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Filipino and Chinese Diasporic Communities in Australia and Dis/Connections in Merlinda Bobis's "Fruit Stall" and Tom Cho's "Dinner with my Brother"

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Abstract:
In their short stories, Merlinda Bobis and Tom Cho depict characters living in Australia who have a different cultural background. They are depicted as characters seemingly confirming their traditional diasporic status but, at the same time, rejecting it by accepting their host country as their new homeland. This paper analyses a depiction of the main characters in both stories arguing that their cultural identity is close to Bill Aschroft's concept of the transnation. At the same time, the paper points out the role of popular culture in the construction of a non-diasporic character belonging to the young generation of Chinese Australians in Cho´s story and a rejection of both negative aspects of traditional patriarchal society and colonial attitudes of the new host country in Bobis's story.

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In their fiction, contemporary Asian-Australian authors of Filipino (Bobis) and Chinese descent (Cho) often depict diasporic communities and their cultural interactions with the dominant Australian culture influenced not only by their ancestral country's cultural traditions, but also by media and popular culture. Unlike traditional immigrant writing and the traditional social construction of reality, both

authors frequently employ magical realist and postmodern techniques to highlight the role of traditional myth (Bobis) and contemporary popular culture (Cho) in the depiction of diasporic communities in Australia. In Merlinda Bobis's fiction, the use of myth related to Filipino culture, on the one hand, points out the specificity of Filipino culture, on the other hand it serves as a means of separation from tradition and its incompatibility with life in a modern technologically and economically advanced society. Various aspects of the myth, however, are used to point out a critique of both negative aspects of Filipino cultural tradition and the alienation related to life in the modern society of Australia.

In many traditional immigrant narratives there is often depicted a nostalgia for the lost homeland and a generation gap with conflicting views on the new country in which the diasporic people feel unaccepted. As Francois Kral argues, "[d]iasporic texts are by their very nature tales of nostalgia whose function is to re-member the fragments of the motherland in a situation of either temporary displacement or permanent exile" (Kral, 2009, p. 7), and, as she further confirms, "[d]iasporic literature is a literature of remembering, not only in the usual sense of the term... It is also a literature of re-membering which unearths fragments of the past, pieces them together, or fails to do so…" (Kral, 2009, p. 75). Tom Cho's fiction, much like many traditional immigrant narratives that express nostalgia for a lost homeland, portrays a generational gap and conflict. On one hand, Cho highlights the older generation's insistence on preserving traditional culture, contrasted with the younger generation's acceptance of life in a modern society shaped by advanced technologies and mass media. On the other hand, unlike traditional immigrant narratives, Cho presents both generations as being influenced and shaped by media, modern technologies, and pop culture.

In William Safran's view, diasporic communties share several of the following characteristics: 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "center" to two or more "peripheral", or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland - its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not...fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship (Safran, 1991, pp. 83-84). As Safran's understanding of diaspora implies, there should be a strong affinity with the original homeland among diasporic communities, along with a sense of alienation or, in some cases, a rejection of the host society – or at least a feeling

of being rejected by it. Susan Stanford Friedman, however, introduces another element to the concept of diaspora: its cosmopolitan nature. As she observes, "[d]iasporas induce cosmopolitanism and 'double consciousness' based on both accommodation to the dominant culture and an ongoing tie to a homeland elsewhere" (Friedman, 2007, pp. 269-270). Or, as she further continues referring to James Clifford's understanding of diaspora, "[t]hey involve 'feeling global' in a locale that is both home and not quite home" (Friedman, 2007, p. 270).

As mentioned above, both fiction authors undermine such an understanding of diaspora and diasporic communities, although both in a different way. In her short story, "Fruit Stall", Merlinda Bobis depicts a young Philipina fruit seller who lives in Australia in a marriage arranged by her father living in Australia. Through the imagery of fruits and fruit selling, most likely set in Sydney, Australia (as suggested by Kings Cross), Bobis depicts the Filipino diasporic community, represented by two generations (father and daughter). The daughter, in particular, partly rejects Safran's notion of diaspora. The story also explores the impact of the historical relationship between colonizer and colonized on the cultural and ethnic aspects of the Filipino diasporic community today. At the very beginning of the story, a middle-aged narrator says: "I am forty. Divorced. No children. I own a fruit stall in Kings Cross. And I am Filipina, but this my secret. People ask, are you Spanish? Mexican? Italian? A big man, brushing his hairy arm against my waist, whispers in his beer-breath, aha, Latina! Cringing, I say, si, si, si to him, and to all of them. I am Filipina, but this is my secret" (Bobis, 1999, p. 4).

Although the woman clearly defines herself as Filipina, because of her dark skin the white people misidentify her ethnic and cultural identity and treat her as if from a typical superior colonial position. This manifests itself in this passage but also in the following example: "This is show the men, who go to my country to find themselves a nice, little brown girl, put it. They´re great, these rice-ies. Give them a bowl of rice and they can fuck all night! An American serviceman said this once, grabbing me by the waist. I was twelve then. I remember I went home crying" (Bobis, 1999, p. 5).

In these passages, both in the host country (Australia) and in her homeland in the past, a middle-aged woman who was a young girl in her homeland is treated by white people from the superior position of colonizers and rulers, in the Philippines in the past not only because of the real physical colonization of Australia but also because of racism of an American and at present because of her appearance as non-white, non-Australian and thus because of her status of immigrant. At the same time, she is seemingly presented as a typical diasporic character – referring to the Philippines as "my country" (Bobis, 1999, pp. 5-6) and valuing the quality of her home country's fruit as superior to that of her host country. The young woman's appreciation of her homeland's agricultural produce creates a metaphor for her sense of belonging to her original homeland, as illustrated in the following passage.

The narrator referring to papayas says that “[t]hey’re too small here and not as sweet. See these here? Too expensive, but not as good as the papayas back home. The tourists go gaga over our papayas there. They are sun-ripe, tree-ripe, we say. And cheap” (Bobis, 1999, p. 5). All this creates a metaphor for the rejection of a young woman’s belonging to the host country which further manifests itself in the following passage in which she offers an Australian man a taste of a melon she is selling: “Want a taste? I offer the last slice from a box labelled “For Tasting.” I pretend I am a fruitseller at home where we let the buyer sample the merchandise before any business takes place” (ibid., p. 5), or when she appreciates the cheaper price for these products in her homeland, explaining to an Australian customer: “You see, papayas are expensive here. Go to my country. We sell them cheaply” (ibid., p. 6), and when she refers to the plentitude of mangoes in her own country (ibid., p. 8). Despite being in Australia, the young woman, a fruit seller, nostalgically recalls the selling practices and prices from her homeland and applies them in Australia. This creates a metaphor for a diasporic community that retains and brings certain aspects of its culture to the host country.

At the same time, this understanding of homeland aligns with Safran’s concept, which Bobis later rejects in the story. At the beginning of the narrative, confused and disappointed by people commenting on her “foreign” status through ironic remarks about her appearance, she says: “I dyed my hair brown. It goes well with this pale skin from my Spanish grandfather who I never saw. He owned the hacienda where my grandmother served as housemaid” (Bobis, 1999, p. 4). In this passage, the woman commenting on her Spanish colonial ancestry symbolically rejects being identified with her Spanish colonizer grandfather’s ancestry. As alluded to in this passage, the relationship between her grandfather and grandmother was probably based on a typical colonizer-colonized relationship. There is no mention of the young woman’s grandparents’ marriage or perpetual relationship in the story so it seems the young woman’s motherhood was probably undesired and possibly forced. And thus it is the relationship the young woman rejects, therefore rejecting her Spanish colonial heritage. Moreover, her appearance casts her into a position of immigrant and, in a way, outcast in the Australian society she also rejects by literally dying her hair brown so that she would not look like an exotic immigrant. In this way the young woman acquires the position of in-betweenness, oscillating between two different cultures, her own Filipino and her host country’s cultures. This is a paradoxical situation, since, on the one hand, she feels a certain nostalgia for her homeland, or at least some aspects of it, and on the other hand she symbolically rejects her colonial heritage and status by dying her hair and rejecting the colonial position of the Spaniards and the Americans as seen in the passages above.

In addition, through her divorce of an Australian in Australia, she also rejects patriarchal relationships and the traditions of her own country represented by an arranged marriage with an older Australian man. As the narrator says, “Remember to be nice to him, ha?...Jake, the old Australian,

whom my father had met in the city, became my husband" (Bobis, 1999, p. 5). Her husband acts towards the woman both as a patriarchal figure and as a symbolic cultural and economic colonizer, and racist. This dynamic is symbolically manifested in the depiction of a sexual act where the woman is reduced to an object of male sexual gratification. During their marriage, he commands, "On your belly, quick." He was swift, and then he "snored his way through a land of fruit. I imagined it had an overripe smell that made me sick" (ibid., p. 7). Moreover, her husband refuses to have children because he did not want "brown kids" (ibid., p. 8).

As can be seen from the above, the middle-aged woman becomes triply oppressed – as a woman by her father and her husband, as a descendant of Spanish colonial heritage, and as an immigrant stranger in a new homeland, that is Australia. Despite the fact that she feels a nostalgia over her home country as a typical diasporic subject according to Safran's definition, she rejects this position of colonized subject both in her own country and in Australia. She argues that "[w]hite people are particular about what they put in their bellies...I don't say this is bad...That's why I like it here. Actually, I like it more after the divorce papers were signed. Oh, yes, I love it now, I do not wish to go home any more. Who would want to see a divorced woman there anyway? My mother with her strange God? My grape-less father? Never mind. I can have more than grapes here" (Bobis, 1999, p. 7). Unlike a similar Filipino-Australian couple, where the Australian husband treats the woman with a patronizing attitude, this woman – despite feeling inferior in Australia due to her skin color – rejects the traditional nostalgic diasporic position. She refuses to return to a traditional, patriarchal, and religious society. After her divorce from her Australian husband, likely from an arranged marriage, she symbolically rejects her submissive and inferior position in Australia as well. Thus, she acquires a position close to Bill Ashcroft's understanding of transnation. In Ashcroft's view, "'Transnation' appears at first to be an old term based on the idea of the transnational". He further argues that he

> coin[s] the term to refer to much more than 'the international', or 'the transnational', which might more properly be conceived as a relation between states, a crossing of borders or a cultural or political interplay between national cultures. It is also distinct from the categories of 'diaspora' and 'cosmopolitanism' which fail, on the whole, to account for subjects who may at various times identify with the nation, ethnicity, religion, family or tribe, who may know nothing of the workings of the state except for their experience of local officials, who may travel beyond national borders or stay within them, and may never be in contact with other

> cultural subjects, but whose experience provides the constant theme of the ambiguous relation between the nation and the state. Transnation is the fluid, migrating outside of the state that begins within the nation. This 'outside' is geographical, cultural and conceptual, and is possibly most obvious in India where the 'nation' is the perpetual scene of translation, but translation is but one example of the movement, the 'betweenness' by which the subjects of the transnation are constituted. (Ashcroft, 2010, p. 73)

As in Ascroft's concept of transnation, Bobis's main character is also not a traditional diasporic character – not cosmopolitan, international or transnational but rather "the fluid, migrating outside of the state that begins within the nation", since she comes from the Philippines the cultural traditions of which she in a sense rejects, as well as rejecting the inferior immigrant position in Australia, and thus she acquires the status of "betweenness". At the end of the story, she says that "Ay, my knuckles had never looked so white" (Bobis, 1999, p. 9) which may symbolically represent her acceptance of "the whiteness" of the dominant Australian culture and integration but, at the same time, because of her divorce of a patronizing Australian husband she rejects the dominant culture's colonialist and superior position and is cast into a position of the betweenness of the subject of the transnation. It is also the position of a diasporic subject Avtar Brah understands as "...the lived experience of the locality" (2018, p. 236) and as "potentially the site[s] of hope and new beginnings" (ibid., p. 237).

As in Bobis's story, in "Dinner with My Brother" Tom Cho depicts a young Chinese Australian and different generations of Chinese immigrants in Australia. In contrast with Bobis's story, however, by using and commenting on the characters' Chinese names and contemporary pop culture, Cho points out both the role of pop culture and the new Australian cultural environment in a deconstruction of the characters' diasporic identities. Playing with the imagery of names and naming, Cho depicts his father as a typically diasporic character. He says that "[d]ad arrived in Brisbane (as an immigrant) and was asked by immigration officials to change his name to a 'roughly equivalent' anglicised name. Dad refused because there was no anglicised name that could approximate the meaning of his Chinese name, which roughly translates to 'Mr. Amazing'. There was apparently a big argument but Dad won" (Cho, 2019, p. 26). Although the young narrator's father is coming to a new country and new homeland his rejection of anglicizing his name stands not only for his resistance to integration in a new homeland but, at the same time, as a manifestation of his typical traditional diasporic position for whom not the host country but his original homeland is his real homeland. This typical diasporic position further manifests itself in his father's choice of his son's name, which must be Chinese in his view since it is

connected with Chinese cultural tradition. As the narrator argues, "...when I first found out that I had a Chinese name, I asked Dad why he had chosed that name for me. Dad had replied that when a parent names a child, it expresses a wish that the parent has for their child" (ibid., p. 27).

Choosing a Chinese name for his son as strongly connected with Chinese cultural tradition strongly emphasizes the father's traditional diasporic position for whom China and Chinese cultural traditions are connected with the country he considers to be his homeland. In this respect then, a young Chinese Australian narrator depicts his father as seemingly feeling nostalgic and belonging to his original home although he may never return to it. It is the concept Avtar Brah understands, in one sense, as "...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 as the place of 'origin'" (Brah, 2018, p. 36). On the other hand, the younger generation of Chinese Australians in the story rejects the traditional diasporic position, even parodying it through a reconfiguration of the Chinese tradition of naming. Popular culture, on one hand, influences the characters' imagination, while on the other hand, it highlights the changed position of the diasporic subject in a new country, which the characters now consider their homeland. The young Chinese Australian narrator, aptly named after the author, Tom Cho, says to his brother: "We both agreed that the meaning of a person's name seems to be quite significant in Chinese culture. Told Hank [the narrator's brother] that Dad chose my Chinese name but that I never been happy with its meaning. My Chinese name – which my mother has told me is a very pretty name – apparently means 'I will skip and pick clover from lush fields.' Hate it hate it hate it" (Cho, 2009, p. 25). As seen in this passage, unlike his father, the young Chinese Australian rejects his Chinese name as unfitting and strange in a new Australian cultural environment, symbolically rejecting nostalgia and longing for his original homeland. In this sense, he distances himself from his traditional diasporic position. This perspective is echoed by his brother Hank, who critiques his own name ironically, stating it means "a very canny and all-powerful emperor with a loyal army of millions" (ibid., p. 26). On the other hand, both the young unnamed narrator and his brother ultimately criticize their cousin Summer Lotus's choice of name for her son, which means "middle management" (ibid., p. 26).

This agreement of both brothers on the rejection of their and their relatives' names symbolically points out a distance and separation from their traditional diasporic position. Such a position is further symbolically emphasized by the brothers' Auntie Wei's rejection of her own name which in Chinese means "A very nice and intact hymen" (ibid., p. 26). By playing with the translation and meaning of Chinese names into English, Cho symbolically highlights the incompatibility of Chinese cultural traditions within an Anglicized Australian context. He illustrates the younger generation of Chinese Australians' openness to accepting foreign culture as their new homeland culture while rejecting their

traditional diasporic position as understood by Safran and other critics. Further in the story, Tom Cho creates a parodic distance from this position through the playful use of various aspects of popular culture and media related to the new cultural environment. By juxtaposing traditional Chinese naming with modern Australian and Western popular culture, he emphasizes the inadequacy of returning to traditional Chinese ways of life or culture and underscores the incompatibility of misapplying old traditions in a new context. This manifests itself in the last pages of the story in which both the narrator and his brother Hank appropriate traditional Chinese cultural tradition in a new modern Australian/western cultural context. Asking his father for the reason for choosing such a name for him, his father replies that "...when a parent names a child, it expresses a wish that the parent has for their child" (ibid., p. 27). And the narrator talking to his brother says "...if I could have any name at all, it would be 'Marlon Brando'. Told him I thought it was a name that expressed my own wishes for myself"' (ibid.). And his brother Hank replies "that if he could have any name it would be "Indiana Jones'" (ibid.).

Parodic recontextualization of the names and naming into a new cultural context means both a distance from the brothers' traditional nostalgic diasporic position and the appropriation of a tradition (of naming) in a new Australian modern cultural context influenced by popular culture (music, film), media and technology. The seemingly traditional Chinese names and their meanings express both the literal and symbolic wish of the young Chinese Australians to be identified with the pop cultural icons they admire in the present. At the same time, the brothers play with the meanings of slogans from pop culture marketing to highlight their acceptance of their position in the new Australian cultural environment.The narrator, who is revealed to be the real author himself, Tom Cho, says that his brother would choose the Indiana Jones name "because of the marketing slogan for the Indiana Jones films" and he quotes the slogan "'If 'adventure' has a name, then that name must be 'Indiana Jones' (ibid.). And the narrator who reveals his identity as Tom Cho, replies: "'If 'patchy employment history' has a name, then that name must be 'Tom Cho'" (ibid.). Marketing, business, commercial phrases, and pop culture constitute significant aspects of modern Australian society, which the younger generation of Chinese Australians embraces. Through a parodic recontextualization of seemingly traditional Chinese naming within a contemporary cultural environment, Cho highlights these characters' rejection of their traditional diasporic position and their acceptance of the new cultural environment as their new and rather natural homeland. These characters are neither diasporic nor cosmopolitan, nor are they immigrants or political asylum seekers of any kind. They are not diasporic because they reject the notion of nostalgia for their homeland and the hope of returning to their original country in the future. They are not cosmopolitan, as Friedman understands the term, because they do not embrace a fluid or hybrid identity that transcends national boundaries, that is "those who move in search of a more

secure or better life at the most basic level of survival even those whose migration is only ambiguosly voluntary or decidedly" (Friedman, 2007, p. 261). Their new homeland is, as Brah understands it, "...the lived experience of locality" (Brah, 2018, p. 236), and they reject their "essentialist claims of belonging" (ibid., p. 235).

These characters are more closely aligned with Bill Ashcroft's concept of transnation. In Ascroft's view, "[t]ransnation is the fluid, migrating outside of the state that begins within the nation. This 'outside' is geographical, cultural and conceptual, and is possibly most obvious in India where the 'nation' is the perpetual scene of translation, but translation is but one example of the movement, the 'betweenness' by which the subjects of the transnation are constituted" (Ashcroft, 2010, p. 73). On the other hand, through a parodic recontextualizaton of Chinese naming tradition, Cho does not only point out the pleasure of pop cultural production among the young generation of Chinese Australians, but also its negative effects on people's vision of the world. Both the young and old generations of Chinese Australians as seen also in other stories from Cho's collection create their vision of the world based on the fabrication of its image through pop culture and media. This casts them away from direct contact with reality which seems to be replaced by its image. This process is similar to Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra, the hyperreal, and his idea of the precession of simulacra. In his view, "[a]bstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own" (Baudrillard, 1988, p.166). Especially the young characters in Cho's story – though not exclusively them – shape their vision of the world based on popular imagery generated by media and pop culture, as evidenced by Cho's parodic depiction of the Chinese tradition of naming. In this way, these media replace the reality associated with authentic Chinese traditions and create a reality devoid of what Baudrillard refers to as "the substance", resulting in hyperreality. Thus, in addition to what has been discussed, Cho provides a broader critique of the manipulative power of media, which can create an image of reality that people come to accept, effectively replacing "the substance" and genuine physical contact with reality.

Conclusion

In their stories, both authors depict characters who seem to accept their belonging to their original homeland and their diasporic position as understood by Safran, appreciating aspects of their culture, such as the natural environment of their homeland or respect for their parents. However, they simultaneously reject this position by embracing their connection to and appreciation for the host country – Australia – as their new homeland. In Merlinda Bobis's story "Fruit Stall", a middle-aged narrator living with her older Australian husband through an arranged marriage accepts and appreciates the "naturalness" of her original homeland, represented by its unspoiled environment. At the same time, she rejects her original country's patriarchal traditions and religion – such as arranged marriages and prejudice – as well as the patronizing and colonizing attitude of her Australian husband in her new homeland.

In Tom Cho's story "Dinner with my Brother", playing with the Chinese tradition and importance of naming, the author depicts a young Chinese narrator revealed eventually to be Tom Cho, his brother and other Chinese characters to point out both the difference in diasporic position of the older generation of Chinese Australians and the new generation who accepts the new country to be their homeland and in which they fully use and are adapted to the popular culture, media and technologies they are influenced by. Parodic recontextualization of their names and naming in the new Australian cultural environment becomes a point of incompability between their expected diasporic position as understood by William Safran and their new position of "transnation" as understood by Bill Aschroft and which is defined above. The transnation position of the characters in both stories enables them to accept living their new life, understanding the new country as their homeland.

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