

**This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint *may differ* from the original in pagination and typographic detail.**

Author(s): Pehkoranta, Anna

Title: Displaced desires : the dislocated self and melancholic desire in Chuang Hua's Crossings and Fae Myenne Ng's Steer toward rock

Year: 2015

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Pehkoranta, A. (2015). Displaced desires : the dislocated self and melancholic desire in Chuang Hua's Crossings and Fae Myenne Ng's Steer toward rock. *Amerikastudien / American studies*, 60(2/3), 255-273.

All material supplied via JYX is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorised user.

Displaced Desires: The Dislocated Self and Melancholic Desire in Chuang Hua's *Crossings* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Steer Toward Rock*

ANNA PEHKORANTA

ABSTRACT

This essay investigates two aesthetically innovative Chinese American prose narratives, *Crossings* (1968) by Chuang Hua and *Steer Toward Rock* (2008) by Fae Myenne Ng, which have so far inspired relatively few scholarly readings. Although published forty years apart, both texts convey a melancholic image of displaced desires—loved ones who are lost, beyond reach, or unresponsive—that is echoed by their complex narrative structure and rich stylistic repertoire. Drawing from the psychoanalytically informed notion of racial melancholia, this essay argues that in Chuang's *Crossings* and in Ng's *Steer Toward Rock* the dynamics of melancholia manifest most prominently in the ways their dislocated characters negotiate between a melancholic desire to preserve a lost object of love, on one hand, and a persistent quest for an integrated sense of self, on the other. By examining their dislocated Asian American subjects, transnational love affairs, and melancholic desire, this essay suggests that both writers contribute to a particular aesthetics and ethics of melancholia, in which identificatory and narrative boundaries alike are contested and transgressed. It further argues that melancholia is present in these two narratives not only as an ethical or political construct but equally as an aesthetic element that significantly adds to the ethical import of Chuang's and Ng's fiction.

Open and susceptible, the racial-ethnic body, delicately poised at the edge between racial imagination and material history, is the hypochondriacal body par excellence: the corpse that lives on, the body that resists mere materiality and dreams of company in the impoverishment of sociality.

Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (102)

Chinese American writers Chuang Hua's and Fae Myenne Ng's fictions explore transnational and dislocated Asian American subjects who are often at a crossroads of racial, gender, and sexual identities.¹ With the hybridity of their literary form reflecting the fragmentation and fluidity of identity formation in diasporic conditions, these texts portray characters crossing borders on multiple levels—spatial, temporal, and psychological. Chuang's modernist *Crossings* (1968), and Ng's critically acclaimed *Bone* (1993) and poetically structured *Steer Toward Rock* (2008) each convey a melancholic image of displaced desires: loved ones who are lost, beyond reach, unresponsive, or “wrong” in some other way. Loss,

¹ I wish to thank Pirjo Ahokas, Patricia P. Chu, Jopi Nyman, and the anonymous readers of this essay for their insightful comments and suggestions that helped me refine the ideas presented in this paper.

grief, and melancholia—commonly considered the pathological counterpart of mourning—are present in the novels as an ongoing conflict between the narrative endeavor and bodily experience, both equally constitutive of human existence. Chuang's and Ng's characters thus demarcate the boundaries of body and narration, which is reflected in the novels' rich intermixture of narrative styles and techniques. Counterbalancing the language of loss, mourning, and melancholia, each of these narratives displays a keen sense of self-reflection, active ethical agency, and a quest for personal emancipation. Transcending generic and stylistic boundaries as well as those defining race, gender, and sexuality, they are transnational and diasporic works par excellence.

My analysis focuses specifically on two of the above novels, *Crossings* by Chuang Hua and *Steer Toward Rock* by Fae Myenne Ng. Situated largely in the turbulent decade of the 1960s, when social and political movements transformed ideologies across America, both texts narrate a haunting, transnational love story, displaying a narrative structure that transcends conventional novelistic forms. This essay examines the novels' dislocated Asian American subjects and their melancholic desires as they manifest in both texts, paying specific attention to the characters' corporeal forms and the narrative endeavors at play in the two narratives. Through its emphasis on the narrative endeavors and their aesthetic expressions in Chuang's and Ng's novels, this essay also seeks to respond to the recently surfaced calls in Asian American literary studies for incorporation of more formal analysis in critical readings of Asian American texts and for drawing more attention to the aesthetic and the literary in Asian American writing.² Drawing on Anne Anlin Cheng's articulation of racial melancholia, or what she calls the "hypochondriacal response," to racial and cultural abjection (68-9), this essay argues that these works approach sexuality and desire largely in terms of loss and melancholia. The profuse number of images expressing temporal and spatial stagnation, specifically in *Crossings*—images of falling, sinking, or staying immobile—can be attributed to the inability of the characters to let go of the past, or more particularly, to let go of a lost object of love. Simultaneously, these novels suggest that the line separating "healthy" from "pathological" mourning may not be as unambiguous as Freud (1917/1955) originally argued and is commonly perceived in psychoanalytical theory, and that in socioracial dynamics, as Cheng notes, melancholia may in fact function as a necessary form of mourning (98). Moreover, David L. Eng and Shinhee Han's (2003) similar critique of the Freudian dichotomy also suggests that the process of assimilation contains both aspects, as becomes evident from the two novels discussed in this essay.

² Sue-Im Lee (2006), for example, notes that because of its political beginnings, Asian American literary criticism has been dominated by sociologically and politically oriented critical perspectives at the expense of approaches that would fully attend to the aesthetic dimension of Asian American writing. Contending that the aesthetic has been "a missing category of analysis" in Asian American literary studies (5), Lee argues for a "complementary possibility of a historically and materially engaged analysis that *also* recognizes the aesthetic as a rich critical variable" (1). Similar critiques have been voiced, for instance, by Zhou Xiaojing (2005) and Colleen Lye (2008).

Desire as Conflict in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*

Published in 1968, *Crossings* remains the only known written work by Chuang Hua.³ Its exceptional style, unconventional narrative content, and genre-crossing form have contributed to its well established title as the first modernist novel in Asian America.⁴ Weimin Tang goes even further, describing it as the earliest instance of *postmodern* Chinese American fiction, “whose avant-gardism lies not merely in its transgression of the boundaries of literary genres, but also in the novel’s content of multifaceted crossings mirrored in the experimental transgression of its form” (29). *Crossings* is also often characterized as an autobiographical or semi-autobiographical novel, although relatively little is known about the life of its author. The narrative concentrates on the numerous migrations and crossings—spatial, temporal, and psychological—of Fourth Jane, one of seven children in an upper-class Chinese American émigré family. Fourth Jane’s middle position in the family is not only determined by her ordinal position as the fourth child of seven; it is also reflected in her Chinese name, Chuang-Hua, which leaves Fourth Jane “belonging in name both to the male attribute and the female” (Chuang 31), as Chuang is the first name given to all the boys in the family and Hua is the second name given to all the girls. Suggestive of the ambivalence her parents feel toward having yet another daughter (Ling, Afterword 219), her Chinese name adds to the confusion and sense of displacement she feels. As an act of independence and in search of an integrated sense of self, Fourth Jane defies her father’s insistent efforts to marry her to a fellow Chinese expatriate and escapes to Paris, where she soon drifts into an unsatisfying, self-defeating romance with a married French journalist, who rarely answers or returns her phone calls and only appears on her doorstep when it serves his purpose.

From the very beginning, Fourth Jane’s romance with her French lover is set against images and episodes conveying memories of her childhood, of all the homes she has had in her life, and, most significantly, of her father.⁵ This con-

³ Chuang Hua is the Chinese name of Stella Yang Copley, who was born in Shanghai in 1931. The year of her birth also marks the beginning of the Japanese occupation of China, which severely escalated in 1937 when Japan invaded the cities of Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing (see, for instance, Chang 215-17). Chuang Hua fled the Japanese invasion with her family via Hong Kong to England, later settling in the United States, where she led an extremely private life, refusing both public recognition and interviews. She lived in New York and Connecticut, and died on June 25, 2000 (Chuang 224; Huang 122).

⁴ Amy Ling was the first to call Chuang’s work “Asian America’s first modernist novel” in her Afterword to *Crossings* (218). In *Reading Asian American Literature*, Sau-ling Wong also refers to *Crossings* as “the first modernist Asian American novel” (120), while Monica Chiu gives a more recent reading of *Crossings* as a modernist work of fiction in her article “Motion, Memory, and Conflict in Chuang Hua’s Modernist *Crossings*” (107). It may be an overstatement, however, to give *Crossings* the credit of being the first modernist novel in Asian America. For instance, H. T. Tsiang’s recently republished novel *The Hanging on Union Square* (2013) also features an experimental narrative form combined with an attention to questions of representation and reality, and might justifiably be characterized as a modernist novel. Originally published in 1935, Tsiang’s work also predates *Crossings* by more than thirty years.

⁵ Chuang Hua consistently refers to Fourth Jane’s father by the name “Dyadya” and to her mother by the name “Ngmah.” According to Wen-ching Ho, these are “dialectical terms of endearment used by people in and around Shanghai and Ningpo in China’s Jiangsu Province” (155).

stant flow of memories gradually sheds light on her conflicted yet deeply loving relationship with her father. Jane's impatient and often forlorn waiting for her absent lover is frequently paralleled with memories of her father diligently performing his every-day duties and caring for his seven children, or with images of the hospital waiting room where she keeps watch, awaiting for her terminally ill father to die. In her attempt to escape Dyadya's suffocating love and restrictive ways of managing his family—at times as if it were a business enterprise—Fourth Jane stumbles over her own inner boundaries, drifting into a relationship haunted by “the specter of paternal control” reinvented by her narcissistic lover (Chiu, “Motion, Memory, and Conflict” 115). *Crossings* begins with a random encounter between Fourth Jane and the Parisian journalist who, after writing his name and telephone number into her address book “in a tiny stiff script” (12), with almost paternal determination persuades her to call him later at the office, thus setting in motion the ensuing romance. The Parisian's controlled and disciplined handwriting echoes the structured and carefully organized order that Fourth Jane's father persistently seeks to uphold both in his work and in family life. Moreover, as if to underline Fourth Jane's failing attempt to escape paternal control by moving overseas against her father's wishes, her love affair with the Parisian journalist begins, quite literally, with Dyadya's watch: “She glanced at her watch, a round gold face with thin round numerals which Dyadya had bought on a holiday in Geneva the summer of 1938” (7). The import inscribed in this sentence, which begins the novel, reveals itself to the reader gradually, as the fragmentary images, impressions, and memories presented in associative order eventually find their right places in the reader's narrative imagination. Within one sentence, the reader is provided not only with the allusion to the protagonist's close yet complicated relationship to her father, but also with a reference to her family's cosmopolitan, transnational way of life and their upper-class background. Finally, the presence of Dyadya's watch in the very beginning of the novel suggests that the past is never truly gone but is instead an inseparable part of the present, to the extent that “time present is being told by time past” (Ling, “A Rumble in the Silence” 34).

Crossings is temporally situated over the course of several decades ranging from Fourth Jane's childhood years in the 1930s until her young adulthood in the 1950s and 1960s, marked by allusions to the Korean and Vietnam wars. Spatial and temporal settings remain mostly unspecified and must be extrapolated from several textual clues interspersed throughout the novel, often positioned amidst fragmentary images or seemingly isolated passages conveying memories from the past, distant and near. Such anonymity is characteristic of Chuang Hua's manifold stylistic and generic crossings, which reflect the inner fragmentation and displacement felt by her protagonist: “Her face appeared intolerably alien and unclaimed as the space and light around her” (40). The anonymity extends to the novel's characters, who are often left unnamed. Fourth Jane's Parisian lover remains forever anonymous, perhaps a sign of his ultimately replaceable role in the love story that merely frames Fourth Jane's narrative centered around her personal search for self (Ling, Afterword 218). Or, perhaps, his anonymity reflects her desire to “[render] him impermanent or unrecognizable” or to “[relegate] him to a lesser significance,” as Monica Chiu suggests (Chiu, “Motion, Memory, and Conflict”

115). Because the novel's characters are rarely referred to by name, one must rely on carefully placed intratextual clues to determine the focalizer or the object of focalization in a given passage. Narrated in third person, *Crossings* is mainly focalized through its protagonist Fourth Jane. In certain passages, however, the internal focalization shifts without prior notice so that it is difficult to immediately tell which character the interior monologue or stream of consciousness of that passage belongs to. In two chapters, Fourth Jane's narrative is suddenly interrupted to give way to Ngmah's and Dyadya's first person narratives.

In one passage, the solitary word "silence" is used repeatedly to denote the beginning of Ngmah's interior monologue, narrated in first person: "Silence. . . . Hanging in my cedar-lined closets are dresses none of which fit properly. Always a bit to take in a bit to take out. I long to find a dress that would fit me perfectly" (137). The internal clue that first allows the reader to conclude that the interior monologue in question in fact belongs to Ngmah and no one else is found in the second chapter, where Ngmah is sitting in her study overlooking the park, "altering the seams of a dress she intended to wear for her birthday dinner" (15). Significantly, the narrative mentions that she has spent "more than twenty years" (15) sewing and stitching in an effort to adjust dresses to fit her shape. Sewing, in *Crossings*, appears as a metaphor for negotiating a place for oneself in a new context, be it a new cultural environment or any new situation in life. While she longs to find a dress that fits her perfectly without the need of "letting out a fraction of an inch here, taking in a fraction there, lengthening and shortening" (15), Ngmah's ultimate wish is "to be seen in [her] perfect-fitting dress" (137). In a similar vein, Fourth Jane wishes to be seen, first by her father, who refuses to see her as anyone else but his daughter and therefore his creation, and later by her Parisian journalist. Before leaving for Paris, in a dramatic encounter with her father, Fourth Jane explicitly opposes Dyadya for the first time, declaring: "I want to go away. I want my separateness for a time. I don't know who I am outside of the old context and I'm afraid I might not survive the new" (196). She is referring to the strict familial order instigated by her father and the unwavering unity of the family members, now devastated by the arrival of a "barbarian" into the family, as her brother marries a white woman. While Dyadya eventually accepts Fifth James's Caucasian wife as the mother of his grandson, Ngmah remains adamant, and the drift between her parents causes Fourth Jane to "feel a terrible danger crossing" (196). Feeling powerless and at a loss in the face of her brother's choice and her father's eventual decision to side with his son instead of his own wife, Jane crosses the Atlantic in search of her separateness but ends up playing a "waiting game" with a man who, once again, sees but his own reflection in her (Chiu, "Motion, Memory, and Conflict" 116). Jane's sudden escape to Paris and her subsequent surrendering to the vaguely defined relationship with the Frenchman can both be seen as reflecting the melancholic ambivalence she feels toward her father's strict order, on the one hand, and toward her Chinese cultural past, on the other. To fully understand this melancholic ambivalence, it is necessary to consider melancholia from a theoretical perspective which departs from the Freudian notion of melancholia as a pathological counterpart to mourning.

In his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud famously argues that there is a fundamental difference between mourning as a healthy response to loss, and melancholia as a pathological or unhealthy response to loss. The essential difference between these two types of psychological response to loss, according to Freud, is that in the healthy course of mourning, the lost object will eventually be relinquished and replaced, as a result of which the grief will be overcome “after a certain lapse of time” (1955, 244). The melancholic, by contrast, is unable to replace the lost object and over time internalizes the loss, which results in “an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego” (246, 249). Freud further remarks that the melancholic’s relation to a love-object is typically complicated by a sense of ambivalence, as “countless separate struggles are carried on over the object, in which hate and love contend with each other” (256). It is this ambivalence that produces “a pathological cast to mourning,” resulting in guilt and self-degradation (251). Anne Anlin Cheng, however, questions the underlying binarist assumption that there can be a “clean cut” between healing or healthy relinquishment and pathology or unhealthy retention, suggesting instead that melancholia might also function as a “necessary, perhaps even continuous, stage of mourning” (98). For Cheng, there is an ambivalence to melancholia, the very logic of which is to “[repeat] the figure of loss in order to simultaneously commemorate and exorcise that loss” (98). Later attempts in psychoanalytical theory to overcome problems inherent in the Freudian dichotomy of “healthy” versus “unhealthy” mourning, she maintains, have managed to do little more than to reproduce the Freudian structure with minor alterations (219, n54). According to Cheng, the investment in an oppositional model of healthy versus pathological mourning is especially problematic in analyses of “socio-racial grief,” first, because a medical model of health versus pathology has historically been used as a means of racial discrimination, and second, because in socio-racial dynamics, “memory, loss, retention, and rejection ... revolve around ‘un-curable,’ persistent ties, allegiances, and interests” (99). This is precisely the kind of dynamics at play in *Crossings*, in which such “‘un-curable,’ persistent ties, allegiances, and interests” can be perceived as both disruptive *and* constitutive of subject formation.

This is evident, for instance, in the fact that Fourth Jane’s relationship with the Frenchman is fueled by a melancholic desire characterized by an ambivalence she feels toward her newfound independence, which she has gained by violently distancing herself from her birth family. Reflecting this ambivalence toward her new relationship—which can be seen as reflecting her equally faltering sense of self with regard to her own family history and her racial and cultural background—and the undulating movement between relinquishment and retention, *Crossings* is replete with passages related to food, cooking, and eating, which often find stark contrasts in fragmentary images dedicated to death, decay, and the unsavory. In one fragment, a sanitary pad is soaking in a “basin of bloody water” next to a “basket of purple red lichees and yellow loquats,” followed by a sudden thought: “Time for tea” (43). In another instance, Fourth Jane dashes out in a hurry to find fresh sea urchins for her Parisian lover, who “devour[s] creatures of the sea ... but especially sea urchins their digestive systems palpable and visible, blood and vomit, the salt clay taste of the sea” (97). As the end of the novel approaches, Fourth Jane is seized by

“a gnawing lust ... which only crabs could satisfy” (206), but after she has found her way to a restaurant that serves crabs exactly the way she craves them, she suddenly “[feels] like throwing up” (211). Passages contrasting not only images of beauty and ugliness, but also the opposite desires to devour and disgorge, both literally and metaphorically, are remarkably frequent in *Crossings*. Chuang’s ambiguous, contrapuntal imagery reflects Fourth Jane’s inner conflict and the contrasting urges of her melancholic desire and functions as a way of “commemorating” and “exorcising” the losses of her life. Cheng argues that “‘gagging’ literalizes the melancholic condition of race in America: as a culture, *America gags on what it refuses to see*, for ‘American culture’ is continually confronted by ghosts it can neither emit nor swallow” (133). In a slightly different sense, the ability to neither “emit nor swallow” is at the heart of the condition afflicting Fourth Jane, who is forced to choose between her ethnic affiliation represented by Dyadya’s order and taking a feminist stance toward finding security in herself. This unresolved inner conflict is what causes Fourth Jane’s “psychical injury” (Chiu, *Filthy Fictions* 43). Finally, the feminist act of taking control over her own sexuality, while betraying her ethnic affiliation, functions as an important act of subversion, in the same vein as Leslie Bow has suggested (11).

The ambivalence inherent in her melancholic condition manifests in passages expressing Fourth Jane’s inability to be decisive in her life. The emotional and physical stagnation is so paralyzing that “on certain days moving from one room to another in her apartment was the only displacement she felt capable of undertaking” (Chuang 116). Fourth Jane’s relationship with her Parisian lover is equally lacking in direction, fueled only by a weakening flame of “stagnating desire” (Chiu, “Motion, Memory, and Conflict” 116). Afraid that she will miss his phone calls or that he will arrive unexpectedly, she makes hasty dashes to run her errands and buy food to cook for him, rarely venturing very far from her apartment. Once, after not hearing from him for days, she goes to buy a newspaper from a stand next to his office building, “missing a heartbeat ... so hopeful of finding him right behind her” (Chuang 63). Upon returning to her apartment, she drops her keys “in her fumbling haste to open the door,” having heard “a distant ringing of a telephone” (Chuang 63). Other images reflecting Fourth Jane’s psychological ambivalence are connected to water. Images with running water in *Crossings* are often associated with actions aimed at tending flowers, vegetables, and trees—planting, watering, and cutting branches—thus giving a metaphorical expression to the desire Fourth Jane feels for beauty and life. Images of still water, on the other hand, represent her gravitation toward sleep, depression, and even death, as in the passage in which Fourth Jane, pregnant and consumed by conflicting urges, sits in a canoe crossing an unspecified lake with the man whose child she is carrying:⁶ “She closed her eyes. The slow glide of the canoe made her slightly sick

⁶ The anonymity of many of the characters referred to in *Crossings* has resulted in confusion among critics regarding Fourth Jane’s pregnancy and the father of her baby: Monica Chiu mentions that at the text’s conclusion, Fourth Jane is “pregnant with the French lover’s child” (“Motion, Memory, and Conflict” 120), but, according to Amy Ling, she “crosses an ocean to escape from a lover after aborting his child, yet longs for him in the foreign country” (“A Rumble in the Silence” 31). Based on textual clues—the father of Fourth Jane’s child asks her to “marry [him] and have the baby” (Chuang 201), an unlikely act from the already married Parisian jour-

and accentuated the sensation of her body's leaden weight that living thing nestled inside of her, gliding on the black lake infinitely deep, sleep, the sun will melt the ice in the picnic basket" (199).

The image of her body's "leaden weight" finds resonance in a small fragment placed early in the novel, interrupting a passage of Fourth Jane and the Parisian preparing their first dinner together, of a bird that "plunged like dead weight ten stories from the roof" (24). Death looming large at the end of the somber dive, the suicidal image suddenly changes: "Two stories from the pavement, with a single flap of wings, [the bird] skimmed above the quivering treetops and took off in a sweeping spiral till it disappeared behind the rooftops" (24). Much like the audacious bird, Fourth Jane takes a plunge into the unknown several times in her life, often not knowing what to do until destruction already seems inevitable. Disregarding the marriage proposal made by the man whose child she is pregnant with, Fourth Jane "step[s] out of his pebbled circle" (202), which he has created around her on the beach of a small rocky island "set in the middle of still black water" (198). Later in France, her affair with the Parisian journalist both begins and ends near or at "the Circle." At the beginning of the relationship, she arrives at the Circle sharing a taxi with the Parisian, who has given her wrong advice, thus causing her to miss her bus. Significantly, as the affair finally comes to an end several months later, she walks away from the Circle and into her apartment with her own two feet: "She shook away her daze, crossed the street and entered the house" (214). In a passage reflecting her surfacing sense of self, Fourth Jane remembers a time in China when she and Dyadya canoed into a field of wild rice to witness its growth. Slowly and silently, the growing stalks of rice push through the dark waters, feeding from the bottomless depths, yet reaching into the light: "Beneath the surface of the water flashing by, she saw stalks extending deep into the silent dark, the utter depths of the lake where she could not follow, the roots of stalks feeding and growing there" (202). Without offering a final closure to Fourth Jane's narrative, this image gives a subtle yet striking expression to her gradual inner growth and nascent personal emancipation.

On the surface, it might seem that Fourth Jane's melancholic condition manifest in her immobile corporeal form is not racial as much as it is particular to her gender. As noted above, before embarking on her self-exilic sojourn to Paris, Fourth Jane becomes pregnant by a man whom she does not wish to marry and subsequently undergoes an abortion; despite the fact that she voluntarily terminates the pregnancy, it seems reasonable to presume that the loss of the unborn baby might contribute to her melancholia later on. On closer inspection, one might interpret her decision as a refusal to not only submit to her father's will by marrying the father of her unborn child but equally as a refusal to be defined by her racial and cultural past. What ultimately sends her to the melancholic state of physical and emotional stasis is her eventual realization that her Parisian romance, far from her family and the United States, does not entail freedom from a racially determined past. She seeks refuge from family obligations by throwing

nalist—I am inclined to agree with Ling and conclude that the child is from an earlier relationship Fourth Jane had in America prior to her self-imposed exile to Paris.

herself into an unconventional love affair, which in the end turns out to be largely determined by her racial and cultural difference in her lover's eyes: "You have to go back. You have no future in America. You are an exile in America as you are in exile here" (Chuang 121). Fourth Jane's ambivalence toward her cultural past is clearly expressed in her response to her lover's position: "I couldn't live without America. It's a part of me by now. For years I used to think I was dying in America because I could not have China. ... Those wasted years when I denied America because I had lost China. In my mind I expelled myself from both" (121). Despite the novel's apparent focus on its protagonist's personal struggle for independence and a coherent sense of self, it becomes evident that her melancholia is caused by a series of losses that extend beyond the personal or the individual. Her emotional and physical paralyses bear a strong connection to her immigrant past as a war-time exile from China to the United States. The shadows cast by the Korean war, as well as her own immigration history, are explicit in the passage where she describes being torn between two competing identities:

Our engagement in Korea paralyzed me. I saw with dread my two lives ebbing. ... In that paralysis I lived in no man's land, having also lost America since the loss of one entailed the loss of the other. Moments I thought of giving up one for the other, I had such longings to make a rumble in the silence. But both parts equally strong canceled out choice. (Chuang 122)

One might conclude, on the one hand, that *Crossings* is a narrative that resists racializing discourses. Through its unusual and highly aestheticized literary form, and by portraying even the most private and personal emotions as conveyors of meanings that are socially constructed, the novel effectively demonstrates the inherent ethical potential of literature, which becomes perhaps most apparent in the ability of literary narratives to challenge conventional or normative ways of perceiving the world, ourselves, and others. While the seemingly unconventional romance that unfolds between Fourth Jane and the married French journalist soon reveals his racist and sexist attitudes toward her perceived Chineseness, it also casts Jane's own negative stance toward her brother's choice of an ethnically non-Chinese wife in a conflicted light. Although Fourth Jane eventually escapes from the unsatisfactory and demeaning relationship with the Frenchman, the novel's double exposure of ethnic stereotyping reveals the arbitrariness of any claims for ethnic authenticity or for an "original condition" (Chow 572). On the other hand, the emphasis the novel places on the ambivalence that characterizes Fourth Jane's diasporic existence highlights the constructedness of racial formations at large. At the same time, and well ahead of its time, *Crossings* also resists any postethnic claims that race and racialization no longer have a bearing on the possibilities available to individual subjects living in the increasingly globalized and transnational world. In this respect, little has changed during those forty years that separate *Crossings* from the publication of Ng's *Steer Toward Rock*. Ng's work treats the postethnic rhetoric with a similar suspicion, suggesting that the different historical and political discourses resting upon the notion of racialization have produced disparate racial pasts, which continue to cast their shadow over American society and its racial minorities well into the twenty-first century.

Gambling for Love in Chinatown: Fae Myenne Ng's *Steer Toward Rock*

Fae Myenne Ng's second novel is a genuine love story, in some respects in a more profound sense than Chuang Hua's *Crossings* is. In *Steer Toward Rock*, romantic love not only frames the protagonist's personal search for self, but it is at the very heart of the narrative. Jack Moon Szeto, Ng's protagonist and narrator, is bought into the family of Yi-Tung Szeto at the age of five. At nineteen, Jack is asked to join his "paper father" in San Francisco, California, where Yi-Tung Szeto has made a fortune by running gambling houses, thus earning him the name 'Gold Szeto.' Jack leaves his Chinese village and sails across the Pacific Ocean, knowing in his heart "that [he] too would not return" (4). Raised by Gold Szeto's first wife—unable to bear children of her own, it is told—Jack has never seen the man who bought him to be his son. Walking out of his home village, "as the first Japanese bombs fell," Jack catches a glimpse of the grief that he, too, will eventually feel: "with every woman I have loved, I have also feared her eventual sadness as I recall my last image of the Mother, her face aslant and her shoulders trembling in unrequited love" (4). In her hopeless resignation, she knows that her husband will never come back; in the documents held by the immigration officials, Gold Szeto has listed his "paper son" as a married man so that he can later bring in a "Replacement Wife" for himself using the "immigration slot" reserved for Jack's alleged wife (4). In debt to his "paper father," morally as much as financially, Jack accepts Gold Szeto's promise that in two years' time, he will be released from his false marriage and be free to marry whomever he wants: "He said in that time, my fake marriage would dissolve and I would have bought my life back. I believed it. Time was my trusted currency" (4). Nevertheless, when Gold Szeto finds a Chinese woman willing to be his mistress in exchange for her passage to the United States and asks Jack to claim her as his documented wife, Jack knows he has lost his freedom forever: "I heard one gate shutting with such a clang that I knew it would never open again" (52). Quite unexpectedly, Ilin Cheung, Jack's wife on paper, becomes his confidant and companion in loss; having already lost her father for America, she later loses her and Jack's unborn child, and before she can bring her mother to the United States to live with her, she loses her mother, too.

In Chuang Hua's *Crossings*, Fourth Jane's diasporic dilemma of not feeling 'at home' anywhere can be traced back not only to her racial difference, but equally to her gender. Race and gender both function as markers of bodily difference that largely set the stage for her melancholic and self-defeating desire toward the married French journalist. In *Steer Toward Rock*, Jack's life is equally determined by bodily difference marked by both race and gender. The novel is divided into five segments, each named to characterize the content therein in a single word that captures the essential narrative content of the part in question. The first part, named "Report," narrates Jack's personal immigration history and ends in his confession report; "Respond" recounts in two short chapters the "handshake" that follows the confession report; "Requite" takes off where the first part ended, covering a time period of as much as twenty years in Jack's life starting from the confession; "Return" takes the reader back to the day when Jack was sold to his "paper family"; and finally, the fifth part, named "Release," gives voice to Jack's

daughter Veda. In San Francisco, Jack's existence is defined, above all, by bodily necessities: he earns his living catering to the body. He works as "the only bachelor butcher" in numerous Chinatown restaurants and butcher shops, starting as a "Bird Boy" at Gold Szeto's Universal Market (11, 7). Priding himself on the quality of his work, Jack believes that "what a man [does] with his hands [speaks] his worth" (6). Days and nights spent draining blood, plucking feathers, and cutting meat in the garbage alley behind the Universal Market and in the basement galleys of Chinatown tourist restaurants is what Jack builds his identity on: "As a butcher, I wanted to harness the stroke that cut through bone; and as a man, I wanted to speak the mark. If there was a promise I could not fulfill, I did not inconvenience others by talk" (7). A man of honesty and integrity, determined to survive in a world where he can only lose, Jack knows better than to depend on words. Occasionally, he caters to desires other than those related to mere nourishment, serving the lonely "grass widows" whose absentee husbands are working on the farmlands in the Central Valley or on construction sites in the Southland. A monthly witness to their loneliness and slowly dying hope for their husbands' return, Jack eventually concludes: "what butchery taught me was that the body was the only truth" (5). But the fate of the grass widows is soon to be Jack's own, as he himself will feel the pain of unrequited love.

Throughout Jack's narrative, however, *Steer Toward Rock* conveys much more than a story of unrequited love; it also sheds light on a part of American immigration history rendered nearly invisible in dominant historical narratives. Jack lives his American life under a false identity, having bought his name and legal passage to the United States from a man who has also bought his way into the country. 'Jik Moon Szeto' is the name Jack buys from Gold Szeto against a debt worth four thousand dollars. Tellingly, his Chinese birth name signifies "to have trust" (55). When Gold Szeto wants Jack to claim Ilin Cheung as his lawful wife so she can enter the country and be Gold Szeto's mistress, Jack has no choice but to do what he is told. Even though Jack eventually develops a lasting friendship with Ilin and even though she later becomes a surrogate mother for his daughter, the woman Jack truly desires is the American-born Joice Kwan, who works at the Underground Bathhouse handing out towels. In the end, four thousand dollars is only a fragment of the price Jack has to pay for his life in America, as the novel's first lines suggest: "The woman I loved wasn't in love with me; the woman I married wasn't a wife to me" (3). Desperate to win Joice's love, Jack enters the Chinese Confession Program and gambles his citizenship for the mere hope that it will win him her heart. The Chinese Confession Program (1956-1965) was instigated, according to the official explanation, in order to allow Chinese immigrants who had entered the United States under false pretenses to confess their true identity in exchange for the status of an "alien lawfully admitted for permanent residence" and eventual naturalization (244). In reality, the program opened the door for the United States government to target certain residents of the Chinese community with the purpose of investigating and deporting those who were considered pro-Communist (Takaki 416). Because each confessor was required to disclose the names of every relative and friend, of whom some were prosecuted and consequently deported, the program instilled severe suspicion and paranoia within

the Chinese community, leaving “paper sons” everywhere anxious and fearful of their fate (Takai 416).

In *The Politics of the Visible*, Eleanor Ty asserts that the United States’ long history of contradictory and discriminatory immigration policy, directed specifically toward Asians, has created a “condition of invisibility” that continues to afflict Asian Americans (13). From the gold rush of the 1850s until the 1880s, Chinese laborers arrived in California, British Columbia, and the Pacific coast in large numbers to participate in gold mining, to build the first transcontinental railroad, to work on plantations and in factories, and to operate laundries and restaurants (13). Although Chinese immigrants were first welcomed because they provided much-needed labor, from the 1880s onward a “combination of exclusionary laws, discriminatory taxes, boycotts, hostility, and labour exploitation” made their lives in America increasingly difficult and rendered their entry and re-entry to the United States highly controlled (Ty 14). The emergence of “paper families,” such as Jack’s, increased significantly with the restrictive legislations set in place from the late nineteenth century onward to control Asian immigration to the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 initiated the “racialization of immigrant discourse,” denoting the first instance in American history that racial identity was made the foundation for “excluding immigrants and denying them naturalization” (Koshy 85, 34). During the period between the 1920s and the Second World War, in particular, Asian immigration to the United States was nearly non-existent (Ty 16). It took several decades before the discriminatory legislation slowly started to give way to a more liberal immigration policy; while The Magnuson Act of 1943 inaugurated the liberalization of immigration policy for Asians, it is the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that is commonly regarded as the culmination of the legislative reversal of anti-Asian exclusion (Eng 169).

According to his confession report (Ng 63), Jack was admitted in the United States in January 1954, when the entry of Chinese to the United States was not as restricted as during the exclusionary era but when racial quotas for Asian immigrants were still in use. Because of the restrictive legislation, most Chinese immigrants coming to the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were men, who, if they were married, were not allowed to bring their wives (Takaki 231, 235). During a period when antimiscegenation laws prohibited Asian men from marrying white women (Koshy 4) and Asian women were few in the predominantly male Asian community created by the discriminatory immigration legislation in place in the United States, love was often inherently melancholic due to structural and institutional racism. Despite the odds, Jack drifts into a series of sexual encounters with Joice, as a result of which Joice becomes pregnant, eventually giving birth to a daughter, Veda. Dictated in part by history, in part by his poor luck in love, Jack’s life is a constant struggle between his own sense of displacement and his melancholic desire, which is unwilling to let go of the lost object of love. After gambling his citizenship for Joice’s love and losing them both, Jack begins his story with a confession much more difficult than the one given to the officials: “I was almost loved. Love almost came true for me” (5). Regardless of Jack’s efforts to convince himself otherwise, body is *not* the only truth in Jack’s life, especially not after Joice becomes a part of it. When Joice first rejects Jack, declaring that

she is not in love with him, he is puzzled: “What did she mean? I had no idea. I understood love to be a shared fate, a feeling grown from seed, a flower eternally beautiful” (33). Jack and Joice are both feminist characters, who challenge stereotypical images of masculinity and femininity: after finding work “sexing chickens in Petaluma” (130), Joice leaves Veda to Jack who raises her with Ilin, his wife on paper. Ultimately, it is paternal love that gives Jack the strength and determination to tell his own story and find peace in it. Handing his story over to Veda for her to tell the rest, Jack knows that “no story matters till it is finished and the only stories that need telling are the ones whose endings do not fulfill us” (190). In the final segment of *Steer Toward Rock*, it is Veda who becomes the narrator and sets herself free from the burden of her father’s past. Acknowledging the constructedness of all identities, she realizes what Jack knew all along and what her mother’s name stands for—that love is a choice: “I chose Jack Moon Szeto. I chose his fake name, the name he lived half his life with, the name he made with his own sweat, the name he surrendered for love, the name that made him true” (255).

Jack’s condition can be further examined in the light of racial melancholia and the concomitant notion of hypochondria. When writing about “Asian American hypochondria” as an expression of racial melancholia, Anne Anlin Cheng states that like any hypochondriacal body, “the assimilating racial-ethnic body can also be said to be hypochondriacal in that it is, too, a body continuously plagued by questions of its own authenticity and etiology” (69). These are questions that largely define Jack’s life in *Steer Toward Rock*. Moreover, they define lives of racialized subjects everywhere. If melancholia is considered as a necessary form of mourning for racialized subjects, as Cheng argues, instead of appearing pathological, Jack’s melancholic desire—not giving up hope despite being continuously rejected—reflects his need to negotiate a place for himself in the new and often hostile cultural context. In a similar vein, David L. Eng and Shinhee Han note that “the ethnic subject does not inhabit one or the other—mourning *or* melancholia—but mourning *and* melancholia coexist at once in the process of assimilation” (363). This understanding of melancholia depathologizes it, allowing us to perceive the negotiation of racial melancholia as “*conflict* rather than [permanent] *damage*” (363). While the inner conflict inherent in the process of assimilation may be unpleasant, it is nevertheless an opportunity for personal growth. Before leaving little Jack to Yi-Tung Szeto’s house, Jack’s birth mother takes him across a river in the middle of which stands a large rock with three characters painted on its side: “Toward I Come” (112). Jack’s mother explains: “Trust rock. . . . Break fear upon rock. . . . Go toward fear. Trust fear. Steer toward rock” (112). This is the inheritance Jack wants to convey to his daughter; his confession and his relentless holding on to the mere hope of Joice’s love signify his unwillingness to let fear conquer love, even in the face of one loss after another.

In psychoanalytic terms, Jack’s melancholic condition is contingent upon several lost objects that he is unable to relinquish; some of them are persons he has loved, while others take a more abstract form. Conceptualizing the difference between mourning and melancholia in his afore-mentioned essay, Freud defines melancholia as a pathological response “to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country,

liberty, ideal, and so on” (243). In Jack’s case, some of the determining losses in his life fall under the first category, whereas others represent the second, more abstract form of loss. Among the most pressing of the losses he suffers are the loss of his birth mother and his blood family (and therefore his true identity) as a consequence of being sold to the family of his paper father. Another loss that haunts Jack’s life in America, and is at the heart of his melancholic desire, is caused by his inability to win over Joice’s love. For a while, losing her entails the loss of his daughter, too, as Joice resolves to raise their daughter on her own. Finally, Jack’s losing his American citizenship after he confesses his fake identity to the immigration officials is a loss that takes on a more abstract form, not least of all because its consequences remain rather vague throughout the narrative—Jack is, for instance, never deported from the United States, yet he shows great reluctance to seek naturalization even after his daughter offers to accompany him to the naturalization exam. Nevertheless, losing his citizenship as a result of his confession casts an enduring shadow over his life in his adopted country. One of the most gruesome consequences of his confession is losing his left hand as retaliation orchestrated by his paper father after being deported from the United States following Jack’s report. Unlike most of the novel, the incident that ends in Jack losing his hand is narrated in the third person. Jack’s gradual understanding of what is about to happen—the brutal severing of his hand—is narrated in an understated, almost declaratory style that is occasionally suspended by a disturbingly lyrical image or an abrupt question: “*Did Jack know? Did Jack feel?*” (110). As if in preparation for the excruciating pain about to be carved into Jack’s consciousness, the violent unraveling of events is interrupted by the memory of Jack’s birth mother taking him across the river to the village of his new family. The chapter ends in Jack’s final impression of a handshake taking place before his hand is brutally sawed off: “Jack only remembered the last impression of a handshake. In the stillness, he was confused between what was new and what was old. *Which hand did they shake? Which hand did they take?*” (113).

As it turns out later in the narrative, it is Jack’s left hand that has been dismembered. The handshake that precedes this gruesome act functions as an arresting metaphor for his conflicted and ambivalent position with regard to the American national body, which simultaneously incorporates and rejects him from its sphere. Jack’s lost hand is a constant and, even in its absence, very concrete reminder of the “corpse that lives on, the body that resists mere materiality and dreams of company in the impoverishment of sociality,” to use Anne Cheng’s (102) formulation quoted in the beginning of this essay. The fact that Jack loses his hand and not some other body part is not coincidental but rather suggestive of his wavering ability to connect with other people in his life, with his daughter in particular. Moreover, losing his hand also signifies that a part of Jack’s identity is lost forever, and not only because he can no longer work as a butcher—a profession that he has somewhat ironically shown an exceptional talent for—but also by association because he can no longer confirm his identity through fingerprints on his left hand. Based on what has been said above, I propose that Jack’s romantic longing in *Steer Toward Rock* and Fourth Jane’s melancholic desire in *Crossings* both coincide with racial melancholia, if we understand racial melancholia as a

necessary response to structural racism, as suggested by Cheng and others. What makes Jack's melancholia racial rather than merely personal is that the losses that outline his narrative are to a remarkable degree determined by his racial past. His ambivalence toward his lost objects is manifested in the way he nurtures the idea of one day returning to his native China, yet avoids taking any action that might lead either to his returning to China or to his eventual naturalization as an American citizen. In his melancholic ambivalence, Jack is neither fully Chinese nor fully American, and his identity is both false and true at the same time. Significantly, it is precisely the simultaneous inclusion in and exclusion from the American national body that lies at the heart of racial melancholia.

Critical Crossings

Published forty years apart, Chuang Hua's *Crossings* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Steer Toward Rock* represent different generations of Chinese American writing and were received by equally different audiences. Ng's *Steer Toward Rock* came out to a cultural and literary context that had undergone dramatic changes during the four decades since the publication of Chuang's *Crossings*, which appeared in a cultural context that was in many respects characterized by a lack of scholarly interest toward Asian American authors. Its publication preceded the first scholarly activity ever dedicated to Asian American literature by five years, as Amy Ling notes in her Afterword to *Crossings* (217). *Crossings* did not receive much critical attention upon its publication and soon went out of print (217), leaving it in complete scholarly oblivion until Ling finally broke the silence with her pioneering essay "A Rumble in the Silence" (1982). Fae Myenne Ng's *Steer Toward Rock*, by contrast, was welcomed with great expectation and a fair amount of critical interest, as fifteen years had passed since the publication of her highly acclaimed debut novel *Bone* (1993). During the forty years that separate the publication of the two novels discussed in this essay, much has happened both in the field of Asian American studies and in American society at large. Ng's discussion of the Chinese Confession Program in *Steer Toward Rock* makes a timely appearance at present when considered in light of the recent debates surrounding immigration and the possibility of establishing new forms of immigration amnesty in the United States. Since 1965, there has been a significant change in demographics, which has resulted in a substantial increase in the Asian population in the United States (Takaki 420). In fact, this demographic shift has been so extensive that the majority of Asian Americans are now Asian-born, first generation immigrants, as Lisa Lowe (269) has noted, so much so that this new immigrant population "can be said to constitute the newest racial formation of Asian Americans." At the same time, Asian American studies has become an established field of academic inquiry, which has in turn resulted in the establishment of numerous university departments and academic programs specializing in the field. Moreover, in the course of the past four or five decades, the body of Chinese American fiction has grown unprecedentedly and produced an impressive amount of research literature. Regardless of this, critical readings of Chuang Hua's *Crossings* are still

remarkably few in number; it remains to be seen how much scholarly attention will be devoted to Ng's *Steer Toward Rock* in the aftermath of the critical success of her debut novel.⁷

Besides these discrepancies in the cultural climates and the critical discourses surrounding their publications, there are certain other differences that clearly separate the two novels discussed in this essay. Class and socio-economic conditions are perhaps the most noticeable difference between Chuang's and Ng's narrative settings. As Wen-ching Ho notes, the narrative setting of a cosmopolitan upper-class Chinese émigré family sets *Crossings* apart from the majority of Chinese American fiction (151-52). Reflecting the upper-class background of its protagonist Fourth Jane, the narrative is dispersed between a number of spatial settings geographically and culturally distant from each other: China before and during the Japanese invasion, England, where Fourth Jane's family finds refuge from the invasion, the United States as their eventual home, and Paris as the destination of her self-imposed exile. Although Chinese American women writers often revisit China in their novels by dispersing the narrative between two separate spatial (and often temporal) settings—the United States (of the present) and China (of the past)—Chuang's decision to disperse the story among three continents and four decades is another path rarely taken in Chinese American fiction. A substantial portion of Chinese American writing, including Fae Myenne Ng's *Steer Toward Rock*, portrays life in the Chinatowns of San Francisco and New York, as Ho points out (151). Often, this reflects the socio-economic status of the novels' first-generation immigrant protagonists, who, like Jack Moon Szeto, earn their livings taking any odd job they can find, working as butchers and cooks, running a laundry business, or signing up to work on ocean liners, and their second-generation Chinese American children are left with the task of crossing those socio-economic boundaries that tied their parents to a life structured by economic uncertainty and endless amounts of work.

Despite the above differences that mark their respective times of publication and narrative settings, Chuang Hua's *Crossings* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Steer Toward Rock* share several important thematic and stylistic features. Both novels convey a story of unrequited love, albeit the narrative details in the two works are different. In addition to that, both narratives center around memory and the process of remembrance, suggesting that the undulating back and forth movement between the past and the present is indeed often necessary for psychological healing in socioracial dynamics. In this specific context, as Cheng has suggested, the melancholic retention of the lost object—be it love, homeland, or one's lineage—seems now essential for the process of mourning and for the emotional healing of the diasporic subject. Eng and Han even see a “nascent ethico-political project” in

⁷ In August 2014, there is a total of ten entries on Chuang Hua's *Crossings* listed on the website of the MLA International Bibliography. One entry is listed on Fae Myenne Ng's *Steer Toward Rock*, as opposed to the thirty-nine entries listed on her debut novel *Bone*. For a more detailed discussion on the critical reception and the innovative aesthetic form of Chuang Hua's *Crossings*, see Pehkoranta, “Shifting the Center,” and for a parallel examination of Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock* with a specific focus on their melancholic literary ethics, see Pehkoranta, “Negotiating Loss and Betrayal.”

the dynamics of racial melancholia, one in which a loved object is kept alive inside the melancholic's psyche at the expense of her or his psychological stability (364-65). What makes this kind of retention of a lost object particularly ethical is that the melancholic is willing to sacrifice her or his own emotional well-being in order to preserve something that is threatened by the surrounding world. The melancholic refuses to bring final closure to the loss, yet melancholia does not signify complete psychological stagnation, as Chuang Hua's *Crossings* and Fae Myenne Ng's *Steer Toward Rock* so eloquently demonstrate. The stylistic imagination and uniquely structured narrative form characteristic of both novels contribute to this ethical project of racial melancholia. In Chuang's and Ng's fiction, the dynamics of racial melancholia manifest most visibly in the ways their dislocated Asian American subjects negotiate between their melancholic desire to preserve a lost object of love and their persistent quest for an integrated sense of self. Melancholia is present in these narratives not only as an ethical or political construct but equally as an aesthetic element that significantly adds to the ethical import of Chuang's and Ng's fiction. The decision to use multiple narrators, then, is also an ethical choice; allowing us to view the world from conflicting perspectives, it is suggestive of the transformative power inherent in all kinds of crossings.

In both novels examined in this essay, loss and melancholia figure prominently, which may suggest several things. In *Steer Toward Rock*, loss evidently denotes the "racialized loss or lack" of equal civil, political, economic, and social rights or opportunities afflicting the Asian American subject since the late nineteenth century (Shiu 4). Further, loss also figures in the narrative on a more intimate level, denoting the loss or absence of a loved person. Both manifestations of the Freudian conceptualization of loss are equally at play in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*, albeit the latter, 'personal' manifestation of loss takes on a more prominent role in the novel. I suggest that the melancholic corporeal form of the protagonists in both narratives can be seen as emblematic of the historical loss or failure of the Asian American subject to become incorporated into the American national body; the dead or injured Asian American body symbolizes the failure or 'ailment' that afflicts the national self-image. Moreover, the elusive love affairs of both novels, or, in psychoanalytic parlance, the loss or absence of a loved person that cannot be completely overcome, can be interpreted as reflecting the difficult, partial, or failed integration of America's racial others into its national self-image. Through their innovative aesthetic form, characterized by abrupt shifts in time and narration, markedly lyrical language, and an abundance of arresting poetic images, both novels call attention to the melancholic ambivalence peculiar to the Asian American subject both on a communal and an individual level. In the national imaginary, this ambivalence suggests that the 'Asian American' functions as abject in relation to the 'American,' thus vacillating between exclusion from and inclusion in the national self-image, as David Li has suggested (6-8). On an individual level, the melancholic ambivalence of the dislocated Asian American subject materializes in her or his unwillingness to let go of the lost object of love, whether that is a loved person or a cultural past that is lost due to a political history of racial segregation and racially based immigration laws. In addition, both novels draw attention to parts of American history that might be characterized, in Russell Reising's terms, as "unused"

or forgotten by the dominant historical narrative (18). In *Steer Toward Rock*, the restrictive political history of Asian immigration to the United States is explicitly present, whereas in *Crossings*, its possible effects on the melancholic corporeal form of the novel's protagonist must be extrapolated from a number of dispersed and fragmentary references to the political context of the time and to the larger political history behind the individual family narrative. Because of the unusual aesthetic form and the, at times, enigmatic narrative structure of Chuang's and Ng's two works, the parallel examination of corporeality and the narrative endeavor also emerges as one way of responding to the recent calls to pay increased attention to literary form and the aesthetic in Asian American writing. I suggest that it is precisely through their peculiar aesthetic quality that these two Asian American novels draw the reader's attention to the ethical dimension of racial melancholia. In both novels, the dynamic of melancholia, in which the past is never completely lost or replaced by the present, becomes the very mechanism that constructs and maintains subjectivity, thus entailing a future that fully acknowledges its own historicity and its irremovable ties to the material histories of earlier generations.

Works Cited

- Bow, Leslie. *Betrayal and Other Acts of Subversion. Feminism, Sexual Politics, Asian American Women's Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. Print.
- Chang, Iris. *The Chinese in America. A Narrative History*. 2003. New York: Penguin Books, 2004. Print.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. *Melancholy of Race. Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.
- Chiu, Monica. *Filthy Fictions. Asian American Literature by Women*. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira, 2004. Print.
- . "Motion, Memory, and Conflict in Chuang Hua's Modernist *Crossings*." *ME-LUS* 24.4 (1999): 107-23. Print.
- Chow, Rey. "Translator, Traitor; Translator, Mourner (or, Dreaming of Intercultural Equivalence)." *New Literary History* 39.3 (2008): 565-80. Print.
- Chuang, Hua. *Crossings*. 1968. New York: New Directions, 2007. Print.
- Eng, David L. *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001. Print.
- Eng, David L., and Shinhee Han. "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia." *Loss. The Politics of Mourning*. Eds. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003. 343-71. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." 1917. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 14*. Trans. James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1955. 237-60. Print.
- Ho, Wen-ching. "Representing Diaspora and Identity Quest in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*." *Seeking the Self—Encountering the Other. Diasporic Narrative and the Ethics of Representation*. Eds. Tuomas Huttunen et al. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008. 151-67. Print.

- Huang, Guiyou. *Columbia Guide to Asian American Literature since 1945*. New York: Columbia UP, 2006. Print.
- Koshy, Susan. *Sexual Naturalization. Asian Americans and Miscegenation*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004. Print.
- Lee, Sue-Im. "The Aesthetic in Asian American Literary Discourse." Introduction. *Literary Gestures. The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing*. Ed. Rocío G. Davis and Sue-Im Lee. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006. 1-14. Print.
- Li, David Leiwei. *Imagining the Nation. Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Print.
- Ling, Amy. Afterword. 1986. *Crossings*. By Chuang Hua. New York: New Directions, 2007. 217-22. Print.
- . "A Rumble in the Silence: *Crossings* by Chuang Hua." *MELUS* 9.3 (1982): 29-37. Print.
- Lowe, Lisa. "Epistemological Shifts: National Ontology and the New Asian Immigrant." *Orientations. Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora*. Eds. Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa. Durham: Duke UP, 2001. 267-76. Print.
- Lye, Colleen. "Racial Form." *Representations* 104.1 (2008): 92-101. Print.
- Ng, Fae Myenne. *Steer Toward Rock*. New York: Hyperion, 2008. Print.
- Pehkoranta, Anna. "Negotiating Loss and Betrayal: Melancholic Ethics and Narrative Agency in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* and *Steer Toward Rock*." *Panic and Mourning. The Cultural Work of Trauma*. Eds. Daniela Agostinho, Elisa Antz and Cátia Ferreira. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012. 69-83. Print.
- . "Shifting the Center: Emotional Exile and the Aesthetic of Displacement in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*." *Positioning the New. Chinese American Literature and the Changing Image of the American Literary Canon*. Eds. Tanfer Emin Tunc and Elisabetta Marino. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010. 69-82. Print.
- Reising, Russell. *The Unusable Past. Theory and the Study of American Literature*. New York: Methuen, 1998. Print.
- Shiu, Anthony Sze-Fai. "On Loss: Anticipating a Future for Asian American Studies." *MELUS* 31.1 (2006): 3-33. Print.
- Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore. A History of Asian Americans*. 1989. New York and Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998. Print.
- Tang, Weimin. "Echoes from the Borderlands: Transnation and Cultural Identity in Chuang Hua's *Crossings*." *Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture* 1.1 (2010): 25-36. Web. 26 January 2013.
- Tsiang, H. T. *The Hanging on Union Square. An American Epic*. 1935. Ed. Floyd Cheung. Los Angeles: Kaya, 2013. Print.
- Ty, Eleanor. *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004. Print.
- Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. *Reading Asian American Literature. From Necessity to Extravagance*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. Print.
- Zhou, Xiaojing. "Critical Theories and Methodologies in Asian American Literary Studies." Introduction. *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature*. Eds. Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi. Seattle: U of Washington P, 2005. 3-29. Print.

