not only from a subordinated subject position but also from certain oversimplified twentieth-century notions of ethnic identity within and outside the academy and along all points of the political spectrum:

Our challenge was to break ourselves free of the political habits we had inherited over the past twenty years: the answer for us, if there was one, would not involve spiritual revolutions against the patriarchy, nor would it require tedious round-table affirmations of ‘identity-related’ experiences ... (18-19)

But as can be seen in the narrator’s denigration of the ‘clichés of “displacement” and “diaspora”’ *Pamela: A Novel* also calls into question the knee-jerk assumptions literary and cultural critics bring to discussions of the snazzier, more twenty-first-century, category of ‘diasporic literature’¹⁰ that ostensibly replaces more old-fashioned conceptions of nation-bound and identity-based literatures. In both its content and form, *Pamela: A Novel* forces us to question this rush to embrace the diasporic; in its very being, which runs counter to what most would consider a diasporic text—one with identifiable ethnic markers—it offers the reader a more flexible, imaginative, yet socially grounded, conception of what diasporic writing is or can be.

Brian Castro's *The Bath Fugues*, published 11 years later, shares some characteristics with *Pamela: A Novel* while differing in other respects. Whereas *Pamela: A Novel* takes place solely in the consciousness of a single narrating subject—albeit not the familiar autobiographical and stable speaker presumed to be anchoring most ethnic narrative—there are multiple narrators in *The Bath Fugues*, which is divided into three sections and ranges across historical and literary time. Each of the three sections focuses on a primary character—Jason Redvers, a Chinese Portuguese writer and former art forger, an immigrant to Australia from Macau; Redvers' grandfather, Camilo Conceicao, a Portuguese poet; and Judith Sarraute, a doctor in Queensland—though a myriad of secondary characters enter and exit, as well as historical literary and musical figures, such as Montaigne, Johann Sebastian Bach, among others.

The 'fugue' in Castro's title refers, variously, to musical variations (à la Bach's Goldberg Variations), the psychological state of losing one's identity and memory, and the nineteenth-century phenomenon of fugueurs—a rash of males, mainly European, who left their villages often by bicycle, disappeared, and assumed new identities elsewhere. The novel is obsessed with questions of inauthenticity, illegitimacy, and forgeries. Each of *The Bath Fugues*' three sections invokes a well-known Modern or postmodern European author: 'Beckett's Bicycle', 'Walter's Brief' (as in Walter Benjamin), and 'Sarraute's Surgery' (as in Nathalie Sarraute).

Like Lu's text, *The Bath Fugues* is highly literary in its referents and evinces a heightened awareness of Western literary traditions (one interesting congruence: both Lu and Castro cite the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard as an influence on their work). Both 'novels' contain dialogue undelineated by quotation marks, both shift between various consciousnesses (though *Pamela: A Novel* stays more often in the mind of its eponymous speaker), and both evince much wandering and movement within the text. While Castro's novel has more of a 'plot' than *Pamela: A Novel*, which has no plot to speak of, the multiple plots in *The Bath Fugues* are confusing and full of gaps, with the effect that not a few reviewers find it frustrating if not enraging—intellectually but not emotionally compelling. Both *Pamela: A Novel* and *The Bath Fugues* refuse character development and the kind of emotional interiority and 'relatability' (or sentimentality) most readers expect in novels, especially ethnic novels. Indeed, are they novels at all?

I would argue that in both cases of experimental writing it is the form of the writing itself that makes the texts diasporic—in different ways, to be sure—rather than any diasporic 'content'. In other words, it is *how* something is said rather than *what* is being said, I would argue, that links the diasporic to the avant-garde, if we are to make that link. But there is no general or generic form diasporic writing takes—each instance of diasporic writing manifests itself in forms particular to the individual author and her consciousness and unconscious; that said, the author is not separable from the larger historical, social, and political contexts—national and global—which interpellate her. We might then examine the various instances of diasporic writing and see if from their particularities, more general patterns emerge. But one needs to move from the specific to the general—any theorising emerges from close attention to the texts themselves and from historical specificity not from celebrations of abstract and generic notions of 'hybridity' and 'border crossings'. One might ask what the diasporic and the avant-garde share and what makes them oppositional categories. Before I turn to more specific readings of Lu's and Castro's texts, let me ask: What do the terms 'diaspora' and 'diasporic' mean exactly?

With the burst of interest in the past decade or so, the definition of diaspora has broadened

from its original meaning—the dispersion of Jews from their homeland¹¹—to a more general sense of any group of people living outside their homeland. Arif Dirlik writes, ‘... “[D]iaspora” has come to cover such a broad range of phenomena that it has become vague, and perhaps meaningless’ (‘Intimate Others’ 499). In 1996, two years before *Pamela: A Novel*’s publication, Khachig Tölölyan, the editor of the journal *Diaspora*, found the term ‘diaspora’ ‘in danger of becoming a promiscuously capacious category’ (‘Rethinking *Diaspora(s)*’ 8).¹²

Like the terms ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘transnational’, ‘diasporic’ is imbued with a certain global verve that the terms ‘minority’, ‘ethnic’, and ‘migrant’ lack. Certainly by the late 1990s, the time of *Pamela: A Novel*’s writing, the term ‘diaspora’ had not only accrued currency in academic and certain intellectual circles but—like the equally valorised (and evacuated) terms ‘multiplicity’, ‘hybridity’, and ‘heterogeneity’—was almost too easily invoked as a form of automatic shorthand for anti-nationalisms of various sorts, border crossings, and, by implication, anti-essentialising acts weighted with political significance. Diaspora studies’ currency is still strong. Once again, the editors of the 2006 issue of *French Cultural Studies*: ‘More broadly, academics in the humanities are at the moment somewhat enamoured of terms such as “hybridity”, “creolite” and “diaspora”, and we sometimes seem to be prematurely celebratory of the successful construction of such alternative modes of identification’ (Astbury, De Smet, and Hiddleston 253-54).

Multiple scholars such as Khachig Tölölyan, William Safran, and Paul Gilroy—among quite a few others—have attempted to pinpoint the characteristics of and criteria for diaspora, while recognising the risks of too loose or too restrictive a list.¹³ While subjects in the Chinese diaspora generally ‘fit’ these criteria—for example, have a relationship to an actual or imagined homeland, are aware of the group’s identity, are marginalised within the host country, face great pressures to assimilate into the dominant Anglo culture, and so on—there are great geographical, historical, cultural, national, political, class-based, religious, linguistic, familial, and individual differences across the spectrum of Chinese living in the diaspora (see Ho and Kuehn). There is also the question of degree of self-identification, especially among those who are further removed both temporally and geographically from China and who no longer speak Chinese.

Pinning down what constitutes the ‘diasporic’ in diasporic literature cannot be found in refining ever more exhaustive lists of shared characteristics.¹⁴ Positivistic approaches overlook the territory of feeling, the unconscious, and the ineffable and discount the power of what is unsaid or only implied, as well as what is conveyed powerfully by language and style—in other words, all that distinguishes literary texts from ethnographic, scientific, or social scientific ones. Stuart Hall, in explaining what he calls the ‘*Présence Africain*’ in Caribbean culture, speaks of ‘secret syntactical structures’ (240). While I would resist Hall’s implication of something essential or biological being passed down in language, I would agree with him that culture and history and a myriad of other pressures on the writing subject and her subjectivity make themselves felt not only at the level of writing’s thematics but also crucially at the level of form, which includes syntax.

Obviously, ‘Africanness’ or, in this case, ‘Chineseness’ cannot be reduced to phenotype, physiognomy, or name—there are histories of migration, racial interpellation, traditions, contexts, and a myriad of factors to consider (e.g. mixed-race writers obviously complicate these classificatory schemes). The ways in which scholars usually think of the ‘horizontal’ connection among diasporic writers potentially run the danger of unconsciously reifying

‘Chineseness’ as some sort of racial essence. Arif Dirlik warns:

Because of the fact that the very phenomenon of diaspora has produced a multiplicity of Chinese cultures, the affirmation of ‘Chineseness’ may be sustained only by recourse to a common origin, or descent, that persists in spite of widely different historical trajectories, which results in the elevation of ethnicity and race over all the other factors ... (‘Bringing History’ 99-100)

A term such as *diaspora* ... [was] intended to break down boundaries and to deconstruct homogenizing essentializations of categories such as race and nation. ... Nevertheless, used uncritically without due attention to differences of place, *diaspora* lends itself to cultural and racial reification in endowing populations that are products of different historical trajectories with identity on the basis of descent from a common ‘nation’ ... (‘Race Talk’ 1373) (original emphasis)

While Dirlik may underestimate the pervasive and persistent racial interpellation minority subjects face despite the multiplicity of cultures and contexts, it is true that, within Chinese diasporic communities and in scholarship on the Chinese diaspora, the emphasis can fall on the ‘Chineseness’ shared by, say, Chinese Australian, Chinese American, and Chinese British subjects, authors, and texts.¹⁵

But, if ‘Chineseness’ can, and often does, prove a slippery path, what precisely *does* link, say, *The Woman Warrior* by Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston, *Shanghai Dancing* by Chinese Australian writer Brian Castro, and *Sour Sweet* by Chinese British writer Timothy Mo if not primarily the ‘Chinese’ ethnicity of their authors?¹⁶ Most critics of diasporic writing are concerned with the sociological relationship of diasporic writers to both the ‘home’ and ‘local’ cultures¹⁷ and pay much less attention to that other major element shared by diasporic writers: language (in this case, the English language).

The question of language becomes much more foregrounded—pushed to an extreme, one might say—in experimental, avant-garde, or formally innovative writing. Writing ‘difficult’ books might seem like professional suicide for an ethnic American or Australian writer who might desire any kind of recognition from either the reading public or academic critics, given, as I said earlier, the prevailing modes of reading ethnic literatures and subjects. As Jason Redvers, the writer in *The Bath Fugues*, puts it about his own writing:

... I was *writing unto extinction*. I didn’t realize it at the time, but now I see it clearly, that I was trying to reduce my readership to the bare minimum in order to express my ideal of possessing the perfect reader. But perhaps I was really expressing my desolation at never having possessed my own story, my grief taking on the unadorned nature of *one whose house had been robbed*. (86-87) (original emphasis)

Castro in interviews speaks often of the importance of form to him.¹⁸ When asked in one interview what his goals in his work are, he replies, ‘To be true to poetics. To seek aesthetic shape. To be always astonished’ (Purcell par. 9).

As minority writers who have been locked out of the English/Western literary traditions by virtue of their alien ‘Asianness’, both Castro and Lu understand the life-and-death stakes involved in the use of language. P, the speaker of *Pamela: A Novel*, says:

So we were fortunate, for the most part, to get through life holding onto a complete sentence, and luckier still if we could salvage an entire paragraph, rescued from the wreckage that was the great historical-cultural narrative. And even if we did, even if we found ourselves with a fragment of the big picture or of the whole story, it was still not our story. It was not our story, nor had it ever at any time before or after our birth been our story. (41-42)

‘To get through life holding onto a complete sentence’ or ‘luckier ... salvage an entire paragraph’, is to acknowledge these minority subjects’ subordinate relationship to these larger narratives. Their lives and their subjectivities are structured by a language that is greater and more powerful than they are.

Unlike some theorists who would abstractly privilege and glibly celebrate the transgressive potential of diasporic border-crossings or who think that the *jouissance* of wordplay can overcome the very real and material structures in states and nations,¹⁹ Lu understands that the struggle in and through language is a starker matter about surviving in the face of such dominant paradigms, as she says in a published email interview:

Extreme Asian American gaps in language, cultural experience, and historical time open up opportunities for vocabulary play, invented self-definitions, and appropriations of mainstream or canonical cultural goods with a wink. But at the same time, this is not just play but an almost desperate life-preserving attempt to really, really ‘own’ a form, to have and inhabit a form (both aesthetic and physical) of one’s own. (quoted in Wilson, ‘Email Dialogue’ 16)

To own a form is not only to claim a room of one’s own but also to resist, to the extent one can, being captured by other people’s interpellative forms (usually narratives).

Being Other occasions questioning and philosophising about the state of being excluded from and menaced by ‘dominant paradigms’, one of the major concerns of *Pamela: A Novel*. Thus, while the text does not resort to the usual autobiographical or sociological modes of handling minority experience—referentiality does not function straightforwardly here—being a member of a racialised minority is so much a part of who these characters are and of their sense of the world that the ontology of racialised subjectivity cannot be reduced to mere theme or project.

Thus, while there are fewer than half a dozen moments in *Pamela: A Novel* where Asian ethnicity is mentioned explicitly, the state of ‘being Asian American’ is not a throwaway detail. In one of the few straightforwardly painful passages in the book, P describes her friend C, who

... wrote with all the awful clarity and slenderness of someone who had grown up Asian in Indiana, the memory of anger and that daily experience of coming

home single to watch the double of his face peel away from itself in the mirror
... (17)

By contrast, the only instance in which P alludes specifically to being Asian herself, she does so in an oblique tongue-in-cheek manner, loaded with antic humour:

... ancestral memory was what inspired me to renounce immediate fast-food gratification and spontaneously cook stir-fry while listening to a recording of an all-girl Taiwanese punk band ... (79)

Here ‘ancestral memory’ is being used parodically, in the act of cleverly renouncing an Orientalist interpellation and discourse that might be forced upon her. It is clear that P’s relationship to her ‘Taiwanese-ness’²⁰ is treated with a sidelong wink here, as if being Taiwanese were something that might be approximated by means of performing certain actions whose ontological nature is simultaneously being called into question. The tone of the sentence teases the reader, who does not quite know whether to take the statement seriously or not. Not dissimilarly, the multiracial main character Jason Redvers in section one of *The Bath Fugues* invokes his ‘Chinese self’—‘My Chinese self sustains me’—then follows that declaration with ‘Franz Kafka had a Chinese self. So did Walter Benjamin’ (98), thus undercutting notions of essentialised ‘Chinese selves’.

In *Pamela: A Novel*, P goes on to express a more unambiguous and unhappy stance towards her ancestry than that of the stir-frying punk-music-listening modern girl:

... I experienced my ancestral memory as a curse that afflicted both of my lower extremities, manifesting in my right foot as a chronic orthopedic misalignment which grew gradually into a mysterious tumor, and in my left foot as an array of multiple bone fractures resulting from being squashed beneath the double tire of a Mack tanker truck. (79)

The narrator’s use of tongue-in-cheek hyperbole reifies her ethnicised and racialised ‘ancestral memory’ as a physical malady—which literally solidifies into a tumour—and takes a swipe at Orientalist (and chop-suey) invocations of ‘ancient Chinese’ memories and secrets. The humour of this passage does not disguise the seriousness behind the seeming flippancy. After all, racial difference is often pathologised and treated as a ‘disease’ and the subject who suffers from the effects of such pathologising does often come to see her ‘ancestral memory’ as an affliction, one that must be ‘cured’ by, say, various assimilative strategies. The material and psychic weight of living as a racial minority whose ‘ancestral’ culture is experienced as trauma—because interpellated as inferior, un-American, and so on by the dominant culture—with psychic and material consequences can feel like ‘multiple bone fractures’, the result of being squashed under the equivalent of multiple Mack tanker trucks.

What is shared ‘ancestral memory’? P goes out of her way to puncture conventional assumptions about both ancestral and individual memory:

So we found it natural, if not imperative, to be assaulted and overwhelmed by memories which were not our own but which we nevertheless carried *as though*

they had actually happened to us. In this sense, the history of our lives was always the history of something else. (33) (emphasis added)

Here, Lu succinctly and skilfully engages the questions of self-identification and external interpellation. First at the denotative level, her use of the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ suggests not primarily the communal experiences and histories by members of the ‘we’ but more the shared experience of having memories which ‘were not our own’. In this respect, the narrator is positing a certain shared experience of alienation from their own histories and memories—one that many minorities and diasporics share in dominant cultures which have violently imposed their own representation of what those ancestral and individual memories should look like. The narrator does not come out explicitly and state that she is making this link among various minorities and diasporics who have experienced similar afflictions—she does not really need to.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, Lu renders this shared psychic alienation at the level of form. Her use of the subjunctive ‘as though’ and P’s paradoxical or seemingly illogical declarations (‘the history of our lives was always the history of something else’), along with the tone of the passage, undercut any tendency to impute ancestral memory (or any sort of canned ethnic group identity) to either the narrator or her friends. By saying that ‘we found it natural ... to be assaulted and overwhelmed by memories which were not our own’, Lu pushes at the notion of what, for racial Others, is ‘natural’—the imputation of biological determinism and/or Jungian archetypal memory but also an internalisation of the stereotypes and expectations imposed by both the dominant culture (here, American) and the ethnic culture (here, Chinese).

To be marked as ‘minority’ (‘Chinese’) and automatically be read as possessing certain stereotyped traits and behaviours inevitably results in some degree of internalisation so that memories are carried around *as though* they had happened to one.²¹ This phrase ‘as though’ is crucial. The unsettling and slightly humorous image of carrying around memories that are not one’s own—are not memories, by definition, one of the few things deeply personal to each individual?²²—forces us to confront the larger issues behind the question ‘What is diasporic?’ but also ‘What constitutes the self?’

Yet while P resists her interpellation into the category of identity implied by ‘ancestral memory’ she does not find solace in that very American refuge, the privileged idea of the self or the individual (nor its corollary reserved for ethnic Americans: ‘identity’). Indeed, P and her friends find the notion of the self vexing if not illusory:

The self was a mystery so consumed by its own questioning that it had no room left for us, a condition which we nevertheless preferred since we were totally unprepared for the alternative. ... We desperately depended on the spectacle of the large ‘I’, with all its artifice and white noise, to keep us alive and functional in the world. We sometimes wondered who this ‘I’ really was. Raw speculations placed ‘I’ at the dawn of Western civilization. ... [T]here was no way to find ‘I’ without by definition losing it, and therefore losing ourselves. (33-34)

Lu has spoken of how the pronoun ‘I’ functions as both pronoun and initial, as if ‘I’ were another separate character in the text.²³ Indeed, ‘I’ is one of three characters, three

speculative entities, the narrator suddenly invokes, or rather splits into, a little more than halfway through the book:

If I was at risk of suddenly becoming P in the midst of a plausible situation, then P was similarly at risk of becoming not me but Pamela, a project that I had invented to include both P and me, and that was expanding, day by day, into a larger persona than either of us could handle. (58-59)

If P was the wallpaper to the house that was Pamela, then I was the resident who paced restlessly through the halls ... (61)

Here, 'I' might be read as the 'real' character of the narrator (bracketing the paradox of calling a narrator 'real'), 'P' as the fictitious externalised character of 'I' within the text, and 'Pamela' as the literary representation or 'project' (*Pamela* is, after all, the title of the work). 'Pamela' is given a menacing agency of her own: 'Pamela was smothering us' (59).

A few pages earlier, Lu metaphorises this condition of self-splitting and self-observation into what she calls 'the condition of subjunctivity', a condition that, in her words:

... was heightened by the fact that it was all *relative*: there was the subjunctive of the real character speculating about the imaginary situation, the fictitious character speculating about the real situation, and then of the fictitious character speculating about the even more fictitious situation, which could prove to be either totally unimaginable or, equivalently, as unimaginative as the plain facts. Of these three subjunctives I could never settle on what I was, save that I lived regularly in the shadow of myself and only just managed to avoid falling in. (57-58) (emphasis added)

Here, sorting out what is 'real', 'the plain facts', is especially difficult if what is 'totally unimaginable' comes parabolically close to being as 'unimaginative as the plain facts'. Where does one locate the self or the 'I'? What is a self? What is real? What is fictional? What is relative?

The word 'relative' has particular resonance when thinking of diasporic subjects because it captures both the notion of descent by blood *and* affiliation by other non-biological or non-essentialising means: '[a] thing or group (such as a species, language, etc.) which is related to another by common origin or (more loosely) by similarity of structure, properties, or purpose' (*Oxford English Dictionary* 3rd ed.). In grammar, a relative pronoun or clause refers back to an antecedent; in the diasporic context, that antecedent may or may not be a blood ancestor. As an adjective, the term 'relative' embodies the notion of non-absolute identity: '[e]xisting or possessing a specified characteristic only in comparison to something else; not absolute or independent'; '[co]nsidered in relation or proportion to something else or each other; comparative' (*Oxford English Dictionary* 3rd ed.).

Like the relation among the various characters who become a 'we' in the text, what links 'I', 'P', and 'Pamela' as relative(s) is not blood but their being yoked—brought into being—through and in language:²⁴ in this case, through the subjunctive.

The subjunctive, the *OED* reminds us, is a grammatical term designating something

‘subjunctive or dependent’. The definition elucidates that the subjunctive precisely designates ‘a mood ... the forms of which are employed to denote an action or a state as conceived (and *not as a fact*) and therefore used to express a wish, command, exhortation, or a contingent, hypothetical, or prospective event’ (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2nd ed.) (emphasis added). The subjunctive lies in the realm of the ‘what if’ or ‘as if’, alternative possibilities, potential. In other words, there is potential inherent in the subjunctive (another name for the subjunctive mood is the potential mood). The narrator speaks of one of her friends: ‘A illustrated the possibility of taking grand tours of civilised thought within the space of a subordinate clause ...’ (Lu 63).

At the same time that the subjunctive embodies potential and travel, its contingent nature also raises the possibility of the mood tipping in less optimistic directions. Another dictionary tells us, ‘In English ... the subjunctive mood [is used] to indicate doubt or unlikelihood ...’ (*American Heritage Dictionary* 1141).²⁵ Dependence, doubt, unlikelihood ...

Thus, not unlike the notion of the ‘diasporic’, the subjunctive mood is a space in which one can re-imagine identities and affective relationships that are usually defined according to customary categories, but in this mood is also the possibility of the failure of the wishing into being—the attendant and contradictory risks of contingency.

If subjunctivity is the grammatical form—or mood—that captures a key aspect of *Pamela: A Novel*’s secret diasporic syntactical structures, to paraphrase Stuart Hall, then what are the secret structures at work in *The Bath Fugues*? One is obvious: the fugue form with its variations and counterpointing. The 30 subsections in each of the three sections mirror the 30 variations of the Goldberg Variations. ‘*Every idea, Bach said to himself while standing at his window, is built from what is already known; created out of chance, counterpoint and somersaults*’ (139) (original italics). ‘... [T]hese tunes were not a variation on a theme, because ... [t]here was no theme’, says Bach to his protégé Goldberg (138). Goldberg seeks ‘... endless variations and striations and returns and endless ways of mutilating the subject’ (138). Moving centuries forward in time, Jason Redvers describes the variations as ‘No theme, no pure noun, no subject’ (95).

If nouns are dismantled here, verbs, too, are rendered unstable, shifting back and forth. If *Pamela: A Novel* can be characterised by its subjunctive mood(s), then *The Bath Fugues* is obsessed with constant shifts in verb tenses, destabilising linear notions of history, memory, identity, and time.

Lu and Castro share a preoccupation with pronouns though the workings of these pronouns differ in the two works. Lu herself has stated that ‘[t]he language of the book reflects ... the realism of how a group of individuals from very different backgrounds succeeds in forming a community (a ‘we’) by developing a common language of synthesis, pet terminology, jokey one-liners, and experiential leaps in logic’ (quoted in Wilson, ‘Email Dialogue’ 14).

The narrator P and her friends wander anchorless in the world and in the novel—diasporics *par excellence*. They seek to find a home and new form of community in language, even as they realise that there is no homeland, even a utopian one, to turn to. They identify not along the lines of blood (kinship) or ethnicity but along the lines of shared marginalisation and, crucially, shared language—or, more precisely, literature: ‘And in fact it was literature that

had brought us together in the first place ...' (81).²⁶ Literature creates a space that enables these isolated wanderers to find respite and create an imagined community.

Sentences are literally seen as abodes or forms of habitation. P speaks of her friend A who

... paced back and forth between the walls of his sentence in search of the perfect armchair or reclining futon in which to realize his insights ... until he was eventually drawn to his purpose and promptly sat down, in the middle of his statement ... (63)

Like the text of the 'house that was Pamela', language—a text, a sentence—'houses' both P and A. Language is their abode—a house if not a home. And because this language is English, it is both home and not-home (*unheimlich*) for minority Americans, especially for Asian Americans and Asian diasporics, who are seen as inherently foreign—non-American or un-American—and, thus, constitutively non-native speakers of English.

Castro, too, and his character the writer Jason Redvers find a habitation in language and the Western literary and artistic tradition that they could not find in the 'real world', but, unlike in *Pamela: A Novel*, no communal bonds are formed in *The Bath Fugues*—either with other Asian Australians or other minorities or indigenous peoples. Yet, as in Lu's text, Castro recognises the importance of the sentence as a sort of abode:

It's a form of aesthetic [sic] perhaps that there is only this feeling of rhythm and fluidity inside words, inside sentences. So I take the sentence on board as a very important unit, not the whole book. Each sentence is an important unit. (quoted in Koval)

Both Lu and Castro deeply understand that the 'Anglophone' is just as important as the 'Chinese' in the diasporic notion of Anglophone Chinese writing. To make such a claim is not to retreat from the world to an art for art's sake privileging of the 'purely literary'. As Braziel and Mannur remind us:

Theorizations of diaspora need not, and should not, be divorced from historical and cultural specificity. Diasporic traversals question the rigidities of identity itself—religious, ethnic, gendered, national; yet this diasporic movement marks not a postmodern turn from history, but a nomadic turn in which the very parameters of specific historical moments are embodied and—as diaspora itself suggests—are scattered and regrouped into new points of becoming. (3)

Diaspora, does not, however, transcend differences of race, class, gender, and sexuality ... nor can diaspora stand alone as an epistemological or historical category of analysis, separate and distinct from these interrelated categories. (5)

'After all', writes Castro, 'the truest view of a society comes from the immigrant's double vision. In essence, an encounter with language' (*Writing Asia* 17).

To include 'difficult' experimental writing such as *Pamela: A Novel* and *The Bath Fugues* in

the category of the ‘diasporic’ despite—or, more crucially, because of—their lack of the customary markers, themes, and modes of ‘Chineseness’ is to move beyond customary conceptions of Anglophone Chinese diasporic writing (those obviously marked as ‘ethnic’) and to greatly expand the possibilities of what constitutes the diasporic itself. Both Lu’s and Castro’s texts are deeply diasporic because they fuse so completely the two ‘sides’ of the Anglophone Chinese diasporic coin—‘Chineseness’ and the English language—so that the two are inseparable. ‘Once narration takes place’, writes Castro, ‘the truth is in the telling’ (*Writing Asia* 33). These texts’ diasporic sensibilities do not reside in superficial citations of ethnicity but are co-extensive with the very form of the novels and of individual sentences.

Just as the tone of a novel cannot be quantified, diasporic subjectivity is hard to capture with positivist criteria. In a ‘world that was no place like home’ (Lu 62), where ‘home’ itself is nowhere to be found, Anglophone Chinese diasporic subjects are linked not only by being ‘Chinese’ and speaking English, in the usual mundane senses of these ‘facts’, but also by the processes of subjectification that have subordinated them to larger processes of interpellation and identification—namely, being hostilely hailed as Chinese but also having to position or imagine themselves in relation to an ancestral memory or culture. In both cases, the ‘I’ becomes subjunctified and proceeds ‘as though’.

This process of splitting and subjunctification also takes place in relation to English. Being excluded from being a ‘native speaker’ or from having a claim to the written literary tradition, the Anglophone diasporic writer must imagine herself as—or force herself into being—a master of language. In and through language—if not in the ‘real world’—alternate conditions and futures can be imagined and perhaps made possible:

... like the time I walked through Berkeley with L shortly after the rains had stopped and suddenly became aware of the potential for travel—how the street tilted east and west in a line which one could follow indefinitely, walking straight into one’s life as if it were one long distance culminating in freedom, leading away from and then back toward one’s starting point in an orbit that magnified (or perhaps restored) the world to spectacular proportions. During moments like these I faltered. I tricked myself out of desolation: I could not tell if I was moving or moved. And such feelings seemed to contradict me, the way love seemed to contradict itself and its lovers with a sweeping gesture that traveled as much as it trapped. (50-51)

We see here the ‘potential for travel’, streets tilting ‘east and west in a line which one could follow indefinitely’, but also that the culmination in freedom can be illusory (‘as if’).

Again there is contradiction (and paradox): ‘leading away from and then back toward one’s starting point’, ‘not tell[ing] if I was moving or moved’, ‘travel[ing] as much as ... trapped’. In the subjunctive spaces of *Pamela: A Novel*, we enter the subjectivity and linguistic universe of P, a twenty-first century diasporic subject but one who is also never not a racialised Asian American.

Pamela Lu’s and Brian Castro’s writing unfolds for readers the complex and contradictory modes of diasporic subjectivity, experience, and writing—particularly those aspects that are not reifiable and quantifiable, yet operate crucially and throughout, such as feeling and tone. In so doing, their work reminds those of us in the academy—especially those who too

quickly or comfortably embrace the ‘utopian promise’ of diaspora (Dirlik, ‘Race Talk’ 1373)—to pay attention to the feelings that contradict us.

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¹ Because of my own specialization in Asian American literature, I speak at greater length in this article about *Pamela: A Novel* and the American context.

² The examples in the popular press are too numerous to mention but a typical instance would be *U.S., News & World Report*'s 25 Feb.-3 March 2008 issue, whose cover featured a full-page photo of candidate Obama with the prominent headline ‘Does Race Still Matter?’

³ As I argue in the Introduction to my forthcoming book, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Palo Alto: Stanford UP, 2013), the notion of ‘identity’ as problematic is almost always conflated with the straw man of an essentializing/essentialized form of ‘identity politics’ that exists mainly in the critics’ imagination.

⁴ And/or its more conservative cousin, ‘World Literature’.

⁵ The editors of *Theorizing Diaspora*, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, rightly take a sober and cautious stance towards the term, arguing, as has Bruce Robbins, against the occasionally ‘ahistorical and uncritical manner’ in which the term ‘diaspora’ has been used. See the introduction to their volume (1-22).

⁶ Examples include the infamous 1998 MSBNC website headline ‘American Beats Kwan’ when figure skater Tara Lipinski defeated Asian American Michelle Kwan for the gold medal in the 1998 Winter Olympics. More recently, Oprah Winfrey, in her 25 Oct. 2010 show, described Seung-Hui Cho, the Korean American Virginia Tech shooter as a ‘South Korean undergraduate student’ (she also used the Asian form of his name—last name first—‘Cho Seung-Hui’, an odd designation for a US permanent resident who had come to this country at age 8). Her website continues to this day to use this designation. See <http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/Virginia-Tech-Massacre-Survivor-Colin-Goddard>.

⁷ Anglophone Chinese literature tells only part of the story: we must not forget that there is also a sizeable group of Chinese diasporic writings written in Chinese.

⁸ Robert Glück describes the writing as ‘a pastiche of 18th-century style whose artifice is never broken and whose solemn periods are as measured as a Handel march’ (par. 1).

⁹ Remarks made on the occasion of a panel, ‘Postmodernism, Identity, Theory: A Conversation with Pamela Lu.’ University of Illinois, Chicago, 18 April 2003.

¹⁰ As are the terms ‘Asian American literature’ and ‘Chinese American literature’.

¹¹ The current online edition of the *OED* (<http://www.oed.com>)—which is based on the second edition of the *OED* (1989)—still sticks to this singular definition: ‘The Dispersion; i.e. (among the Hellenistic Jews) the whole body of Jews living dispersed among the Gentiles after the Captivity (John vii.35); (Among the early Jewish Christians) the body of Jewish Christians outside of Palestine (Jas. I. 1, 1 Pet. I. 1)’.

¹² The journal *Diaspora* ran from 1991 to 2005.

¹³ See, for example, William Safran’s ‘Diasporas in Modern Societies’; Khachig Tölölyan, ‘The Nation-State’ and ‘Rethinking *Diaspora(s)*’; Paul Gilroy, ‘Diaspora’. See also Braziel and Mannur.

¹⁴ The situation is made even more complicated when one necessarily needs to distinguish between or among literatures written by diasporics of the same racial/ethnic group but written in different languages—for example, Anglophone Chinese diasporic literature as differentiated from Chinese-language diasporic literature. See Wang Gungwu.

¹⁵ In the case of writers in the Chinese-language literary diaspora, one would look more towards writers in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia than those in the United States. See, for example, Wang Gungwu. In reality, these geographical boundaries cannot be drawn so neatly: Eileen Chang (1920-1995), Pai Hsien-yung (b. 1937), and Yan Geling (b. 1958) are just a few examples of Chinese-language writers who lived and wrote—or are living and write—in the United States.

¹⁶ This question is further complicated by the fact that both Mo and Castro are of mixed race—Mo has a recognizably ‘Asian’ name while Castro does not.

¹⁷ See Elaine Ho's introduction to *China Abroad: Travels, Subjects, Spaces* for a discussion of this danger in some scholarship on the Chinese diaspora.

¹⁸ For example, in his interview with Ramona Koval on ABC Radio National's 'The Book Show'.

¹⁹ Braziel and Mannur write, 'Theorizations of diaspora ... must emerge from this base of scholarship, historically grounded in different diasporic locations, rather than purely postmodern theoretical abstractions of displacement and movement' (12).

²⁰ Taiwanese identity is itself a complex topic, Taiwan having—depending on one's political point of view—a synecdochic or independent (if not oppositional) relationship to China.

²¹ An alternative, and perhaps more diaspora-affirming, reading of 'memories which were not our own' might be that those in the Chinese diaspora did and do share a certain larger history of cultural practices, migration, discrimination, which, while not personally experienced by a particular Chinese American individual in the twenty-first century, is carried around by her in her unconscious memory.

²² Lu may also be poking fun at the now clichéd invoking of 'memory' as a thematic and analytical focus of discussion by critics reading Asian American (and Asian diasporic) texts. In another passage in *Pamela: A Novel*, she suggests that even individual memory cannot be relied upon to be one's own: 'For a while I had been struck by the passage of time as a spatial passage, which drowned me at random intervals in old familiar places I had never been' (31).

²³ Remarks made on the occasion of a panel 'Postmodernism, Identity, Theory: A Conversation with Pamela Lu.' University of Illinois, Chicago, 18 April 2003.

²⁴ Note the reference to language in the above *OED* definition of 'relative': a 'thing or group (such as a species, language, etc.) ...'

²⁵ Entry for 'mood'.

²⁶ That P and her friends try to form their own community based along lines of shared interests, sensibilities, age, education, and, most of all, a 'common language'—rather than along more traditional lines of shared ethnicity, familial and kinship ties, etc.—highlights the difficulty of speaking about diasporic links among various peoples of Chinese descent across the world. Especially for young, well-educated, English-speaking hyphenated Chinese, the horizontal links based on the idea of ethnicity tend to be much weaker than other affiliations they share locally.