Bearing the Diasporic Burden: Representations of Suicide in Sky Lee's Disappearing Moon Café, Fae Myenne Ng's Bone, and Hsu-Ming Teo's Love and Vertigo

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Abstract

These three texts are geographically distinct – Fae Myenne Ng is a Chinese-American writer, Hsu-Ming Teo is Chinese-Australian and SKY Lee is Chinese-Canadian – but they share a concern with the particular historical and cultural pressures that form the diasporic experience of Chinese immigrant communities. In all three nations of America, Australia and Canada, exclusionary legislative, political, and social practices have operated from the late nineteenth century to shape the Chinese diasporic community in specific ways. The identity of diasporic Chinese communities has also been shaped by competing discourses of “Chineseness”: particularly the valorisation of mainland versus overseas “Chineseness”. In these three texts, suicide becomes the trope that represents the complex interplay of cultural and historical factors to which Chinese female diasporic subjects are exposed. In Bone and Love and Vertigo the text focuses upon the struggle of the narrator to comprehend the suicide of a close family member; in Disappearing Moon Café this same problematic enters the text as part of a broad family saga. But in each […]

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Mainland versus Diasporic “Chineseness”: SKY Lee’s Disappearing Moon Café

Complicating this set of issues is the fact that the Chinese Diaspora so-called is not a singular phenomenon. There is not one but many Chinese Diasporas, historically and geographically distinct from each other: the South China Diaspora of the mid-nineteenth century was preceded by what Robin Cohen calls the Chinese “trade Diaspora” and the migration of Chinese laborers to the Caribbean at a time when the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire caused a crisis of labour and a challenge to modernize the sugar industry by using Chinese rather than black labour. The South China Diaspora has been succeeded by the permanent dispersion of Chinese “sojourners” who were absent from China at the time of the Cultural Revolution and were unable to return home, and further Diasporas that followed the events of Tiananmen Square and the return of Hong Kong to mainland China. Geographically, the Chinese Diasporas have resulted in significant Chinese communities in all parts of the globe. These distinct events raise the question of the “Chineseness” of diasporic Chinese culture and communities. Separated by historical and geographical conditions, one must ask whether indeed the Chineseness of these
communities shares any “essential” Chinese qualities and characteristics with each other as well as with the Chinese mainland culture?

Ien Ang has written succinctly of precisely this issue, in the essay “Can One Say No to Chineseness?”, where she writes:

Central to the Diasporic paradigm is the theoretical axiom that Chineseness is not a category with a fixed content – be it racial, cultural, or geographical – but operates as an open and indeterminate signifier whose meanings are constantly renegotiated and rearticulated indifferent sections of the Chinese diaspora. Being Chinese outside China cannot possibly be the same thing as inside. It varies from place to place, molded by the local circumstances in different parts of the world where people of Chinese ancestry have settled and constructed new ways of living. There are, in this paradigm, many different Chinese identities, not one” (Ang, 1998, 225).

I would like to nuance Ang’s argument by observing that while the concept of an essential “Chineseness” is questioned in the narratives under discussion here, these same narratives disclose a commonality of experience that belies Ang’s assertion that the Chinese Diaspora is experienced differently in distinct geographical spaces. We should bear in mind, for example, that the prejudicial exclusion laws, which specifically restricted Chinese immigration to the United States until the post-World War II period, were replicated both in Canada and in Australia. Certainly in the view of legislators and immigration officials in the US, Canada and Australia there was such a thing as an essential “Chineseness”. In her work, Ang makes clear her own radically hybrid cultural position as a Peranakan Chinese woman, born in Indonesia but raised substantially in Holland before relocating to Australia, that informs her cosmopolitan interpretation of Chineseness as an indeterminate signifier of racial identity.

What is useful in Ang’s formulation for a reading of Disappearing Moon Café is her observation that the construction of Chineseness as a cultural and subjective value differs significantly according to whether one is located inside or outside China. This crystallizes the primary problematic of the novel, Disappearing Moon Café. The attempts of the narrator, Kae, to discover the motive for her aunt’s suicide are frustrated until she learns of the abandonment by her grandfather, Gwei Chang, of his first wife, Kelora, who is of Native and Chinese descent, in favour of a wife from China. The temporal dislocations of the narrative, as the narrator switches from one character’s life story to another’s, disrupt the easy matching of cause to effect. But the foundational rejection of the “hybrid” Kelora in favour of the “authentic” Mui Lan sets in play a complex generational dynamic of legitimate versus illegitimate offspring, pure versus hybrid cultural constructions, that results finally in Suzanne’s death by suicide.

The final confrontation between Gwei Chang and Ting An, the son he has disowned for so long, concerns precisely the question of family lineage and heritage through the family name. Ting An consults Gwei Chang about his intention to change his name to that of his mother, Kelora, before he marries. Ironically, it is because Ting An ostensibly needs to ensure that he is not a fake or “paper son” – that his papers had not been bought from Gwei Chang to facilitate his immigration – that this confrontation takes place. So issues of authenticity, family belonging and national
identity are highlighted in this episode along with the existence of multiple ways in which it is possible to be Chinese in Canada. When Gwei Chang promises to find “a real wife from China” for Ting An, then the son explosively reveals his understanding and deep resentment of his father: “‘Like your real wife from China?’ he asked. ‘Not a dirty half-breed buried somewhere in the bush?’” (233).

When Ting An fathers the children that Gwei Chang’s “Chinese” son, Choy Fuk, could not produce, he achieves a fine retribution by disrupting the “pure” family lineage Gwei Chang wanted. Rather than the offspring of a “genuine” born-in-China Chinese father, like Choy Fuk, they are born in North America of a father who is himself a hybrid of Chinese and Native American descent. In this way, Ting An embodies a Diaspora that is the problematical legacy he bequeaths to his children. These children include not only the children born in adultery to Fong Mei – John, Beatrice and Suzanne – but also the son, Morgan, whom Ting An fathers with his French-Canadian wife. Ting An’s revenge upon the Wong clan culminates through this problematical legacy when the half-siblings Suzanne and Morgan meet in ignorance of their true relation, fall in love and, when Suzanne becomes pregnant, decide to marry.

The differential valuation of “Chineseness” defined in terms of the mainland versus the diasporic space does not work alone to produce this complex tangle of human relationships. Ting An may seek vengeance for his father’s neglect through adultery with a Wong woman but this woman, Fong Mei, has her own motivations. And they are powerful motivations: in her inability to produce Choy Fuk’s son Fong Mei is threatened with ostracism from the clan. The purity of the Chinese family line is her individual responsibility and so it is to her that the full force of the family’s patriarchal power is directed. Fong Mei must produce the “pure” Chinese children born to China-born parents that will ensure that the clan remains Chinese despite their diasporic existence in Canada. The nationalistic imperative that Chinese essence be reproduced intersects most violently with the patriarchal control of feminine sexuality through Fong Mei’s relationship with her mother-in-law. Mui Lan, who is powerless except for her power to persecute Fong Mei, threatens to send her back to her family in China knowing that this is a death-sentence:

Mui Lan sneered, knowing full well that a spurned daughter-in-law would rather commit suicide than go back to her parents’ home, for all the ten generations of lasting shame that she would cost her family, in fact her whole village (59).

It is interesting to note the narrator’s evocation of suicide here as the fate of the spurned bride, because when Mui Lan tells Fong Mei, “I don’t care where you drag your dead body” (59), she is putting in train the series of events that will end in her granddaughter’s suicide. It is the internalization of patriarchal values by Mui Lan, who identifies completely with the interests of her husband’s family, and Fong Mei who refuses any identity outside that offered by the Wong clan, that works in conjunction with essentialist definitions of Chineseness to undermine and destabilize the construction of Chinese-Canadian feminine identity.

This destabilization is experienced most intensely by Suzanne whose act of committing suicide is the unspoken event that shapes all that precedes and follows in the narrative. The actual act of suicide is not represented in the text. Suicide exists in a hiatus between narrative vignettes. This is the case in both Disappearing Moon Café and Fae Myenne Ng’s novel Bone: in both narratives the significance of suicide is the
primary narrative concern yet the act of suicide is not directly represented. We learn of Suzanne’s fate from Morgan’s defensive outburst, in the section entitled “Feeding the Dead”:

“You’re trying to blame me! She just ups one day and slits her veins open. And it’s my fault? Well, let me tell you,” he screamed, ‘you don’t know fucking shit! They drove her to it! With their filthy lies! They wouldn’t let me near her,’ sobbing drunk, ‘They did it! Not me!’” (186).

But in contrast to this dramatic image, Kae describes a photograph of Suzie taken the year in which she died. In this image she is disintegrating, “Suzie’s face is crumbling, chipped stoneware” (192). Suzie is literally disintegrating under the pressure of family and cultural history; under the pressure exerted by the lies told to perpetuate and sustain the family in the diasporic space of Canada.

The section that immediately follows, entitled “The Suicide,” explains how Suzie has reached this condition of fragmentation or disintegration. The section begins, however, not with Suzie but with the consternation caused by her sister, Beatrice, who has expressed her intention to marry Keeman. Both Mui Fan and Fong Mei mistakenly believe Keeman to be Choy Fuk’s illegitimate son. This mistake renders the treatment of the pregnant Suzie even more brutal. The last vignette devoted to Suzie, dated 1951, the year of her death, tells only of her alienation and psychic disintegration. She tells how it takes five hours to dress and that this act of dressing is in fact a form of disguise, an attempt at normalcy that will fool those around her. She stages the house in a performance of ordinary life: “I had been careful to leave dried coffee rings in the bottom of cups, bread crumbs on plates, potato chip shards on the counter, because no one must suspect that I don’t eat anymore” (211-12). Suzie’s performance of normality is an ironic repetition of her family’s history which is structured around deceptions that are both perpetrated and kept hidden in order to preserve the appearance of “normality.”

The extreme to which Suzie’s self-perception has become alienated is apparent at the end of this scene when she prepares to leave with Beatrice and Keeman. She rises gingerly from the sofa where she has been sitting, immobile, all day, only to find when she looks back, “there on the sofa, Suzie was still sitting. She looked startlingly fresh and relaxed, waiting in sweet anticipation” (213). This schizophrenic separation of body and image indicates the extent to which Suzie has lost her psychic integrity, fragmenting into unstable pieces. So it is no surprise when Kae, in the letter to Hermia that follows, admits the true circumstances of Suzie’s death. She confesses:

Funny, all these years I have been obsessed with uncovering the truth. Yet one of the few facts I was given, I completely refused to believe. I suppose it’s natural to want to believe that she died with the same passion with which she lived. Who wants to know that she botched it, succumbing instead to a slow, ignoble, wheezy death (214).

The manner of Suzie’s death is, however, entirely appropriate. By dying of pneumonia rather than at her own hand, she is denied agency even in her own death. Suzie’s disintegration is the consequence of inherited patriarchal and nationalistic prejudices imported imperfectly to the Diaspora space that is North America. In
Canada, these practices of cultural and subjective formation break down into a chaotic confusion, generating the family tragedy that claims Suzie as its most obvious victim. The Wong family, in Disappearing Moon Café, is a cultural construct but the means of construction are no less powerful for being arbitrary. As Ien Ang suggests, “[c]onceiving Chineseness as a discursive construct entails a disruption of the ontological stability and certainty of Chinese identity; it does not, however, negate its operative power as a cultural principle in the social constitution of identities as Chinese” (Ang, 1998, 227). Disappearing Moon Café explores the destructive power of constructions of Chinese “essence.” Indeed, the very concept of Diaspora is a dynamic one, signifying movement and change as constitutive qualities of cultural experience. The process of removing from the homeland to a migrant space implies the construction of a future cultural identity that is the product of cross-cultural contacts, creolization and hybridisation. The transformation of cultural practices in the move from home to Diaspora implies a necessary transformation in the location and constitution of individual subjectivity. As Lisa Lowe suggests, “Rather than considering ‘Asian American identity’ as a fixed, established ‘given,’ perhaps we can consider instead ‘Asian American cultural practices’ that produce identity; the processes that produce such identity are never complete and are always constituted in relation to historical and material differences” (Lowe, 1996, 64). Certainly the patriarchal cultural practices that produce the Chinese identity desired by Fong Mei, Mui Lan and Gwei Chang remain incomplete, frustrated, in the particular diasporic context of Canada. The force of this frustration destroys Suzie.

Anti-Chineseness and Historical Exclusion: Fae Myenne Ng’s Bone

In the novel Bone the construction of Chineseness in the face of governmental persecution and exclusion informs the character’s quest for an explanation of Ona’s suicide. The motif of the mysterious suicide, which each character in the novel (major and minor alike) feels compelled to explain, serves to focus attention upon the many unexplained and unexamined narratives that determine the cultural and subjective experiences of Ng’s characters. Lisa Lowe proposes that “Bone confronts the narratives that have so often suppressed those events and peoples who do not conform to the logic of development and the equally vexing problem of how alternative records might adequately attend to those suppressed materials” (Lowe, 1996, 120). She goes on to explain:

The narrative moves backward in time, in reverse approach to Ona’s suicide. One effect of the reverse narration is that causality as a means of investigation is disorganized. Although Ona’s death appears initially as the originating loss that would seem either to motivate the reverse chronology or to resolve a progressive one, when the event of the suicide is at last reached, it dissolves, apprehensible not as an origin but as a symptom of the Leong family’s collective condition (Lowe, 1996, 122).

Lowe suggests that in Bone “the novel allegorizes how the affective, cultural ties in the Leong family bear the weight of immigration laws, geographical segregation, and global flows of exchange” (Lowe, 1996, 169). The reverse chronology of Ng’s narrative works in much the same way as the disjointed chronology of Disappearing
Moon Café where the stories of the characters are unfolded in such a way that simple patterns of cause and effect breakdown under the pressure of personal, family and community history. This is emphasised in both novels which refuse to represent the act of suicide itself. So the act is always presented in interpretation.

Indeed, Bone does not begin with reference to Ona’s death but instead with an account of why the family is an unlucky one: three girls, no boys, the eldest a half-sister to the younger girls. The narrator, Leila, suggests a variety of cultural constructions that have formed the subjectivities of her family members: birth order, personal names, parentage. Only at the end of the first page does she mention Ona’s death: “Mah and Leon are still married, but after Ona jumped from the Nam, Leon moved out. It was a bad time” (3). Leila’s search through Chinatown to find Leon, so he can be the first to know about her sudden marriage, introduces a character who is many things: stepfather, occupant of the San Fran, the “old-man” hotel, amateur inventor, merchant seaman and “paper son”.

Leon and his Chinatown cronies occupy a variety of Chinese subject positions or “Chinesenesses,” as Jen Ang might put it. Leila encounters Leon’s old friend You Thin Toy and recalls how they met on the voyage to America: “they coached each other on their paper histories … After You Thin and Leon both passed their interrogation at Angel Island, they slapped each other’s backs. Each called the other ‘Brother’ and predicted the good life” (9). But Leila finds You Thin among the “wasters” of Portsmouth Square to whom America has failed to deliver the good life. She discovers that Leon and the men of his generation occupy these multiple subject positions not by choice or personal agency. The extent to which Leon’s dreams and ambitions have been disappointed is revealed when she helps him register for social security. In this governmental office, the discursive web of protective misinformation that Leon has woven around himself finally unravels. Leila calls this “Old-timer logic: If you don’t tell the truth, you’ll never get caught in a lie” (55). This is a kind of logic formulated in response to the prejudicial exclusion laws that would otherwise have denied Leon entry to the United States. She reflects, “fifty years later, here he was, caught in his own lie; the laws that excluded him now held him captive” (57). So she searches through Leon’s suitcase of papers to find a satisfactory piece of identification. There she finds a record of loss and rejection, a construction of Leon that she does not want to know, preferring instead the stories he would invent to rationalise and soften the relentless succession of rejections.

Leila exposes the suppressed history of Leon and with it the suppressed history of racial exclusion, segregation and discrimination to which those of the Chinese Diaspora are subject in the United States. Ona’s death appears then to Leon as one more mysterious aspect of his life that he cannot understand. He casts about for someone to blame, “[f]inally he blamed all America for making big promises and breaking every one” (103). But the weight of some of this blame was assigned to Ona before she died. Because she became involved with Osvaldo, the son of Leon’s cheating business partner in the laundry Ong & Leong, Ona bears much of the family’s sense of betrayal and resentment. The weight of historical circumstance, racial discrimination and political exclusion is displaced into personal blame directed at Ona.

Leila wonders whether escape was what Ona was pursuing when she jumped from the apartment block. In the closest description of the suicide that the narrative achieves, Leila imagines her sister flying, free in free-fall. This contrasts graphically with Leila’s later observation that Ona’s body was identified only by dental records. In this way, Ng undercuts the suggestion that suicide brought Ona escape. There is no
possible answer to the question why she committed suicide, no obvious causality, only more narratives to fill the lack that is her absence. In contrast to the other sisters, Leila recalls, it was Ona who shared Leon’s capacity for creating narratives to suppress unwelcome knowledge or to mediate difficult family situations. In death, as in life, Ona is surrounded by a network of narratives and stories that constitute her subjectivity and that of her family. These are narratives that mediate the relationships among diasporic spaces in the novel: the imaginary Chinese homeland to which Leon always intended to return; Hong Kong where Mah seeks solace from her family after Ona’s death, Australia where Leila’s father pursues his “Gold Mountain” dreams and San Francisco’s Chinatown which accommodates the immigrant community that is formed in relation to these other contested “Chinese” spaces.

A relation between the subjects of death and migration in recent Chinese-Australian writing is explored by Marty Wechselblatt in a paper that explores connections between suicide and Diaspora. In a discussion of Leslie Zhao’s story “Waking Up in the Morning,” Wechselblatt points to the story’s analogy between terminal sleep or death and the Chinese experience of Australian permanent residency. The Chinese-Australian migrant lives in a liminal world of White fantasy, disappointed expectation, and dreams or memories of home. Wechselblatt’s evocation of a half-world in which Chinese migrants live out half-lives is reminiscent of Ien Ang’s observation that “Asia and Australia are positioned in the grey area of inclusion and exclusion” which she calls the “not-quite” zone (Ang, 2002, 147). The Chinatowns of Vancouver and San Francisco can also be called “not-quite zones”: they are not quite China, not quite Canada, not quite the United States. These diasporic spaces are not quite home. The failure to belong lies at the heart of Hsu-Ming Teo’s Love and Vertigo, which also seeks to explain the suicide of a close family member. In this narrative, as in Disappearing Moon Café and Bone, the themes of patriarchal and political or racial oppression coincide and reinforce each other within the context of migration as the unsettling of subjectivity.

Ang argues that “[t]he condition of diaspora – literally, ‘the scattering of seeds’ – produces subjects for whom notions of identity and belonging are radically unsettled. … Diasporic subjects are exemplary cases of the multiple and hybrid subjectivities so favored by postmodern and poststructuralist theory” (Ang, 1998, 233). Such is the case with Ng’s character Leon, who becomes deracinated through constant travelling which is not his choice but an economic necessity. But Ang also notes the unwillingness to acknowledge the creolization and hybridization of diasporic communities in favor of an emphasis upon homeland centre and diasporic margin, an unwillingness that marks both the reception of hybridized subjectivities by the dominant Western culture as well as the diasporic community itself, cultural formations that have an invested interest in maintaining essentialized racial subject positions: like the pure Chineseness pursued in Disappearing Moon Café. The concept of Diaspora does, however, inscribe a distinct notion of home and homeland, together with a mythology of return. The fantasy of return to an imaginary community of origin complicates this aspect of diasporic experience. For if Diaspora names what Ang calls “a complex range of dispersed, heterogeneous, and not necessarily commensurable diaspora narratives” (Ang, 1998, 232), then return, like the originary dispersion, must be indeterminate, reflective of the always already absent place of origin. Avtar Brah suggests as much when she asks, “Where is home? On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the Diasporic imagination. In this sense – it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen to be the place of ‘origin’” (Brah, 1996, 192).
Home, Migration, Return: Hsu-Ming Teo’s *Love and Vertigo*

The prospect that a return “home” may be possible, let alone desirable, by a creolised member of the diasporic community is sharply undercut by Hsu-Ming Teo’s narrator as she tells of the mortal consequences for her mother of such an attempted return. The narrative begins on the eve of Pandora Tay’s wake, with her daughter’s arrival in Singapore. She reflects, “This is not the Singapore my mother told me about. Her stories are a world apart from this; no longer reality but history. Just like my mother herself” (2). The novel then moves between two sub-plots: the historical account of Pandora’s life in Singapore and Malaysia and her daughter’s story of the family’s emigration to Australia and their experience as part of the Chinese Diaspora. For both daughter and mother the return to an imaginary home community is profoundly unsatisfactory. For the children who have tried so hard to assimilate into Australian society, to find a way of being Chinese Australian, this return is a disturbing unsettling of the subjectivities they habitually occupy. Grace recalls, “These Singaporean roots of hers, this side of her – and possibly of me too – were unacceptable. … I realise now that I had gone to Singapore with the attitude of a nineteenth-century memsahib. I was determined not to belong, not to fit in, because I was Australian, and Mum ought to be Australian too” (3). Too late, Grace wonders whether her mother also shared this sense of cultural alienation, alienation from the social and familial formation that she had assumed formed the foundation of her subjectivity: “When she returned, [Grace speculates] did she gaze uncomprehendingly around her and realise that this was no longer her home?” (3).

For Pandora, this would be one more evidence of her failure to belong in any of the spaces that she has called “home”. Indeed, the narrative can be seen as the story of Pandora’s unsuccessful attempt to discover a place (geographical and emotional) that she can call “home”, where she will finally experience a unity of being that is continually denied her. Her subjectivity is defined by guilt and rejection from the moment of her birth, during the Japanese occupation of Singapore. As her mother cries out from the pain of childbirth, the noise attracts a troop of soldiers searching for “comfort women” to serve as sexual slaves of the Japanese military. Pandora is later not permitted to forget her responsibility for the fate of the women who were taken. Her mother views the infant Pandora as a punishment; it is through her sexuality that she is confined within the constraints of patriarchy and so Mei Ling experiences maternity as punitive. This experience of feminine sexuality as punitive is represented as the inherited burden of the women in Pandor’s family. Indeed, Mei Ling’s rejection of her new daughter reminds her sister, Madam Tan, of the story concerning Mei Ling’s marriage. Like her daughter Pandora after her, Mei Ling wanted not to marry but to use education as a means to escape her prescribed destiny. Instead, she is married to a poor shopkeeper from whom she hides every night until he complains to her father and she is subjected to a vicious beating to remind her of her place as wife and daughter. The narrator wonders,

> Nobody was ever quite certain about the point of this story. 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? But at any gathering of Lim women this story was told and retold until we women understood that ours
was a family conceived in violence and rape, raised in sullen resentment and unspoken grief (25).

The story signifies all of these things and more. This is the patriarchal legacy that perpetuates essentialist roles for the women of this family. These women are trained and coerced into traditional Chinese feminine subject positions that bring together imperatives defined in both nationalist and gender terms.

The betrayals and rejections of her early life form in the young Pandora a subjective absence that the narrator describes as a “black hole.” In later life, when her husband or her children have sought to know her, she has turned upon them this protective gesture, this absent gaze that reflects only their own image of her back to them. Even the attempt to understand her act of suicide is likened by the narrator to the attempt to possess something of Pandora’s heavily protected, because fragile, sense of herself. Grace confesses, “Like everyone else intimately related to her in her life, I wanted to do violence to her, to force her to surrender up her self to me. I wanted to take by force what would not be given voluntarily. … For so much of my life, she looked at me with those vacant eyes that made me rage and cry” (142). In death, Pandora is described as occupying an absence, as the pool of her blood widens “Pandora lay in her own black hole” (279). Ultimately, the reason for her death remains also an absence, a black hole that her daughter tries in vain to fill with reason. As the novel concludes, Grace thinks of her mother as a “Hungry Ghost,” like those for whom she would leave offerings, but with a crucial difference: addressing her dead mother she speculates, “you – an outsider in a foreign land – made [you offerings] out of empathy with the dislocated dead.” Grace goes on to admit, “These days I imagine that you have joined the ranks of the unearthly exiles. A Hungry Ghost, phantasmal vagabond, you wander around trying to fill that bleak black hole inside you. In death, as in life, you remain displaced” (285).

This suggestion that Pandora’s subjective disintegration is a form of psychic displacement related to her cultural and geographical displacement is reinforced by the novel’s use of diasporic spaces. The story of Pandora’s early life is set in colonial Singapore, while her husband, Jonah, grows up in Malaysia. Indeed, when they first meet they are unable to communicate effectively because each speaks a different Chinese dialect. The characters of this narrative are, then, represented as already diasporic when they immigrate to Australia. The emigration described is then a secondary diasporic experience. The narrator mentions in passing that the Lim family left China for Singapore at the turn of the twentieth century and no member of the family had ever returned. China, then does not function as a signifier of home in this context. Similarly, the account of the 1969 Malay jihad, which represents a dramatic context for the birth of Pandora’s son, not unlike her own birth “under a sword,” provides a stark reminder of anti-Chinese sentiment in parts of Islamic Asia. “Home” in colonial Singapore is not then “China” but “England” yet within the circle of the Lim family home remains the China that is mediated through prescribed gender roles. As a schoolgirl, Pandora experiences a profound cultural dichotomy between the British imperialism of her education at an Anglican Chinese girls’ school – where she was required to read Enid Blyton and attend Girl Guides activities – and her life as a submissive and filial Chinese daughter at home. Like Singapore and Malaysia, Australia also represents a colonial diasporic space. While the ideology of British imperialism is strong in Australia, it is expressed in a form of cultural homogeneity that differs from the family’s experience in Singapore and Malaysia. In Australia, they experience a strong cultural pressure to assimilate. Grace describes her father as being
resentful of later generations of immigrants who refuse assimilation and embrace a concept of multiculturalism instead. Among these later migrants are Chinese from Hong Kong with whom Sonny fails to integrate even though he feels he should. “He found himself making gauche mistakes when he went out to dim sum with his Chinese friends. … They wondered disdainfully why he couldn’t speak any Chinese dialect properly, and deliberately spoke Cantonese when they didn’t want him to understand. To them, he was an Aussie, he didn’t belong” (179). In this diasporic community there is no singular “Chineseness,” no essential “Australian” essence, and no unitary sense of “home” or “belonging.”

The effect of the family’s displacement is played out in miniature in the story of Pandora’s mother-in-law, Madam Tay, and her alienation from herself as she is transformed from a cruel and domineering mother-in-law to a disoriented and powerless old woman. During Pandora’s married life, first in Singapore and then in Malaysia, Madam Tay represents the pressures that are destroying Pandora’s fragile sense of self: “She lost her time, her space, her privacy and her boundaries. … she wanted space to collect herself, to remember who she was” (120). It is here that Pandora begins to imagine that she inhabits a black hole, that inside her there is nothing but this nothingness. But when Madam Tay, who has followed them from Singapore to Malaysia, attempts to follow them to Australia, Pandora suddenly realises that in this diasporic space, she possesses power in the form of a limited “belonging.” If Pandora had felt alienated from her new environment in Sydney, this perception is reversed in the face of Madam Tay’s complete inability to function in this alien environment. Pandora, and her children, conduct a campaign of persecution not unlike that which Pandora had to withstand in her mother-in-law’s house. Finally, the old woman returns to Malaysia and, when she dies soon afterwards, Pandora, Sonny and Grace are sure that she has succumbed to the nothingness into which they had already transformed her.

This incident provides an interpretative context for Pandora’s final return to Singapore when she suffers the same fateful alienation. She tries to find her childhood home, not realising that the old neighborhood has been demolished to make way for a new shopping center. Grace wonders, “Did she, at that point, … become aware of her utter foreignness in her homeland? On that last afternoon, did she suddenly wish she was back in Sydney, where she could at least orientate herself with ease? … Did she finally realise that, whatever she might now be, she was no longer Singaporean?” (275-6). The supreme irony of the narrative is that migration is initially conceived by Pandora as a form of escape. But the experience of migration exerts its own fragmenting force. Grace recalls that the tensions between her parents that had existed in Malaysia were exacerbated by migration. She observes, “Immigration forced us in on ourselves and moulded us into a family – fractious and often bitterly absurd, but a family nevertheless. Sacrifices were made, unasked for, and lifelong obligations were imposed” (143). These family and cultural burdens eventually destroy a family that migration has, perhaps, created. Sonny becomes increasingly alienated from his family and so leaves; Grace struggles unsuccessfully to maintain some relationship with her mother and brother; her father, to whom she refers as “the Patriarch” takes refuge in his rigid sense of discipline; and Pandora withdraws into her own vacancy, symbolised eventually by her blindness so that she turns eyes that are now literally unseeing upon those around her. And then she commits suicide.
Conclusion

Generations of family history, the pressures of a patriarchal Chinese culture that are transplanted into the diasporic space that is Australia, the assault upon Pandora’s subjectivity from these forces and the dislocations of immigration and resettlement, together with the impossibility of belonging or return, are slowly uncovered by the narrative in the attempt to explain her death and so represent the unrepresentable. Like the narrators of Disappearing Moon Café and Bone, Grace struggles to find a way to conceptualise death and, like Kae and Leila, Grace finally admits that the object of her pursuit has “disappeared into [a] black hole” (283). Perhaps the failure of these narrators to represent the reality of death is related not only to the representational limits of language but also to the position they occupy. For while the narrators tell stories that supplement the loss and absence brought about by suicide, these narrators themselves are survivors of the same diasporic experience that has destroyed their aunt, sister, or mother. Kae in Disappearing Moon Café, Leila in Bone, Grace in Love and Vertigo: each is a member of a second migrant generation and each finds a way to live with the pressures that have killed a near relative. As Leila reflects, “I’m the stepdaughter of a paper son and I’ve inherited this whole suitcase of lies. All of it is mine. All I have are those memories, and I want to remember them all” (61). Leila embraces her family’s history, even the ugly and destructive aspects, into a sense of being Chinese American that is neither indeterminate nor essentialist. Disappearing Moon Café suggests self-reflexively that the narrative is not so much “a story of several generations” but of “one individual thinking collectively” (189). This collective individual is Kae, who finds her literary subject in the struggles of her family to deal with the experience of Diaspora. In Love and Vertigo Grace’s struggle to find a way to control her own life, to have agency in her own destiny is juxtaposed with the story of her mother’s life and death. As the narrative opened with Grace’s reflections on her alienation as an “Australian” from the Chineseness of her mother’s Singaporean roots so, at the end, the narrative returns Grace to Singapore after her mother’s funeral when she is able to reflect on her acceptance of “that part of me which is embedded here and refuses to wither away” (272). Grace’s acceptance of her diasporic character and of her own Chineseness is reflected finally in her forgiveness of her father. With this act of forgiveness she refuses any longer to displace the historical burden that destroyed her mother into personal blame of her father.

As I remarked above, the very concept of Diaspora is dynamic, signifying movement and change as constitutive qualities of cultural experience. The transformation of cultural practices in the move from home to Diaspora implies a necessary transformation in the location and constitution of individual subjectivity. What these three narratives expose is the profound unsettling of the conditions of subject formation in the diasporic space. The combined forces of patriarchy, adapted imperfectly to suit the migrant condition, and the hostility of institutionalised racism, expressed in a range of exclusionary practices, are in these three novels brought to bear upon the subjectivity of an individual who is then destroyed by them. Suicide, and the inability of these narratives to explain it, then represents a symptom of the combined weight of political, social, familial and personal oppression. The narratives are structured in such as way that suicide must be interpreted as a symptom rather than a cause, in a diasporic space that has denied these female characters the opportunity for agency, both in their lives and in their deaths. However, the telling of these tales by women narrators who are strengthened by the narratives they recount
provides a positive context for the interpretation of Chinese feminine subject formation in diverse diasporic spaces.

WORKS CITED


