

‘Hours of Morbid Entertainment’: Self-Irony and Replayed Clichés in Hsu-Ming Teo’s Fiction

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Hsu-Ming Teo keeps returning to Southeast Asia in her novels. These returns are realised through flashbacks, frame stories, parallelism, and projections, indeed, a range of narrative devices that complement, even upstage, literal revisiting. As they interrogate familiarly ‘exotic’ backdrops, these temporal as well as spatial moves back promise a retracing of harrowing experiences and, by extension, a revision of genre paradigms. Teo shares the shuttling between her protagonists’ Asian backgrounds and present-day diasporic plots with the majority of Asian diasporic writers, both in Australia and in the Americas. Teo’s novels, however, treat expected narrative structures with a pointed self-irony. *Behind the Moon* (2005) opens up with details of one protagonist’s childhood, but the significance of his Singaporean parents’—rather than his own—background is limited to satirical side references, to the embarrassments that their presumably culture-specific idiosyncrasies can cause him. Instead, this protagonist’s *Bildungsroman* pivots on the difficulties of growing up gay in contemporary Australia and is triangulated with that of two other young Australians, including a Vietnamese refugee whose father was a black American soldier and a white boy who wishes to be Chinese.¹ The triangulation successfully sends up the limitations of multiculturalism—a send up that critics have warmly welcomed, although such satire also has its limitations. By contrast, *Love and Vertigo* (2000), Teo’s first success, may be the more firmly rooted in the bifurcated structure of traditional diasporic texts. It is more invested in a tracing of family history, in juxtaposing grandmother, mother, and daughter, and embedding their suffering in a rich tapestry of historical and geographical background detail. It seems altogether a simpler, more straightforward work, and yet it has the more intricate narrative structure. Underlying ironies, including a refreshing self-irony, constructively rupture common readerly expectations of an ‘Asian past’.

At first sight a comparison between the two novels might suggest that the later work constitutes a rewriting, a self-parodic reworking even, of the earlier version if not of the entire category of the female Asian diasporic novel. This subgenre has been dominated by such Asian American writers as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. Correspondingly, much of the critical discourse has concentrated on the parameters set up in a US context. In the face of critical reactions and controversies throughout overseas Chinese communities, Tan’s global fame has pushed into the foreground traumatic female immigrant experience characterised by mother-daughter conflicts, and spiced up with blatantly exoticised anecdotes of a China of the past. In a neat bifurcation, Asia (chiefly China) is identified with the past, family history, female suffering, and tragedy, while the so-called ‘West’ (usually the US) stands for the present/future, a coming to terms with the painstakingly and often painfully retraced family history, and comedy. The resulting genre incongruity is embodied by the mother-figure, who is a tragic sufferer in the past/Asia plot and a usually inassimilable figure of fun, or embarrassment, in the present/US plot. The marketability of what has been termed ‘the Amy Tan Phenomenon’ (Wong *passim*) has generated—and keeps generating—popular novels that continue to play into the same dichotomies.

Love and Vertigo draws on some of this subgenre's defining elements, yet also shows how novels produced outside the US market can critically adapt these characteristics. Literary critics have noted an 'emerging canon of Anglophone Chinese Australian literature', a canon that 'shares with much of the Chinese diasporic literary canon ... the "neither here nor there" motif' (Madsen, 'No Place' 120),² and which is 'predominantly a female industry' (Broinowski 194). In Australia, Simone Lazaroo, Arlene Chai, and Hsu-Ming Teo have become standard examples. Both Lazaroo and Teo, moreover, transpose the familiar dichotomies onto Southeast Asia and Australia. As both describe minority groups in the Asia Pacific region, they further complicate the expected split, denying the possibility of neat bifurcation. Southeast Asian novels in English, notably from Malaysia and Singapore, have similarly capitalised on a paradigm that seems appropriate to the dual diaspora they describe (Wagner, 'Tissues'). This parallel appropriation renders Teo's narratives of the same places particularly insightful. It prompts a careful reconsideration of the region's contrasting depiction in the diaspora, offering a mirror that diasporic representations of China have not got to the same extent. It also highlights the need to keep the representational problems of dual, or multiple, diaspora in mind.

When the ethnically Chinese diasporan's point-of-origin is not in China, there is no easy dichotomy, or at least not the one that readers might expect. This in itself creates a narrative opportunity. Yet Malaysian and Singaporean authors, for example, often take up this opportunity just to double the diasporic self-consciousness. They tend to stress an already complicated 'Chineseness' in the traditional diasporas of Southeast Asia and then poise this complication against a simplified, amorphous 'West'. Teo, by contrast, concentrates on Australia. This is an Australia that includes various multiethnic narratives—of which, in other words, an 'Asian Australia' forms an inextricable part—and in which multiculturalism itself can be a problem to her protagonists. Just as there are no easy dichotomies, there are also no easy resolutions, no escapes 'West', or conversely, back from an inhospitable country of immigration to a nostalgically recalled 'original' home. As familiar clichés are consciously addressed (and poked fun at), nothing escapes the pervading self-irony. In a stress on an 'Australian-ness' that deploys a transposed British humour, Teo's writing explodes the common narrative paradigms of (mainly US) diasporic fiction.

Critics have remarked on Teo's 'robustly bleak' style, how she employs comedy and farce to offset the tragedy of chronic displacement (Jacobs n.p.). Her novels are characterised by a biting humour that centres on the breaking in of comedy into tragedy. Descriptions of disturbing incidents are often the most hilariously comical. The resulting comical grotesque capitalises precisely on genre incongruities. The jarring effect, however, becomes expressive of—indeed, it metonymically expresses—the protagonists' own sense of discontinuity, entrapment, failure. Simultaneously, it is a means to criticise clichés, including persistent readerly expectations of female diasporic fiction *a la* Amy Tan. Yet Teo is also keenly aware of the limitations of 'mere' satire, and as grotesque as her scenes often are, they always serve to convey the emotional poignancy of grotesque moments. Satire accentuates this poignancy. The climax of futility with which *Love and Vertigo* ends shows how the novel replaces expected dichotomies.

Beyond Exotic Consumption

Teo toys with, in order to expose, familiar trajectories of Asian female diasporic fiction. The doubly exoticised Asia of the past may at first sight seem typical, yet the frame story already denies the expected solutions. It instead stresses futility and a shattering of expectations. In

the Australian context from which Teo writes, moreover, Southeast Asia as a narrative space brings with it different problems and constrictions. This is not merely because there is a familiarity that undercuts the straightforward exoticism that 'the Orient' evokes in the American popular imagination (an evocation that neither Hollywood nor popular fiction lets us forget). Teo's novel also illustrates how awareness of the additional complications of multiple diasporic communities vis-à-vis the expected US genre paradigms at once demands and facilitates a different level of self-reflexivity.

Given Southeast Asia's relative proximity to Australia as well as growing ties across the Pacific Rim, the region fails to yield the *chinoiserie* that has been associated with such classic Asian American women writers as Amy Tan. In her influential essay on 'Sugar Sisterhood', Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong refers to the 'persistent allure of orientalism', stressing 'that the "Amy Tan phenomenon" must ultimately be situated in quasi-ethnographic Orientalist discourse' (55). Sheng-mei Ma has similarly analysed Tan's rhetoric of *chinoiserie*, suggesting that Tan 'fetishizes ethnicity' (xxi). Current work in diaspora as well as postcolonial studies on the dangers of self- or re-orientalisation has begun to expose how market-driven and internalized recourse to 'orientalist' clichés pervades contemporary productions. In a recent collection on *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics*, Lisa Lau and Ana Mendes have developed a 're-Orientalism theory' that 'exposes the power of Orientalist discourse while underscoring its instability and mutability, and as such provides avenues for questioning the endurance of Orientalist practices today' (1). Critical discourse, as much as popular culture, has been guilty of such practices. Subject matter, or mere location, can trigger a confining interpretative as well as representational framework. This ultimately further constricts what Ien Ang has so pointedly termed 'straight-jackets' (vii) of identity politics.

Asia's role for Australia, moreover, is becoming counterpoised by growing awareness of Australia's role as part of the Asia Pacific region. This creates a different lens through which to view both continents and their relationship. Russell West-Pavlov traces 'a slow realisation of Australia's place on the margins of the Pacific basin' both in recent Anglo-Australian writing and in 'Asian-Australian versions of Australia' (5-6). While I disagree with West-Pavlov that *Love and Vertigo* 'constitutes one tactical undertaking within a broader strategy of Asian-Australian writers to create histories that describe a common Asian-Australian history' (8), what Teo's novel does help to illustrate is how Asian Australian fiction's reference to neighbouring Southeast Asia as familiar rather than exotic allows authors to be more experimental. For the same reason the region's representation is less likely to be overburdened with lengthy 'exotic' descriptions. By contrast, when Singaporean writers in English, for example, write for an international book market, using British or American publishers, their evocation of the described locale can become riddled with historical and geographical overviews. What they share with Chinese diasporic fiction in the US is that they tend to be replete with landscape or cityscape descriptions, or explain a mix of 'local' terms anew in every single novel. Catherine Lim's historical romances are a good example. Published in Britain, each of them includes the same history lesson, usually paired with anecdotes from Chinese folklore.³

A particularly vexing issue that makes self-orientalisation almost inevitable is 'food porn'. Teo, like other diasporic writers, has begun to fight against this form of 'boutique multiculturalism' (Fish 378) and 'banal globalism' (Bartels and Wiemann x). With its chapter on 'Dead Diana Dinners' literalising popular consumption as a feasting on corpses, *Behind the Moon* parodies rich food descriptions as part of its critique of fashionable alterity and of

self-conscious multicultural societies that promote 'otherness' precisely because this is the fashionably correct thing to do (Wagner, 'Boutique Multiculturalism'). In *Love and Vertigo*, there admittedly are lapses into just such a self-orientalisation when lists of 'exotic' food items overrun, yet there is already an undercurrent of self-irony. While *Behind the Moon*, in fact, is heavily parodic where food is concerned, the earlier novel deploys it more subtly in a grotesquely comical symbolism. What is not uncommon in diasporic fiction, and this includes Kingston and Tan, is more gagging than relished swallowing. Grace Tay, *Love and Vertigo*'s retrospective first-person narrator, recalls how she still 'gag[s] reflexively at the smell of soft-boiled eggs' (190). This dish has traditionally been presented, for generations, by the women in her mother's family to the head of the household, as a traditional daughterly offering. In suburban Australia, it becomes a sign not of imported tradition, but of the mother's slow disintegration. At her worst moments, she can still reflexively boil eggs to perfection. The double association with family dissension and the disintegration of selfhood turn this into a reflexive gagging in the next generation.

In juxtaposition with such gagging, passages conjuring up exoticised cornucopia of dishes produce an unpleasant aftertaste. There is the choice of 'a bowl of fish porridge, *nasi lemak* or a couple of spicy, smelly, vermilion-coloured *otak otak* wrapped and roasted in banana leaves' (272) that Grace considers for breakfast during what she self-consciously perceives to be a touristy walk around Singapore. Similar lists are interspersed throughout the novel, and they are not always undercut. Grace is aware that her associations are skewed, that there is something disturbingly fake about her consumption, her attempt to imbibe and incorporate her mother's past. Yet despite the jarring lists of food items—another one occurs when Pandora Lim, Grace's mother, is given a treat, after being fingered by 'old uncles' in her childhood, and she has a choice of 'fried noodles, rice vermicellis, *roti prata*, green and pink Nonya cakes, red bean soup, ice *kachang*, juicy stalks of freshly cut sugarcane, fat pillows of curry puffs and crisp fried banana fritters' (53)—the novel's investment in a comical grotesque makes the most of such lists when it links food to an abusive power struggle that becomes absurd through this very identification with food. In one of the historical chapters, Grace's father, the Patriarch, leaves the heavily pregnant mother to chase after ripe durians in a different province of Malaysia. Pandora gives birth alone, in the midst of the 1969 race riots. The scene replicates that of her own birth, with the Japanese invading the house during World War II, recalled earlier in the novel. Here, however, the men's preoccupation is not with warfare, but with food, with a coveted delicacy for which everything else is forgotten. Jonah Tay, the Patriarch, has ventured into dangerous areas completely oblivious of mounting racial tensions: 'blissfully unaware. Their minds obsessed by the thought of early durians' (130). The description of his desire for the fruit, paired with riots and labour as it is, becomes grotesquely, absurdly, comical.

Both the race riots and the 'exotic' durian have, of course, an additional function in locating the ethnically Chinese protagonists' past in Southeast Asia. Overseas Chinese communities are evoked with a reference to fear and a history of racism. After the collapse of the Asian 'Tiger' economies in 1997 and the racial riots in Indonesia in its wake, fear spreads in Malaysia, reviving memories of 1969: 'Desperate phone calls were placed to family members from Chinese communities in Australia, the UK, the USA and Canada. Within hours of those phone calls, all flights out of Malaysia were fully booked and Chinese people left in droves to cross the causeway from Johor Bahru to Singapore' (131). The fled 'homelands' here are significantly not China, while it is being Chinese that makes these places of departure dangerous. They have become questionable as a place of origin. They have certainly been questioned as such by the racial politics that force out ethnic Chinese. The representation of

Southeast Asia in Chinese diasporic texts consequently yields almost by definition a more complex layer of diasporic in-betweenness, of being 'neither here nor there'. Although by no means unique among diverse diasporic communities, this layered in-betweenness offers an important opportunity to question established parameters of diasporic fiction, parameters that have become particularly vexed in the context of what have been termed 'canonical Chinese American, Chinese Canadian, and Chinese Australian writers' (Madsen, 'Diaspora' 43-44). The idea of such a 'canon' itself points towards limitations, although as Deborah Madsen has remarked in her essay on the 'transnational dynamics of "Chineseness"', novels dealing with multiple diasporas are more likely to 'refuse the "diasporic formula" of a return to some putative "homeland"' (46).

In *Love and Vertigo*, the Tay family moves to Australia to escape Malaysia's racial politics. In their new home, they struggle against categorisations—and the collapses of shifting categories—among diasporic groups. Once 'more Chinese moved into the area', Grace's brother Sonny 'scuttles thankfully into their midst' (178) only to find himself ostracised as a non-Cantonese speaker: 'They wondered disdainfully why he couldn't speak any Chinese dialect properly, and deliberately spoke in Cantonese when they didn't want him to understand. To them, he was an Aussie; he didn't belong' (179). Conversely, the Patriarch remains a believer in assimilation, alienated by fashionable multiculturalism, while Pandora ironically feels most at home in 'a mostly white Pentecostal church' (216) until she is caught up in a rather lurid, deliberately cliché-riddled affair with the pastor. This is not just because he is 'blinded by his own fantasies of Oriental women' and finds her 'practically inscrutable', as Pandora sighs with a sense of self-irony that he fails to get (252). The doubly adulterous affair is like a bad film, and Pandora's self-conscious struggles against becoming 'yet another statistic' (256) singularly fail.

The affair repeats well-known clichés, vitiated with satire. Hilariously, the bleak parody of the church scenes climaxes in Grace's shout of 'Scooby-dooby-doo' to suggest a talking in tongues (222). But there is again a darker side to this hilarity. Grace is desperate to seem to belong in order to counteract her 'replacement' by her mother's 'spiritual daughter', a teenager hardly older than Grace herself. That 'a lifetime of watching Saturday morning cartoons paid off in that urgent instant' (222) puts a different spin on the self-representation of what West-Pavlov has rather curiously termed Teo's 'unexpectedly assimilated narrator Grace' (9). The church scenes certainly illustrate how satire extends to various parts of Australian society, although it is also there that Grace confronts the most overtly realised 'rhetorical strategy of exclusion': the question 'where you're from' (Madsen, 'Diaspora' 44). Madsen speaks of a 'double exclusion' that is conveyed and produced by this rhetorical strategy: 'a strategy that obscures the fact that members of overseas communities can never simply or easily return to "where they are from"' (44). Grace's skilful parrying exposes a banal globalism marked as 'How interesting': "'No, I mean, where do you *really* come from? Originally?" "Helsinki," I [Grace] said. "Oh, really? How interesting. Is that in Japan?"' (Teo, *Love* 217). Yet this easily dismissed silly question is upstaged by a much more poignant sense of not belonging to the 'spiritual' family that Pandora attempts to create for herself, and where Grace feels left out. It ultimately boils down to a clichéd adulterous affair. Neither Grace nor Pandora, in fact, triumphs over what Grace pithily terms the 'typical Lim melodrama' (59-60) to which matrilineal legacies become comically reduced. Instead Grace bears out her father's obsession with cleanliness and order by becoming a cleaner; Pandora temporarily returns to Singapore—in a parody of the 'return' motif that restores bloodlines in so many diasporic novels (Madsen, 'Diaspora' 46)—to plunge to death after a grotesquely

banal incident. In the robust way in which comedy pervades the most disturbing incidents the novel transcends familiar genre confines.

'The Myths I Tell About My Family'

Love and Vertigo employs self-irony to draw attention to the textuality, if not fictionality, of 'the myths I tell about my family' (1). The opening lines stress self-reflexivity while questioning authenticity or, rather, by rejecting readers' demands for a possibly autobiographically inspired, fictionalised history. The threatened bifurcation into mother and daughter narratives along geographical divisions, moreover, is avoided when Grace's childhood passages are sidelined to make way for Pandora's affairs. The mother returns as tragic heroine, caught up in narrative clichés, now of a different sort, and the daughter recedes once again to the position of narrator, self-consciously aware of these clichés.

As the novel circles back to the beginning, it completes a narrative that is first and foremost tragic. It is about futility, and yet achieves a perfect, narratively satisfying, closure. The intricate structure begins at the end, at the eve of Pandora's wake. Grace has temporarily 'returned' to Singapore for the funeral after her mother has jumped to her death during a visit to relatives. From the start, therefore, the diasporic formula of a return to some putative 'homeland' is undercut. Instead, Grace becomes aware not just of her sense of displacement—how her 'presence is an alien intrusion on the cityscape' (280)—but also of a pervading fakeness. Walking through the fake past that the Singaporean tourist board has created in 'restored colonial shophouses' (1), Grace realises that '[t]his is not the Singapore my mother told me about. Her stories are a world apart from this; not longer reality but history. Just like my mother herself' (2). The novel is then structured around a recollection of 'the myths I tell about my family' (1). Unfolding details of the mother's death and then of her life, these myths convey a sense of futility. Appropriately, their climax comes in the opening sections, with the Cod God's slaughter. This is probably the most grotesque scene, at once harrowing and comical. Now blind, Pandora returns to her brother's flat after ineffectively searching for the demolished places she grew up in. Attempting to soothe her disorientation by touching the guppies she has bought, she finds them gone. They have been fed to her brother's giant cod, imbued with supernatural powers by the superstitious family. Her brother 'was too lazy to go down to the NTUC supermarket and buy some more [fishfood]' (278). When her son Sonny hears of this sacrifice to the 'Cod God' during the wake, he smashes the fish tank.

That this double slaughter becomes the object of children's jokes in the extended Lim family establishes a tragicomic connection to a tradition of dysfunctional family drama:

They flung themselves off the top of their bunk beds in six-foot suicide attempts and re-enacted Sonny's slaying of the Cod God, wrestling with their bolsters and giggling. The wake and funeral were barely hiccups in the competitive round of their rigidly disciplined lives, centred on school, after-school tutoring. (271)

This continues a tradition of 'typical Lim melodrama' (59-60). The Lim children of the historical chapters 'squeeze out' 'hours of morbid entertainment', as if each tragedy were 'a new development in the soap opera of their lives and they loved it' (61). Such scenes structure the novel, providing an ironic continuity that forges links where diasporic narratives tend to fall into dichotomous parts.

Comedy runs through the historical chapters. This is not just because of the spelling of Percy-Phone (the family version of Persephone) or Donald Duck. While ‘ghoulish stories [are exposed as] false, a mishmash of myth and other people’s truths’ (84), characters ‘honed [their] tale, adding more tear-jerking pathos to each retelling’ (74), feeling like ‘players in a larger drama’ (75). The ‘myths’ Grace tells about her family are questioned—questioned not simply with reference to their authenticity, but also to their malleable meaning. What precisely is the point of some of the rehearsed stories of the past? The grandmother’s enforced marriage seems a familiar narrative of female Asian diasporic fiction, and is duly passed on from mother to daughter within the Lim family, yet the narrator adds that ‘Nobody was ever quite certain about the point of this story’ (25). It is up to interpretation and can easily be appropriated by different agendas: ‘Was it meant to be an instance of proto-feminist resistance? Or a fable about a Chinese wife’s duty of submission to her husband? Or about the eternal cycle of generations of Lim women struggling against their husbands, only to succumb to the inevitability of disillusionment and defeat?’ (25). Misinterpretation engenders its own tragicomic potential, as when Jonah Tay, upon falling in love with Pandora Lim, ‘is entranced by Pandora’s rowdy family, mistaking the volume of noise for the depth of familial affection’ (106). The ‘typical Lim melodrama’ denies any idealisation of a closely knit extended family in the original homeland to which Pandora or Grace can return to claim healing blood ties.

Neither mother nor daughter breaks out of the imported circle of futility. Grace does not rise above circumstances by studying—like an enormous number of heroines of Asian diasporic fiction do—English literature or some related subject. This is the course her mother takes and drops out of in the Singapore of the historical chapters. In a case of even more pointed dramatic irony, her daughter bears out parental obsessions by becoming a cleaner. The end of the novel sees her bringing ‘order into other people’s homes’, ‘remov[ing] trash from their lives’ (263). This career choice is the natural result of and an ironic commentary on her father’s obsession with cleanliness and maintained order, which includes his policing of his wife’s ‘incontinence’ in her use of cups. Extended metaphors, both incontinence and sterility link the divergent plotlines together on multiple levels, additionally preventing the novel from falling into a clichéd bifurcation.⁴

Yet despite all the self-ironic reworking of familiar clichés, the novel has not escaped readerly expectations of ‘authenticity’. Readers, including critics, still expect not merely verisimilitude, but an explicitly autobiographical element. I do not mean this in the sense in which Wong has questioned the ‘correctness’ or ‘authenticity’ of ‘Asian’ detail. Pointing out ‘mistakes’ in linguistic or larger cultural translation, Wong has accused Amy Tan of presenting a ‘heavily mediated understanding of all things Chinese’: the view of a US writer (54). The real problem is much larger. It goes beyond the question whether a writer’s metaphors or putatively realist depictions are ‘true’ to reality, or whether their rhetorical strategies are neo-orientalist. While there always will be readers, especially in the market of popular fiction, who automatically assume first-person narrators to be identical with authors, this notorious authorial fallacy seems to apply more insistently in the context of so-called ‘ethnic’ writing.

Teo counters such straight-jackets by stressing fictionality, textuality, the making of myths. Still, during a dialogue session at the Singapore Writers Festival in 2007, Teo recalled how she was repeatedly approached by readers at previous festivals and conferences who were commiserating with her on her mother’s fate. This identification of author and narrator

apparently persisted despite their clearly divergent ways of life. Grace Tay ends up as a cleaner, not a writer or an academic. If there is an autobiographical element that has left an impact on Teo's work, it is her awareness of orientalist clichés. Teo has been writing critical analyses of mass-market orientalism and its functions in popular romances.

As a counter-narrative to orientalist romance, *Love and Vertigo* is particularly bleak about the possibilities of love, whether marital, adulterous, parental, between siblings, or for any place, here or elsewhere. Ridiculed expectations of 'inscrutable' oriental women are only one aspect of this exposure. Ironically, to Grace, her mother remains just that after all. Pandora, meanwhile, finds that a Utopia elsewhere—which she thought attainable through emigration—remains elusive. Instead she retreats into herself: 'and wandered in her mind, so that when I [Grace] found her, she was just gone. Somewhere. Over the rainbow. Into the land of Oz' (173). Teo's second novel makes this elusiveness a central trope. While more invested in contemporary Australian society, *Behind the Moon* is also a more global novel, comprising multiple movements across a number of time zones. This is certainly also a way to create narrative distance and thus to burst through limiting discourses on authenticity. At the same time, of course, backgrounds become pushed aside, rendered marginal. Surely there is more to the narrative potential of Australia's Asia, a potential that can help to explode persisting clichés, but without trading exclusively on the satirical effects of such an explosion.

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¹ The Vietnamese refugee’s childhood suffering is likewise treated with a self-consciously parodic slant. Likened to a Muppet, at least when she laughs, she is a caricature of the preternaturally beautiful heroines of mixed ethnic backgrounds in diasporic popular fiction.

² Madsen lists Simone Lazaroo, Arlene Chai, and Hsu-Ming Teo, although she exempts Brian Castro from being ‘part of this emergent canon’ (‘No Place’ 120).

³ Already a successful short story writer, Catherine Lim published a contemporary social-problems novel, *The Serpent’s Tooth* in 1982. She was more successful and became identified with her historical romances, *The Bondmaid* (1995), *The Teardrop Story Woman* (1997), and *The Song of Silver Frond* (2003), although *A Leap of Love* (2003) is set in the present. Two recent novels of tragic love are poised against a background of contemporary social and political problems in Singapore, *Following the Wrong God Home* (2001) and *Miss Seetoh in the World* (2010).

⁴ Simultaneously, the novel evokes clichéd racial references to dirt and cleanliness, so that after wetting herself in the schoolyard, Grace self-consciously thinks of herself as ‘a dirty little Chinese girl’ (Teo, *Love* 183). Throughout the novel she suffers from a literalized ‘incontinence’ of various body fluids, while her mother is policed by the Patriarch for spending and wasting ‘incontinently’.