

«THE MANY FACES OF HYBRIDITY IN CHINESE/AMERICAN FICTION OF THE 1990S»¹

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People keep asking where I come from
Says my son.
Trouble is I'm american on the inside
And oriental on the outside.

No Kai
Turn that outside in
THIS is what American looks like.²

1. INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL AND/OR BIOLOGICAL HYBRIDS

Like other so-called «ethnic literatures,» contemporary Chinese/American fiction focalizes the question of ethnic identity. A number of recent novels highlight the extent to which Chinese/American subjects have to position and define themselves

1. Throughout this essay, and despite common practice favoring the hyphen to name writers of non-white European origin, we have adopted the slash. We subscribe to D'Alfonso's ideas, following Tamburri, that «[t]he slash unifies the two terms instead of semantically dividing them,... [it] creates an active confrontation that keeps the meaning of the terms vibrant, both individually and conjointly» (19).

2. Mitsuye Yamada, «Mirror Mirror» in *Camp Notes and Other Writings* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1998; originally published in 1976). Although written by a Japanese/American, this poem addresses the feelings of all Asian/Americans.

as regards either the mainstream or their distinctive tradition. In a way, they seem to be trying to give an answer to the questions Bhabha voiced in «DissemiNation»:

The discourse of the minority reveals the insurmountable ambivalence that structures the *equivocal* movement of historical time. How does one encounter the past as an anteriority that continually introduces an otherness or alterity into the present? How does one then narrate the present as a form of contemporaneity that is neither punctual nor synchronous? (*The Location of Culture* 157)

The anxiety connected to this «double consciousness» is sometimes conveyed through a mixed-race character, whose biological blend of races comes to stand for the cultural in-betweenness of the subject. This is the case in three novels published in the mid-1990s: Aimée E. Liu's *Face* (1994), Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), and Shawn Wong's *American Knees* (1995). In this paper, we would like to bring the insights of post-colonial theory, and more specifically from Bhabha's notion of hybridity, to bear on our reading of these novels. In addition, we would like to argue that their conceptualization of the cultural hybrid and the biological mixed-race person may contribute some answers to the question of identity among Chinese/Americans.

It may be argued that the deployment of post-colonial theory would be inadequate for this purpose because the situation of the Chinese in the United States is not properly «colonial».³ Nevertheless, it is an inescapable fact that during the 19th century China suffered the effects of the imperialistic policies of several powers (Great Britain, France, the United States, Japan, etc.), and this in turn was the cause of a steady stream of Chinese immigrants to America. As a result, like other ethnic groups in the latter half of our century, Chinese/Americans came to see themselves «as having been exploited in the interests of dominant groups within [the nation]. Their situation has been interpreted as one of internal colonialism» (Richmond 297). Thus, though not strictly a post-colonial society, the features which define the Chinese community in the United States can be explained from the perspective of post-colonial theory (Childs and Williams 10, 13).

Moreover, post-colonial criticism has posited, in recent times, questions regarding racial, ethnic, and cultural identity that are crucial to the analysis of minority writing. Critics have pointed out how «discourses of 'civilization,' 'nature,' and 'race,' came to support and reinforce each other, not covertly but blatantly, during

3. On the ongoing debate surrounding the opportunity of applying post-colonial theory in U.S. studies in general terms, see for example Manzanar and Benito's «El canon literario y la enseñanza de la literatura norteamericana» (96). Too, Caporale has rehearsed the development of post-colonial studies in the U.S. in «La teoría literaria dentro de la crítica cultural» (406-27). As concerns the study of U. S. ethnic literatures, theorists such as Ann duCille have maintained the usefulness of postcolonial concepts: «What we [African/Americans] seek is a precolonial connection; what we theorize is a postcolonial condition; what we're stuck with is a perennial colonial contradiction» («Discourse and Dat Course: Postcoloniality and Afrocentricity» 121).

the period of colonial expansion» (Childs and Williams 189). Like other theoretical schools, post-colonialism in recent times has emphasised the discourse of race as one that, acknowledged or not, underlies all social positions and is therefore always at work (Childs and Williams 192).

Similarly, post-colonial critics' explorations of the workings and effects of diaspora and migration have contributed to map out the fabric of multicultural societies. Accordingly, Stuart Hall states the significance of diaspora as a determinant factor in the configuration of identity, a cultural construct which, in the context of multicultural environments, he dissociates from purity, relating it instead to heterogeneity: «Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference» (402). Making specific reference to the African diaspora, Loomba argues that multicultural encounters give rise to a model of society that disavows any strict configuration of racial purity. Loomba goes on to discuss the "fluidity" of (post)colonial identities, among which the hybrid subject stands out, and suggests the unavoidability of "becoming" in the construction of inter-cultural identities (178). Thus, her arguments come to problematize those binary oppositions which dominate Western thought, and especially cultural relations, proposing instead a model of syncretism and hybridity which combines and destabilises those previous, clear-cut categories. Above all, it has fallen to Homi K. Bhabha to call for

... the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood –single or communal– that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (*The Location of Culture* 1-2).

Central to this theory of interstitial spaces between cultures is the notion of the hybrid. Hybridization, defined generally in cultural terms as the quality of multi-ethnic, multi-lingual or multi-racial societies, but often also as the socio-cultural result of the biological intermingling of different races, is commonly viewed in the context of post-colonial studies as a «strength» rather than a weakness (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 183). The figure of the hybrid, as it comprises the best of two worlds, challenges monolithic cultural representations, and suggests a way out of binary categories. Significantly, Bhabha theorizes about the social and political status of the hybrid, stating that cultural hybridization entails the deferral of power from authoritarian positions towards more democratic perspectives, and the re-negotiation of hegemonic practices, thus offering new alternatives to the inscription of the «hybrid» as cultural signifier:

Such negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration. It makes possible the emergence of an «interstitial» agency that refuses the binary representation of social antagonism. Hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not

seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty. They deploy the partial culture from which they emerge to construct visions of community, and versions of historic memory, that give narrative form to the minority positions they occupy: the outside of the inside: the part in the whole. («Culture's In-Between» 58)

Following Fanon's claim about the «doubleness» of the hybrid individual, at once unable to get rid of the racial markers s/he despises, and to embody whiteness fully, Bhabha admits that this process of hybrid acculturation will always remain ambivalent (the dual image of the hybrid perceived both as different and the same) (Loomba 176). In his influential essay «DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation», Bhabha has explored to what an extent the Romantic notion of the nation-state as community founded on a narrative of common origins has given way nowadays to a nation «split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population. The barred Nation *It/Self*, alienated from its eternal self-generation, becomes a liminal signifying space that is *internally* marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference» (*The Location of Culture* 148).

In encompassing these heterogeneous histories, the modern, plural nation has become a site of instability and ambivalence, which admits of ex-centric subject positions. Bhabha's theories are then of peculiar usefulness to the study of «ethnic literatures» in the West, as he himself has proved by often drawing examples from African/American writing. This particular situation of dis-location, which recurs in other ethnic communities as well, turns out to be problematic for those hybrid subjects who live «in-between». In Hall's terms, hybrids will be in charge of «positioning» themselves, and making choices in order to define their unstable cultural identities («Cultural Identity and Diaspora» 395).

The Chinese/American community currently exists in such an interstitial space. Having immigrated in the second half of the 19th century, after several generations the Chinese/American communities feel torn between a sense of tradition that weighs heavily on their identity-building processes and the difficulties of currently enacting that difference. This is what Bhabha, putting Kristeva's ideas to a different use, has identified as the dichotomy of «the process of identity constituted by historical sedimentation (the pedagogical); and the loss of identity in the signifying process of cultural identification (the performative)» (*The Location of Culture* 153). The implications of this ambivalent process are also detected by Hall, as he proposes the interplay of past and present in the creation of plural identities: «Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialist past, [cultural identities] are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power. Far from being grounded in mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past» («Cultural Identity and Diaspora» 394).

Furthermore, Bhabha's notion of the hybrid could apply to the Chinese/American in other ways as well, as we noted above. In analyzing the gradual

process of global hybridization of the post-colonial subject in multicultural environments, biology traits and cultural referents seem to overlap, and miscegenation could then be understood as the biological counterpart of cultural hybridity. Mixed-race subjects have to move in just such in-between spaces, since they are determined by skin color and are not allowed to benefit from the privileges that white citizens enjoy.⁴

Moreover, the history of the Chinese in the United States prevented endogamous unions and encouraged cross-racial liaisons, since the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 caused a serious imbalance of the sexes –most of the early «sojourners» having come alone, leaving their wives behind– that could not be corrected until fairly recently. This resulted in a proportionally high rate of inter-marriage, often with white women, in the opening decades of our century, as the fierce anti-Asian feeling of the 19th century started to fade away (Sowell 133-54). What's more, outmarriages have remained a fact to this date: only in the 1980s it is estimated that 31.5% of all Chinese marriages in the U. S. involved non-Chinese partners (Tong 186). Thus, the theme of miscegenation is neither a rarity nor historically irrelevant. On the contrary, it is closely related to the experiences of Chinese/Americans, and therefore it cannot come as a surprise that a number of contemporary authors use mixed race as the vehicle to explore their anxieties on identity.⁵

2. CHINESE/AMERICAN FICTION OF THE 1990s AND THE HYBRID

In his exploration of the representation of identity in (post)colonial communities, Bhabha comes up with the concept of «mimicry», which he describes as a common strategy among colonial subjects. These people in-between, Bhabha admits, will try to overcome difference by imitating the ethnic discourse of the mainstream:

[T]he discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference... [M]imicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation: a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which «appropriates» the Other as it visualizes power. (*The Location of Culture* 86)

4. The concept of hybridity has been put to good use in other ethnic American Literatures, remarkably by Gloria Anzaldúa's definition of border identities and «the new mestiza» consciousness.

5. Since we will be tackling both aspects of the idea of hybridity (cultural and biological), for the sake of clarity we will, from now on, refer to Chinese/Americans to signal the cultural approach, and to Amerasians when we adopt a biological outlook.

In the examples of Chinese/American fiction we propose, their authors single out the efforts of Chinese/American and Amerasian characters to re-negotiate the «spaces of slippage» found in the interstices of their mixed identity. The characters portrayed in these novels are always positioned in the boundaries between ethnic stereotypes (in the coordinates of the «almost the same but not quite»), and usually strive to define themselves in opposition to the racial features they seem to despise. By so doing, they finally come to reflect on the characteristics that make one American versus those which make one Americanised.

Cynthia S. Wong has claimed that a similar defence mechanism is adopted by Chinese/Americans in order to cope with their hybrid identity. They will embody the model of the «racial shadow», Wong suggests, in order to dissociate themselves from the Asian markers with which white American society usually associates Chinese/Americans. As a result of this devaluation of Asian values, these subjects will create a fake «racial» *doppelgänger* to whom they will assign the ethnic features they abhor. Furthermore, as Wong points out, the construction of the «racial shadow» or ethnic other always springs from a need to compose a plural self: «The double is symptomatic of a crisis in self-acceptance and self-knowledge: part of the self, denied recognition by the conscious ego, emerges as an external figure exerting a hold over the protagonist that seems disproportionate to provocation or inexplicable by everyday logic» (*Reading* 82). In this respect, this cultural product could be faithfully applied to the experience of the hybrid subject. In the process of becoming these individuals enact, they tend to dissociate themselves from the racial signifiers which cannot be assimilated to the mainstream culture. In practice, Amerasian characters will realize that it is easier to expunge Asian features, and more complex, however, to accommodate to white standards (Wong, *Reading* 99).

Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) sets out to question the processes of constructing one's own identity in the context of multicultural and multiracial societies. It tells the story of Olivia Yee and her half-sister Kwan's life in common. Kwan, born to Olivia's father from an earlier marriage before he emigrated to the United States, only joins her American family after his death. The novel spans nearly thirty years, from Olivia's childhood and adolescence, marked by her sister's obsession with China and her privileged contact with the world of Yin, to her thirties and her marriage to Simon. All along, Olivia's efforts concentrate on obviating Kwan's presence and her overwhelming attentions, and trying to get back to «normal», that is, to assimilate her hybrid identity to a white American conduct. Significantly, Olivia has to cope with Kwan's constant interference, with her mysterious stories about the dead, and with her advice on her ruined marriage. Moreover, Tan's novel focalizes the relationship between two hybrid individuals of Asian descent, Olivia and Simon, and shows how only by Olivia's reconciliation with her Chinese past, and by valuing her hybridity against white American standards, will she be able to take the reins of her life, and accept an equal-to-equal exchange with her husband.

Raised in San Francisco, and daughter to a Chinese father and a white American mother, as a child Olivia is in trouble to place Kwan in an identifiable ethnic and cultural category. In spite of her half-Chinese ascendancy, she cannot help fantasizing about the sister she has never met:

Mom had said that a big sister was a bigger version of myself, sweet and beautiful, only more Chinese, and able to help me do all kinds of fun things. So I imagined not a sister but another me, and older self who danced and wore slinky clothes, who had a sad but fascinating life, like a slant-eyed version of Nathalie Wood in *West Side Story*, which I saw when I was five. (HSS 7)

Unfortunately, once she arrives the real Kwan seems to represent a rather different version of China for Olivia, whose previous contact with Asianness had been Chinese take-out, «like every one else» (HSS 6), by what she means like any other typical American non-Chinese family. Never before had she questioned her identity. With Kwan at home, however, she gradually realises the differences between their respective cultural backgrounds. The figure of Kwan, standing for «Chineseness» in excess –her difficulties to speak English fluently, her continued references to China, her belief in the parallel reality of Yin– constitutes the role model she abhors but unconsciously entices her: her «racial shadow» in Wong's terminology.

From that crucial moment onwards, Olivia starts to analyse her hybridity, having to decide, for example, what part of herself she had inherited through her father's genes (HSS 18). Also significantly, she continually attempts to define herself in opposition to her half-sister who, in turn, seems to find every point of likeness in them: «In spite of all our obvious differences, Kwan thinks she and I are exactly alike. As she sees it, we're connected by a cosmic Chinese umbilical cord that's given us the same inborn traits, personal motives, fate, and luck» (HSS 19). Whereas Kwan seems to rely on the possibility of sharing cultural traits among individuals with similar biological features, Olivia does not believe in that concept of cultural inheritance. Little by little, though, she comes to admit their commonalities.

To achieve a proper balance between her American sense of self and her newly acquired Asian background will not be an easy task for the hybrid, since there spring serious cultural contradictions: «Privately I [Olivia] replaced her notions of ghosts and the World of Yin with Vatican-endorsed saints and a hereafter that ran on the merit system» (HSS 45). Actually, however, the difference between «pure» (Chinese or non-Chinese) and hybrid subjects lies in the fact that the latter may subscribe to more than one set of distinctive culturally-specific markers.

It was precisely their mixed race that brought Olivia and Simon together at the beginning. Since that moment, he has stood for her racial counterpart, for the «other half» she was looking for:

I noticed him right away because like me he had a name that didn't fit with his Asian features. Eurasian students weren't as common then as they are now, and as I stared at him, I had the sense I was seeing my male doppelgänger... Simon didn't look like any particular race. He was a perfectly balanced blend, half Hawaiian-Chinese, half Anglo, a fusion of different racial genes and not a dilution. (HSS 59)

Despite their hybridity in common, what Tan calls here «fusion» of different races, Olivia will have to fight Simon's reluctance to forget her previous girlfriend Elza, a white American of Polish Jew descent, who even after death competes with Olivia for Simon's love. Olivia is made to believe that Elza represents a model of perfection she could never match, although her recurrent wish is to undermine other people's expectations, as when she chose her step-father's Italian surname to go with her Chinese features. As she argues against Simon and Elza's defense of determinism: «I don't think that's true, that stuff about inherited nature, as if we're destined to develop into a certain kind of person without choice.... I mean, how do we define natural? Who's to say what's natural and what's not?» (HSS 64). At first sight Olivia seems to find the notion of a biologically-determined identity greatly suspect. But under the surface, these counter-arguments are part of an array of weapons which Olivia employs in order to reject a «Chineseness» that secretly embarrasses her, and thus in order to be able to assimilate to the white norm with an easy mind.

Tan makes this strategy more evident by means of a subplot that in the novel comes to mirror the features and the plight of the protagonist. In this subplot, narrated by Nunumu, Kwan's counterpart, Miss Banner and Yiban Johnson function as *alter egos* for Olivia and Simon respectively. Both subplot characters seem to belong to the world of Yin, and are described as hybrid, too. The son of a Chinese mother and an American father, Yiban is said to be a «go-between», «a lizard,» even «stained both ways» (HSS 29). However, he is invariably associated to his Chinese descent, and is forced to behave accordingly. Miss Banner also shares Chinese and non-Chinese features in her own way: «[S]he could sense the world like a Chinese person. But it was always this sixth way, her American sense of importance, that later caused troubles between us» (HSS 43). Both half-blood characters partake of a troubled identity that makes them reflect on their uncertain origins, and wonder about their sense of belonging, as Yiban does regarding his ascendancy:

Look at me. I was born to a dead mother, so I was born to no one. I have been both Chinese and foreign, this makes me neither. I belonged to everyone, so I belong to no one. I had a father to whom I am not even one-half his son. Now I have a master who considers me a debt. Tell me, whom do I belong to? What country? What people? What family? (HSS 133)

Much in the same way as Yiban, Olivia is at pains to accept her «doubleness». In the chapter «Name Change» she weighs up the pros and cons of changing her surname, Yee, which after all had not really belonged to her father, who had used someone else's passport to get into the United States. She reasons thus: «As I think more about my name, I realize I've never had any sort of identity that suited me» (HSS 140-41). In the process of elucidating her composite nature, Olivia elicits some of the vital questions concerning the issue of hybridity lately debated in the American scene: what is to be ethnic; to what an extent can hybrids

balance biology and culture; and whether it is necessary to choose one of their halves and discard the other. In the light of this debate, Olivia's brother Kevin summarizes the situation as follows: «“It's hip to be ethnic” “But wearing a Chinese badge doesn't really get you any bonus points”, Kevin says. “Man, they're cutting Asians out, not making any more room for them”» (HSS 141). His conclusion seems to be that, although having a recognizable ethnic distinctiveness seems to be appealing nowadays, there are fewer opportunities for Asians in the United States than for other minorities.

As happens elsewhere in Amy Tan's fiction,⁶ after a failed attempt to find their place in their homeland, an eventual journey to China propitiates a reconciliation with her two halves as well as with her husband. Only there can Olivia unite her two disparate halves:

I gaze at the mountains and realize why Changmian seems so familiar. It's the setting for Kwan's stories, the ones that filter into my dreams. There they are: the archways, the cassia trees, the high walls of the Ghost Merchant's House, the hills leading to Thistle Mountain. And being here, I feel as if the membrane separating the two halves of my life has finally been shed. (185)

The journey to China provides the happy ending for the novel and for the love story between Olivia and Simon as well. Only in the country of her ancestors can the protagonist accept her «doubleness» and achieve a reconciliation with her husband. Although in their mixed race both characters complement each other, this was not enough to warrant their successful partnership. Olivia's new learning to cope with the Chineseness that her sister Kwan represents in excess now allows her to overcome her inferiority complex about her mixed blood and her supposed lack of a distinctive identity. Even though Kwan epitomises all the ethnic features that Olivia has tried to eradicate in herself, and though she turned her younger sister's life as a child and a young adult into a nightmare, her appearance and influence is crucial in the novel, since she bridges the gap between Olivia's desire to assimilate and her need to come to terms with the part of herself which is Chinese. All in all, and despite the newly-acquired proximity, there are some differences between the half-sisters that cannot be obviated: «Why question the world, indeed? Because I'm not Chinese like Kwan. To me, yin isn't yang, and yang isn't yin. I can't accept two contradictory stories as the whole truth» (223).

Like *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Shawn Wong's *American Knees* (1995) focalizes the interaction between Asians, to the point that it reads as a biopsy of such a relationship and of the negotiations that the partners have to undertake in order to make it work. Shawn Wong's choice of such partners is very telling. On the one hand is Raymond Ding, a third-generation Chinese/American who is experiencing a deep identity crisis. On the other is Amerasian Aurora Crane, who has always taken her

6. The only exception is Tan's latest novel to date, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001).

racial heritage for granted. The writer makes the most of the confrontation of both stances: the racially pure subject who nevertheless is a cultural hybrid (and feels the less because of it) vs. the mixed-race subject who prefers to assimilate to the white mainstream if she can.

Although Raymond has a degree in public administration and specializes in minority affairs, his high level of political awareness only contrives to make him feel less «authentic,» wanting in Chineseness. As his friend Jimmy points out: «It's why foreign-born Chinese call American-born Chinese *jook sing*, hollow bamboo; me and Raymond look Chinese, but we're hollow inside, no substance» (AK 99). Raymond believes he is not what his looks proclaim him to be, and thus he feels attracted to those who really «are» what they seem, like his first wife Darleen:

[They] went to a Chinese restaurant, where Darleen ordered in Cantonese. The owner of the restaurant knew her father and didn't charge them. Darleen insisted on paying and left a twenty-dollar bill on the table, but the owner ran after her and gave her a bag of lichee candy, in which Darleen later discovered her twenty-dollar bill. The food, the money, the family honor, were played out to perfection in a classic Chinese morality play.

Raymond recognized all the right cultural signals. Darleen and her family would give him the large Chinese American family he'd never had. (AK 13-14)

Now divorced, Raymond's identity is even more unsettled, as he is missing the cultural signs that for a time made his ethnicity go unquestioned and unquestionable to all eyes, including his: «What good was a good Chinese son without a Chinese family in which to practice his legendary Chinese filial duty? What would Raymond do –go around telling people, “Hi, my name is Raymond Ding. I used to be Chinese, but my wife got custody of my ethnicity?” Raymond wondered if this was cultural diversity at its worst» (AK 11).

Two years after the divorce, Raymond becomes romantically involved with Japanese/Irish/American Aurora Crane, who, like Olivia in Tan's novel, prefers to live according to white, middle-class standards. This is not to say that she ignores or even rejects a racialized positioning; indeed, both Aurora and her sister Julia have experienced, for example, what it is like to have an American-born Japanese mother who is taken for their maid by strangers. She more simply chooses to adapt, whenever possible, to a white, supposedly non-racialized norm that can save her from the intricacies of being «ethnic», and in the process she has turned her ethnicity into a mere exoticism.

Underlying Aurora's conflict is not just a matter of race, but also of gender. The author dissects in the novel the layers of prejudices that weigh over Asian men and women's every action and word, as they feel compelled to measure and read each according to the cultural indictments of their time and society. No trivial encounter is completely neutral as the stereotypes of Asian masculinity and Asian femininity come into play: the myth of Asian domineering males vs. Asian

submissive women casts its spell over non-Asians and Asians alike.⁷ As Aurora explains to Raymond:

You ever go into a Chinese or Japanese restaurant with a date who is white or black? Well, how do you feel? You're scrutinized and made to feel like the outsider. Your date doesn't feel any of this friction and tension. He feels like he's been taken inside; you're going to order the good stuff, maybe talk a little lingo with the waitress for his benefit... [A]ll the while you're trying to figure out if your date is one of those guys who's got some kind of Asian-woman thing. And that «thing» runs the gamut from asking you to teach him how to use chopsticks, to figuring he's going to get a shiatsu massage, to wanting his tea leaves read, to trying to find out if my vagina is slanted. I've never been with any non-Asian man who hasn't at one time or another during our relationship tripped himself up and said something racist. They don't understand it when I say I'm not white. Their defense is that I'm half white... As I talked to you, I realized you'd let me just be a woman, not make me be an Asian woman ... I knew you wouldn't make being an Asian woman part of the sexual fantasy ... (AK 63-64)

Aurora finally gives up on their relationship when she comes to understand that, even though he does not fantasize about Asian women, «Raymond needs a woman who can be a hundred percent Asian every day. Some days I got tired of it» (AK 132). Their relationship is troubled and unstable because ethnic identity is to both of them highly elusive, and Asianness in particular an endless hall of mirrors, reflections that never materialise but that still manage to shape their interaction. Thus, their union is dominated by Raymond's preaching to Aurora about her ethnicity, as he tries to «broaden» her conscience and help her «feel ethnic,» (a positioning that should be understood to a certain extent as his attempt to broadcast the right cultural signs that may compensate for what he feels is his Chineselessness) and by Aurora's rebellion against what she considers his obnoxious and unnecessary teachings.

Like Amy Tan in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, Shawn Wong has amplified the repercussions of this inter-Asian clash by means of a range of alternative relationships in the background of their story. Thus Brenda, Aurora's American-born Japanese friend, once went out with a Korean man but their relationship could not prosper due to the prejudices of both their families: «The mutual stereotypes were too much to overcome: Japan's invasion and occupation of Korea ... versus Koreans' monolithic rudeness and abrupt manner» (AK 90). Another case in point is Aurora's sister, Julia, who has always passed for white, and who now lives with a black man. The way they

7. For a comprehensive analysis of the gendering of ethnicity, with detailed reference to the Chinese/American case, see Cynthia S. Wong's article «Ethnicizing Gender: An Exploration of Sexuality as Sign in Chinese Immigrant Literature» in Geok-Lin and Ling 111-29, and King-Kok Cheung's «Of Men and Men: Reconstructing Chinese American Masculinity» in Stanley 173-99.

perceive each other's difference gets in the way of their being together: «I think deep down Miles and I believe in each other, but there's a sense that both of us will be relieved if I just happened to find someone else who was Japanese or white or even mixed like me, or if he met a black woman. We don't say it. It's just there sometimes» (AK 132-33). What makes everything even worse is that Julia and Aurora's Irish/American father opposes that relationship, on the claim that he does not want his daughters to have to put up with the kind of racist attitudes he and their mother suffered the effects of.

American Knees is thus peopled with a wide range of non-white characters who feel troubled by their inability to measure up to (or to see beyond) what their looks typecast them for, and seeming and being remain disparate and unsettling, always getting in the way of successful interaction. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel Shawn Wong brings Aurora and Raymond together, though the closure is by no means neat: the cultural and the racial hybrid combined make up a whole that is only provisionally or strategically stable.

The focal point of Aimée E. Liu's first novel, *Face* (1994), is also and very prominently, the racial hybrid. The story centers on the search for identity of the Amerasian photographer Maibelle Chung, the daughter of an Amerasian father and a Caucasian mother. As the story unfolds, Maibelle's quest to understand herself merges with her quest to understand her father, the latter being the key to the former.

Joe Chung's life is a mystery to his family. A reputed photojournalist during WW2, he gave up his job and sought complete anonymity thereafter. The only glimpses of his past that his children get are to be found in a box dating back to 1937, «the China box» tucked away in the basement. The answer to the riddle of his identity, as Maibelle will eventually find out, lies in his Chinese father's rejection of his white American mother, whom he kept as a concubine, her whiteness being a symbol of his power. Joe lived a troubled childhood, hearing his classmates in the international settlement of Shanghai call his mother a Chinaman's whore, and himself a chink bastard (F 87 & 256). During his later sojourn in China, as a photojournalist for *Life*, his photos were used in order to target enemies of the regime, including Joe's own father, who was shot before his own eyes, this being the reason for giving up his career. From then on, Joe turned his back on China as well, and used his exclusion, his unbelonging as a form of safety.

Maibelle's quest for identity is even more troubled, as she is twice removed from Chinese roots she feels at best ambivalent about. Like her father, she grew up in a milieu that excluded her, a red-haired, green-eyed Amerasian in New York's Chinatown: «[The] girls I admired the most –the Yellow Butterflies– stood out too. Just one grade ahead of me and worlds apart, they had the flawless appearance of porcelain dolls. Pale skin. Flying cheekbones. Diminutive noses. Waist-length hair that hung straight ... and those classic almond eyes with their smoothed-down lids, as if carved in a single stroke» (F 1). For her, like for Shawn Wong's characters, seeming and being remain at odds with each other. Deprived of the looks, the language, and even of her father's memories, she was adrift in a world where she did not fit in. The other half of her heritage briefly took her every summer to a farm in Wisconsin, a

place of magic and wonder which came to an abrupt end with the death of her childhood friend Johnny.

Now an adult, Maibelle has been tormented by nightmares for well over a decade. Her attempt to cure herself of the nightmares through evasion (her father's strategy) has been useless, and so she finally decides she must face her past, in the belief that solving the puzzle will put an end to her nightly struggles:

I have to go back to Chinatown.... There are answers there, if I can face them. If I can get past the nightmare's silken web, plant my feet on the pavement, and prove to myself that I will not fall or spin or crash. That no one will care if I come or go.

The terror in a nightmare is that it never ends. If I can bring it to a close through real life, I should be able to subvert my terror. Then I might stop focusing on what's holding me back and finally see what I'm aiming for. (*F* 128)

A related sign of her disfunction is that Maibelle is unable to maintain a steady relationship, rather seeking refuge in short-term, purely sexual encounters with men who all exhibit clearly Caucasian features--blonde hair and blue eyes like her friend Johnny.

With the pretext of a photo assignment for a childhood acquaintance, American-born Chinese Tommy (now Tai) Wah, a social historian who is collecting Chinatown's sojourners' experiences for a book, Maibelle makes subsequent visits to Chinatown. As the suppressed memories start surfacing, they afford her pieces for the puzzle of the self she is trying to rebuild. Standing tall in many of these memories is Lao Li, a Chinatown antiquarian who may (or may not) have been Maibelle's grandfather, and who was her only bridge to her Chineseness. Lao Li gave her a Chinese name, Mei-bi (Jade Maiden), told her Chinese stories and taught her to write some Chinese characters. This fatherly figure nourished her Chinese side, most of all by insisting that, despite her looks, she did have it:

'... Mei-bi, you are not white bitch. You are child of bitch. If you marry Chinese man, you have almost Chinese babies. If your babies grow up and marry Chinese, spell of white bitch is broken.'

...

'Why didn't you pick my brother or sister? They're older. They could fix the spell a lot sooner than I can.'

'Not Chinese enough.'

'As Chinese as I am.'

'Same parents, but they are not Chinese like you.'

I scowled at him and flipped my red hair. 'I wish.'

'Chinese spirit is strong in you. I can never mind your red hair. You hear my stories. You pay attention. You work hard. You know.' (*F* 186)

Maibelle has since rejected that Chineseness she learnt she had due to one traumatic experience that has been buried in her unconscious all these years. After her family moved out of Chinatown, she still used to come back to visit Lao Li from time to time. On one of those visits, she was gang-raped by a group of young Chinese. She was only 14. With the help of her sister, she later had an abortion in secret. The tragic irony is that the group had been created by Lao Li himself on the model of the boxer movement in China. Thus, Lao Li had been for his beloved Mei-bi at once a source of nourishment and of pain.

Likewise, Maibelle has to learn that things are not one-sided, that Chineseness (hers and other people's) has many faces. At the end of the novel, the racial hybrid Maibelle represents has achieved a kind of balance. Poised on the brink of a new and promising beginning, daring for the first time to start a meaningful relationship, and with a Chinese man to boot (Tai Wah), she now accepts her in-betweenness: «I would not be able to live in Chinatown again. I understood that now. But I could not escape it either. No one in my family could. It didn't matter how far I ran» (328).

3. CONCLUSIONS

As the analysis of these three novels proves, the question of identity in multicultural societies is extremely unsettling and unsettled. Hybrid individuals, i. e. those whose ethnic background differs from the mainstream while roughly coinciding with the cultural trends of his/her time, have to come to terms with the conflictive ambivalence (in Bhabha's terms) which results from their in-betweenness.

As we have tried to point out in these pages, the approach of the three authors under scrutiny differs substantially, even though they all pay attention to this condition of hybridity as symbolised by the mixed-race character. Amy Tan's proposal to overcome racial divides seems to be clearly indebted to Bhabha's thought, especially regarding her idea of «fusion»: the blending of difference into a whole that does not dissolve the parts. Because Shawn Wong's allegiances seem to fall much more on the side of political activism, his character's tug-of-war between conflicting sides is in fact the method he uses in order to explore the material conditions and the discursive practices related to ethnicity in the United States nowadays, thus signalling towards the way they inevitably shape its performance. Finally, Aimée Liu's approach to the ambivalent nature of the hybrid seems to be more in line with psychoanalytic theory, in that she perceives the need for the hybrid to position him/herself regarding his/her Chineseness, but ultimately such Chinese «essence» is only accessible through a parent figure. Thus, the conflict between cultures and ethnicities is moulded on the conflict between father and child, as her novel's emphasis on inter-generation dynamics makes abundantly clear.

To a certain extent, however, these three Chinese/American authors attempt to find a productive and enriching balance between the different facets of the cultural/collectively-determined and private/individually-shaped self, and thus close their novels with the offer of a tentative reconciliation or, at worst, with the intimation

that these hybrid individuals have at least strategically learnt to live with themselves and their selves. As we have seen, the conflict between the individual and the collectivity is shaped on the trope of romantic love, the troubled character having to find his/her way through the nuances of a love affair (Simon/Olivia, Raymond/Aurora, Maibelle/Tai). The fact that such relationship is shown at the end of each novel to be at the very least, viable (whether or not it is perceived as permanent) signals a fulfilling reconciliation with the collectivity, a willingness to negotiate differences productively.

Even more importantly, these novels mark a shift in the terms of the cultural debate on ethnic identity, away from the polarities Asian/Caucasian that have occupied the foreground in the 1980s, to the potentially more interesting interplay of different Asian constituencies, and/or different Chinese constituencies. As Lisa Lowe has suggested, in terms of fictional structure this may as well entail leaving behind a generational, vertical plot in order to tackle a horizontal pattern, that is, spotlighting intra-generational dynamics rather than inter-generational connections, which in turn could de-essentialise Chinese/American identity (64).

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