

**Disjuncture at Home:  
Mapping the Domestic Cartographies of  
Transnationalism in Gish Jen's *The Love Wife*<sup>1</sup>**

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ABSTRACT

This article starts with a discussion of the dialectics of the modern concept of home and away to broach the ideological constructs of American suburban home during the Age of Asian Transnationalism in Gish Jen's novel *The Love Wife*. The suburban home in the historical context of Asian transnationalism is understood as a treacherous site of competing cultural practices, where the cultural logic of home and away, root and route is at work on both national and transnational axes. The transnational connection of the suburban home reveals the inherent power relations of multiculturalism, which have been skillfully concealed through the ideological linkage of the suburban home and national belonging. The injection of the temporality of Chinese modernity into the temporality of assimilation and acculturation in the multicultural practices of the suburban home creates an Asian/American transnational space, which is able to disrupt the singular national temporality on the one hand, but poses a new challenge to those who attempt to practice transnational rooting/routing on the other hand.

KEY WORDS

the suburban home, route and root, multiculturalism, Asian transnationalism



*[M]odern America should be read within a context of multiple subjectivities whose multiplicity can be depathologized through a close and critical reading of Asian, American, and Asian/American history, and that the unity presumed to be enjoyed by “America” is in fact better read as a set of adjustments and reformations that disclose the fact that America is always in process itself.*

*--David Palumbo-Liu<sup>2</sup>*

The concept of home in postcolonial, immigrant, and diasporic literatures has been a volatile, if not innately self-contradictory, notion. Since the condition of displacement has disrupted the consolidation of those national, domestic, and bounded spaces, to claim a “home” requires more than just staying put in and paying allegiance to a confined space of specific history. To be “at home,” one needs to develop the skill of homing, which may or may not include a physical mobility of “going home” or the nostalgia for an original home, yet certainly involves a negotiation of multiple temporalities and memories of discordant familial stories and histories. Here, we conceive home both as a domestic space inhabited by people with kinship relations, and a metaphorical reference to bigger spaces of belonging—homeland and motherland. Home is also an overlapping of these two spatial constructs, with the domestic space in the forefront, shaped and wielded by the memories of and/or one’s continuing ties to the country of origins.

Home, therefore, is not automatically a safe and stable place of unquestioned belongings. The fact that home can be viewed as

structured by multiple temporalities and spatialities lies in a dynamic and progressive formula of theorization that highlights the dialectical nature of home and away. Home is, in fact, often understood as one of those spaces that constitute the idea and the site of the “local.” The local denotes a specific location with specific history vis-à-vis a generalized, totalitarian concept of the global. Critics who advance a geopolitical concern of diasporic identity often rewrite *home* in terms of *away*, reifying the dialectic between location and travel, roots and routes.<sup>3</sup> James Clifford’s theory of “traveling cultures” inaugurates the concept of the concomitant nature of home and away, travel and location, roots and routes, rooting and routing. Location is largely viewed as a part of travel, constituted by multiple temporalities and movements across national borders, rather than by singular history and stasis. Travel, too, constitutes an occasion for the realization of place-consciousness, rendering it ever urgent to develop strategies of rooting. He argues:

“Location,” here, is not a matter of finding a stable “home” or of discovering a common experience. Rather, it is a matter of being aware of the difference that makes a difference in concrete situations, of recognizing the various inscriptions, “places,” or “histories” that both empower and inhibit the construction of theoretical categories like “Woman,” “Patriarchy,” or “colonization,” categories essential to political action as well as to serious comparative knowledge. “Location” is thus, concretely, a *series* of locations and encounters, travel within diverse, but limited spaces. (1989: 179; emphasis in the original)

Such an understanding of home and location is echoed by Caren Kaplan, whose observation concerning the meaning of the local in globalization rings largely true to our conceptualization of home in the era of transnational exchange:

the “local” is not really about a specific intrinsic territory but about the construction of bundles or clusters of identities in and through

the cultures of transnational capitalism. Whether the “local” is seen to be fluid and relational or fixed and fundamentalist depends upon one’s position or enunciatory situation vis-à-vis economic, political, and cultural hegemonies. (159–160)

Kaplan’s elaboration points to the fact that even though the constructs of home and location are largely multiple and fluid, one could strategically decide to either draw a boundary between home and the world, or to turn home into a site of negotiation of difference, all depending on one’s relationality to the specific hegemony at work.

### The Suburban Home Revisited

Clifford and Kaplan’s geopolitical conceptualizations of home are but part of the recent critical endeavors that attempt to breach the rigid boundaries of home established by American national discourses. To affirm a linear national history with a stable origin, American national discourses construct the myth of home as the localized space where one can realize one’s national identity through the practice of an “American” way of life. The idea of the suburban home is such an ideological construct forged by America’s ideal of national belonging. Emerging in the later half of nineteenth-century America, the suburb has been recognized as an ideal locus for the realization of domestic ideal and national cohesion. The suburb can be defined both spatially as a residential community lying within commuting distance of a major city, and metaphorically as a set of ideals or values, underpinning the conceptualization of a certain way of life (Marsh xii; Jackson 47–52). Because of the privacy, the domesticity and the tranquil isolation a suburban home promises to provide, home comes to be a place of refuge, an enclave free from the outside control. The suburban home has since served as a safeguard against the moral corruption and the decadent lifestyle brought on by industrialism and commercialism. The virtues and moral rectitude nourished by a suburban home, and the satisfaction, fulfillment, and serenity offered by the suburban family were considered the foundation upon which the ideal of the nation was

built (Jackson 48). On the other hand, to cite Rachel Pagano, “suburbia has always represented, on some level of the American consciousness, a pastoral alternative to the city” (1). It has therefore been associated with “the ideal of the yeoman farmer, lost agrarian values, and the sense of boundless potential embodied in the New World and the Western frontier” (Pagano 1; Marsh xiii). It is obvious that since its advent, suburban domestic life has been regarded as an institution where the ideal of the nation can be fulfilled.

Yet, up until the 1950s, the way of life sustained by the suburban values and the accompanying domestic ideals have been designed to cater to white middle class American family gearing toward the realization of the American Dream (Marsh xii). The authors of suburban fictions often use the suburb as a lens through which to examine white middle-class manners and mores. At the same time, in American public imagination, the suburb is constantly taken as a repository of “real” American values. To obtain a suburban lifestyle becomes the means by which people claim themselves “real” Americans. But such a cultural practice is largely restrictive to the white middle-class American family. Gish Jen’s novels mark one of the endeavors to use the suburb as a means to explore the extent to which national ideals or the American Dream can be or fails to be achieved by the minority. In most of Gish Jen’s novels, home has been a site of cultural practices motivated by either homogenous national longing or multicultural ideals. Specifically, Jen places most of her homes in the suburb. In her *Typical American* and *Mona in the Promised Land*, Gish Jen explores the strategies and problematics of assimilation and trans-racial alliance through the investigations of Chinese American suburban homes. While her previous novels disclose the difficulty and the price one has to pay in order to blend into the suburban world, and to gain admission into the community of “real” Americans, *The Love Wife* examines the suburban home as a problematic site of the liberal experiment with multiculturalism. Even if the ideal of suburbia appears to be flexible and can be stretched to accommodate the non-white middle class through the mobilization of liberal, multicultural discourses, liberalism and multiculturalism are in fact discursive

products of national ideology to contain and subsume differences on the terms of the hegemony. Jen pushes the limits of multiculturalism in a suburban home by introducing transnational connections to the family. The suburban home is depicted as a treacherous site of competing cultural practices and a progressive lab of open-ended identity performance, where the cultural logic of home and away, root and route constantly challenges the boundaries charted by the ideological constructs of the American Dream as well as its recent manifestation, multiculturalism. This paper will investigate the dissolution of the territorial boundaries of the suburban home, the emergence of a transnational space, and the transformation of the ethnic subjects from national subjects to subjects-in-process in the novel. In sum, I will trace the diverse cartographies of transnationalism in the suburban home as represented in Jen's novel.

### Chinese Modernity and the Post-1965 Asian Immigrants

The novel tells the story of the Wong family, an instant composite family with a Caucasian wife from Wisconsin and a Chinese American husband, two adopted Asian daughters, and one biological son. Blondie and Carnegie Wong met on an unusual occasion in the Midwest when Carnegie was still a graduate student. Carnegie was called to identify the ethnic identity of an abandoned Oriental baby, since he was the only Asian American in town. Jane Bailey, who is later given the nickname Blondie by Carnegie's mother, came with her pediatrician friend Nomie to examine the baby. Carnegie bonded with the baby and decided to adopt her (Lizzy), while Blondie fell in love with Carnegie's nobility. After they got married they adopted another Chinese orphan from China, Wendy. Then their son Bailey was born. The story is set in 1999; the family lives in an affluent suburban town outside Boston. Their neighbor calls them the new American family. Carnegie and Blondie are proud of their family because it is the result of free choice. Carnegie's mother Mama Wong has been living in a nursing home for years because of the Alzheimer's. Long before her death, Mama Wong left a will in Chinese for her son to fetch a distant "cousin" Lin Lan to

come to America. In honor of her mother's dying wish, Carnegie does what was hoped and pays for Lan to come to America to live with them. A 46-year-old woman from the province of Shandong who grew up in the tumultuous era of Chinese Cultural Revolution, Lan had started her journey away from her home in the cultural city of Suzhou long before she left for America. The daughter of an old-fashion Chinese literati, Lan was to experience multiple displacements after the Red Guards had gruesomely killed her father in public. She was sent down to the remote region of Heilongjiang near the Russian border to be reeducated. A few years later, Lan developed TB (tuberculosis) and was allowed to leave. She was then transferred to her father's aunt's work unit in the Shandong countryside. As a class enemy and a child of a "black family," Lan was to suffer public humiliation and taunting in their various forms. There she worked in a shoe factory; after the factory was shut down she became a migrant worker, moving from one factory to another, making toys, fertilizer, rubber mats, etc. It was when she was working as a karaoke *xijie*—a karaoke miss—that she was sent to America by a distant relative as yet unknown to her. Lan's arrival to the Wongs, however, disrupts the carefully managed and suppressed racial difference between Blondie and Carnegie, and Blondie and the two adopted Asian daughters.

The plot of the novel is therefore marked by the intersection of two complex narratives of development, comprising, not the encounter between East and West, or Asian American and Asian diaspora, but that between two immigrant stories positioned at different moments of assimilation, transformation and transnational homing, forming different relations to the idea of nation and transnational modernity. More importantly, the encounter brings forth the possibility of a linkage between Asian American history and the complex historical trajectory of Chinese modernity. It is noteworthy that the Asian immigrants in question here—i.e. Mama Wong and Lan—are those who can be categorized, to follow Lisa Lowe, as the "post-1965 Asian immigrants." The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 abolished the quotas limiting immigration from Asian countries, while the laws passed between 1943 and 1952 continued to allow immigrants of Asian

origins to become naturalized as citizens (Dirlik 39, Lowe 269). In the wake of the 1965 immigration act, the demography of the Asian American population underwent a structural change. The majority of Asian Americans today are Asian-born rather than multiple-generation (Lowe 269). As a result, immigrant studies shift their focus from issues of assimilation to those related to transnational border-crossings (Ong 8). Interestingly the 1970s was also an era when Asian Pacific countries rose as newly developed global economic powers. Arif Dirlik reminds us that the contemporary “flow of Asian peoples to the United States is part of a larger process of movement of peoples that is both a product and a constituent of a Pacific formation” (39). Because it has included Asian people from outside the nation, the Asian American community/home becomes the location where multiple historical trajectories converge (Dirlik 39). Temporarily, the inclusion implies the possibility of a linkage between Asian American history and the historical trajectories of Asian modernity; spatially, the Asian American community can now be positioned beyond the national border to claim a place “on the metaphorical Rim constituted by diasporas and the movement of individuals” (Dirlik 41).

The expansion of the geographical and historical horizons of Asian America calls for a recasting of Asian American cultural practices and a rethinking of the problem of agency. Critics have agreed that the recent population flows of Asian peoples are motivated largely by economic factors which have restructured the formation of Asia-Pacific. Yet the economic growth in Asia is a result of the interactions among complex strands of the historical developments of Asian modernity. To take China as an instance, the May Fourth Movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century inaugurated China’s first attempt to reform its cultural tradition so that it could reinvigorate the strength of the nation. By turning to the advanced technology of the West in order to fill in the lack in Chinese cultural tradition, China strove to achieve the status of a world-class nation. The dictum coined by 19<sup>th</sup> century Chinese reformists *zhong xue wei ti, xi xue wei yong* (Chinese learning for fundamental principles, Western learning for practical uses) pointed to China’s ambition and determination at the time to put itself

on a par with the West. Chinese civil war marked a second phase of modernity. When the communist regime took over power, traditional Chinese feudalism was demolished along with the urbane, sophisticated cultural lifestyle and traditional intellectual ideals. At the same time the Chinese literati, who served as the feudalist social mainstay, were smeared and stigmatized as enemies of the people. For the communist government, western countries, especially England and America, posed as threatening imperialist powers, corrupted capitalists, but paradoxically served as objects for emulation because of their advancement in modernization. Since the 1980s, China has opened up to capitalist market economy, and has since emerged as a major economic power in the world. Despite the steadfast state-ideology, which, to a certain extent, still regards the western countries as potential enemies, China has changed its relationship to the West. The former enemies are now competitors, alongside which China seeks to establish for itself the image as a legitimate global player (King & Kusno 44). In the meantime, China's goal to become a leading country in Asia and a center in Chinese cultural world prompts a double-handed policy of continuing political coercion to press countries with Chinese cultural origins—foremost among them, Taiwan—into accepting the ideal of a unified China, and openness to capital investments from its neighboring countries. As we can see, the process of modernization in China is far from linear and complete. In Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu's words: "One cannot periodize historical processes so neatly in the Chinese case, and there is no clear temporal pattern of the suppression of the ancient world, modernity, and postmodernity as in the West. Contemporary China consists of the superimposition of multiple temporalities; the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern coexist in the same space and at the same moment" (146).

These social, historical, political, and economical factors, then, are the complex backgrounds from which the Chinese characters in the novel launch their trips across the Pacific. Mama Wong and Lan arrive at America with the cultural, social, and economic inscriptions formed by their original country's experiences of modernity in the past forty years. Their transpacific travels, while liberating them from the

oppressive structure of the old country and releasing them from the throes of random disasters befalling them, provide the occasion for them to turn the survival instinct into an effective strategy of upward social mobility. Having lived through years of political struggles, poverty, famine, the loss of the loved ones, enforced displacement, and public humiliation, they simply want to take care of the basic mundane needs of life—to survive, and if they can, to survive well. Hence, America is regarded by some of the Chinese immigrants solely as a place of opportunity, providing the chance and the mechanism—i.e. capitalism—for surviving well and getting rich. The likes of Mama Wong belong to this group. Lan, on the other hand, is multiply inscribed by social, political, cultural and economic imperatives forged in the process of Chinese modernity. Her encounter with America, the Asian American home, and suburban culture, charts a much more complex route of transformation and politics of transnational strategies. But before I can elaborate on the ways Lan, and, to a certain extent, Mama Wong “become” Chinese Americans, I want to address Carnegie and Blondie’s route to their ideal suburban home.

### Multicultural Ideal and the Strategy of Forgetting

Carnegie’s and Blondie’s stories and the story of their marriage move along a linear narrative of progression consisting of an increasing reception to racial differences as well as upward class mobility. Significantly, their narratives of progression are marked by the geographical mobility of eastward migration from the Midwest, echoing the famous eastward movements Nick Caraway and Jay Gatsby take in *The Great Gatsby*. The eastward migration in Fitzgerald’s novel designates the accumulation of capital, the acquisition of culture, lifestyle and taste, and the achievement of the American Dream. But Carnegie and Blondie’s upward mobility and eastward migration seem to orient toward the dissolution of racial boundaries based on the principle of free choice. Blondie’s freedom of choice comes from the fact that she has the quintessential features of the white race—fair skin, blue-eyes, and blonde-hair. Carnegie’s

inferior racial status, on the other hand, is made up by his class position as a well-educated, upper middle class professional. Furthermore, his “nobility” shown in adopting the Asian baby is rewarded by Blondie’s “nobility” of marrying down on the racial scale. The religious rhetoric Blondie uses in describing the day they met is employed to wipe out, or temporarily conceal, the racial difference:

I wanted to tell him how he had moved me. That I wanted to be like him, but would never be like him.... What stillness a baby could bring. I had never known such stillness. Everything in the room, even the pictures and chairs, seemed to witness her – to attend. It seemed only fitting to be in a church. All the world was hush, and holiness. (64)

It is only in the next moment/paragraph, that Blondie recognizes Carnegie’s Asian body. Their subsequent marriage denotes a mirage of multiculturalism founded on forgetting the past and forfeiting Carnegie’s Asian American cultural identity.

In a sense, the forgetting and forfeiting start from Mama Wong, whose Alzheimer’s disease can be construed as an embodiment of the pathology of forgetting the past. Unlike most of the mothers in Asian American literature, Mama Wong never said much about her past life in China. Her reticence, rather than a pathological sign of political oppressions, was part of the strategy of survival and upward mobility that runs parallel to the famous choice Gatsby makes to erase his Midwest white trash background. In other words, Mama Wong’s silence about her past is less an outcome of unspeakable historical trauma and more a sane decision for self-preservation. A product of the Chinese Cultural Revolution when personal preservation was often achieved through sacrificing and betraying one’s own family—because kinship system was replaced by party memberships—Mama Wong is characterized by her ability to survive and thrive even at the expense of family. As the reader and Carnegie realize approaching the end of the novel, Mama Wong was actually Lan’s biological mother and Carnegie but an adopted son. Mama Wong left her first husband—a stinking

intellectual and an enemy of the people — and Lan for an officer in the People's Army not long after the Liberation. What happened between the second husband and Mama Wong that drove the latter into transnational migration is never clear. While Lan knows nothing about her mother after she abandoned her first family, Carnegie is ignorant about her life in China. His earliest knowledge about his mother's life dates back only to the time when Mama Wong swam across the harbor to Hong Kong with two basketballs under her arms for flotation at the height of Chinese Cultural Revolution. What we do know, through Carnegie's personal memory, is that not long after she settled in Boston's Chinatown, Mama Wong found a third husband. After he died, Mama Wong made a fortune through real estate trading, while raising Carnegie in a single-room apartment. Mama Wong became a champion of survival, who prized money and personal survival more than anything else. Mama Wong's migration from China to Hong Kong to America, and the three husbands she married at a specific juncture of the history of Chinese modernity trace a route of constant rooting, uprooting and rerouting for the purpose of self-preservation and self-promotion. Mama Wong never told Carnegie that she had two husbands and a daughter in China, and she also kept very quiet about the fact that he was actually adopted. While she was silent about her past life and family history, Mama Wong could not shut up about American capitalism and the mortgage system. Learning the new games of real estate trading by means of the mortgage system, Mama Wong quickly accumulated enough wealth to consume in style and achieved a high social status in Chinatown. The evidence of her success comes in the forms of expensive cars, fur coats, gold rings, special menus in restaurants catering to her taste, and more importantly, her ability to gather a network of Chinatown human relationships. Clearly, Mama Wong has been transformed from a refugee to a successful businesswoman, while recharting her trip from one driven by survival to one prompted by accumulation and upward mobility.

## Self-Governance and the Survival Instinct

But what should we make of her silence and deliberate amnesia about the past? Is this one of the “transnational strategies” suggested by Aihwa Ong? In formulating her theory of the cultural logic of transnationality, Ong reminds us that transnational strategies are often related to “systems of governmentality—in the broad sense of techniques and codes for directing human behavior—that condition and manage the movements of populations and capital” (Ong 6). For Ong, different regimes of state, family, and economic enterprise are the sites that produce disciplinary effects conditioning one’s sense of self and everyday practices in the process of transnational border crossings (Ong 6). Seen in this light, Mama Wong’s silence about her past life in China may suggest the breakdown of these regimes of governmentality from the time when communist regime took control to the Cultural Revolution. Commenting upon the Chinese government’s idea of “governance by the populace” during the Cultural Revolution, Rey Chow points out the fact that the term “people” was exploited by the government to construct its national identity. While “the people” were invoked as the utopian bearers of revolution, resistance, and hope, their lives were far from hopeful and utopian. In reality, the people were at the mercy of constant catastrophes, extreme violence, and the dissolution of family bonding. Governmentality in the form of enforced governance exerts disciplines and punishments on the people directly and unabashedly by brute force. Through an insightful reading of the film *To Live*, Chow specifies the result of such a predicament of governance: “[G]overnance means, ultimately, the dissemination of a political culture in which people are always prepared to tolerate violence and to accommodate further violence. It is under such patterns of governance and self-governance that ‘endurance’ excels as the foremost moral virtue in the struggle ‘to live’” (Chow 126).

Mama Wong’s silence and self-enforced amnesia, therefore, bespeaks a rejection of such a pattern of governmentality, while transforming the strategy of endurance to one that is productive and

accumulative in a new social economic context. Lan, on the other hand, reacts to such a form of governmentality differently. The sufferings she had endured in her lifetime—senseless violence, public humiliation, loss of her father, exile and constant displacements, disrupted education—forge different modes of behavior and strategies of survival. Instead of searching for ways of self-preservation through possession and accumulation, she learns to “want nothing,” “ask for nothing,” “expect nothing,” to go through life without the yearning for love—*wu ai*—as she later explains to Lizzy. Such a habit of mind was part of the Taoist teaching infused into her by her father. But the Cultural Revolution put to test the necessity of such an attitude of life. Possessing nothing, she has nothing to give in to some inexplicable and uncontrollable social commands. According to her father, this is one way to triumph over the communists: “The Communists will never be able to take everything away, my father used to say. Always you will have nothing” (96). Furthermore, this seemingly passive defense mechanism, while protecting her from internalizing the violence of the authority, is turned constructively into an art of making-do, of turning scraps into artifacts, which fascinates the Wongs later when she lives with them.

The art of having nothing and the art of making-do, in fact, stem from the aforementioned strategy of self-governance through endurance. As Chow writes:

[G]overnance is enforced not only by soliciting the governed to serve the arbitrary and brutal interests of ‘the public,’ but also by specifically manipulating them into willingly sacrificing those who are disadvantaged—in the name of the *public good*. In turn, these disadvantaged members of the public may internalize such governance as self-governance—by either becoming as violent as their governors...or submissively enduring violence to themselves (if they remain ‘ordinary citizens’). (126)

In the account of her past life in China, Lan mentions that she had to take weekly beating for being a child of a “black family” while she

lived in Shangdon. In Chow's view, these public humiliation and punishment constitute the occasions through which some other people express their loyalty to the community by sacrificing the minor and the powerless. What prevents Lan's self-governance from collapsing into internalizing the violence of official governance, one can argue, is the residual of an interior space carved out by her memories of her father and their life together in Suzhou.

In her discussion of China's rapid progression into modernization and urbanization throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, Jinhua Dai stresses the need for nostalgia for people to weather change and cope with the loss of the old. She says: "From the point of view of the intellectuals, who struggled with both repression and debilitation, nostalgia is a strategic need, a necessary spiritual space for imagining and for consolation" (209). Even though nostalgia in Dai's view is mobilized to resist the ubiquitous commodity craze and the cold, hard steel façade of the postmodern cities in the 1980s and 1990s, not the violence of the authority in the 1960s and 1970s, its function as a spiritual support and a necessary link to a past with human significance remains the same. Lan's nostalgia lingers on the ancient city of Suzhou, where she spent her childhood with her father in their old family compound with a stylish Chinese garden. In her reminiscence, the everyday life practices in Suzhou—father's Suzhou dialect reciting dictums and maxims of ancient philosophy, watermelons cooled in a well, cricket fights, Chinese music, and above all, the exquisite garden of a Suzhou style—are the things laden with old humanist values, capable of countering the inhumanity of revolution. Her constant remembrance of these cultural practices and cultural objects, constitutes a dimension of time unaffected by the rapid social and political changes and the senseless pain and suffering brought on by those changes. The ancient city looms large in her memories and constitutes, therefore, a private space, and a home to go back to even in exile. Lan's complex relations with Chinese nation-state, i.e. the communist government and her nostalgia for ancient Chinese cultural glory, consequently, form the codes of behaviors according to which Lan deploys her logics and practices of transnationality.

## Flexible Citizenship and Transnational Homing

As I have mentioned earlier, strategies of transnational homing often include or entail movement or multiplicity. On the materialistic level, such dialectics is prompted by, in Ong's words, "a flexible notion of citizenship and sovereignty as strategies to accumulate capital and power" (6). Ong further elaborates on this term:

"Flexible citizenship" refers to the cultural logic of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political, economic conditions. In their quest to accumulate capital and social prestige in the global arena, subjects emphasize, and are regulated by, practices favoring flexibility, mobility, and repositioning in relation to market, governments, and cultural regimes. These logics and practices are produced within particular structures of meaning about family, gender, nationality, class mobility, and social power. (Ong 6)

"Flexibility" in Ong's explanation suggests not just the acquisition of double or multiple citizenships, but the way in which displaced subjects transform or translate their cultural practices according to capitalist rationality that stresses the accumulation of capital. What is flexible for Ong is, thus, the fluid mutation of capital, which can be perceived not merely as money, but as "highly sped-up, constantly mutating sets of material, technological, and discursive relations, of production *and* consumption, in which everything is reduced to an exchange value" (Ong 140). Ong's observation refers largely to the affluent Chinese diasporas whose strategies of border-crossing often invoke Chinese cultural values, for example Confucianism, as a naturalized component of Chinese capitalism. Even though Lan might not be classified as affluent Chinese, the cultural legacy she inherits from her father, nonetheless, infuses a sense of pride and an element of self-righteous vindication to her process of

acculturation. Lan's strategy of rooting seems to suggest a subjectification process that includes translation of cultural values and transformation of everyday life practice in response to the demands of multicultural callings for class mobility and accumulation of capital. Yet, it is never the achievement of the usual American dream that motivates her upward mobility—at least not the kind that encourages hybridity at the expense of racial distinction. Quite the contrary, what sustains Lan's transformation in the States is a consciousness of the economic boom in Asia and the fact that she could draw on these new social economic powers through the Asian communities she becomes newly acquainted with to secure her social and economic standing in the States. In other words, her experiences of claiming America as home includes an inter-Asian transnational imaginary that prevents the American nationalist discourse implied in multiculturalism from being fully effective.

Lan's specific homing strategies also derive from a subaltern mentality held by both the Chinese government and the general public whose socialization process in China often included a wholesale acceptance of the State ideologies promoted by the regimes in power. For the Chinese, China has been a victim of Western imperialism since its first encounter with the West in the late nineteenth century. To vindicate this historical injustice, China strives to put itself on a par with the achievement of Western modernity by asserting a modernity which is characteristically Chinese. Despite their status as persecuted social underdogs in China, Lan and her father shared the official view regarding the West. This self-righteous nationalism persists even during her stay with the Wongs. According to Wendy, Lan "hated the British because of the Opium War and gunships, which her father used to talk about all the time. Apparently he used to talk about this humiliation and that humiliation, so that 'humiliation' became, like, this big word for her" (221). One may argue that such a sense of "humiliation" is a patriarchal, nationalist psychological legacy that underlies the process of Chinese modernity. It is a sentiment which can be conveniently mobilized by the government and the individual whenever the differences and the distance between China and the West

prove to be insurmountable, especially in regard to the issues of human rights and democracy. The historical humiliation is often invoked to fend off the West's interference with China's "domestic" issues.<sup>4</sup> Another consequence of this mentality is, as I have mentioned earlier, the strategy to affirm an Asian modernity with overseas Chinese as its major agents. Since Lan is unable to fully embrace Chinese communist nationalism owing to the persecution she has endured throughout her life, her cultural royalty vis-à-vis the West can only be expressed through the second avenue.

Limited by her insufficient language skill, Lan takes root in America by means of forming connections with people of Asian descent, especially with overseas Chinese from Canada, Macao, Vietnam, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Her interests in the overseas Chinese are both cultural and economic. The merits of bonding with overseas Chinese lies in, obviously, their shared cultural values and language; but in a more progressive sense, Lan pays special attention to the overseas Chinese because they seem to assume the façade of modern Chinese subjects, who know how to invest in Asia, shuttle back and forth across the Pacific, and acquire a high social standing in America while retaining their links or homes in Asia. In other words, they are admirable because they are well versed in the skills of flexible citizenship. Ong's comments on the way mainland Chinese regard overseas Chinese are helpful for our understanding of Lan's fascination with overseas Chinese: "Overseas Chinese operate as an intermediary 'contrast category' of Chinese modernity in a structural position between the mainland Chinese and the non-Chinese foreigners who embody Western modernity" (43). That is to say, overseas Chinese from the rising Pacific Rim countries embody the economic energy of Asian modernization which is able to renew and retrieve the cultural glory of old times through a transpacific capitalist endeavor to keep it abreast with Western modernity while avoiding the political disaster of Chinese totalitarianism. The overseas Chinese's connection with Chinese cultural origins, furthermore, seem to guarantee their insulation from the evils Lan perceived lying in American ways of life, i.e., individualism and racism. Therefore, to turn herself into an

economic subject as required by multiculturalism's mandate of upward social mobility and living in a middle-class style, Lan does not do the obvious by abandoning her cultural and historical past to assimilate into the mainstream, nor does she cling to Chinese nationalist rhetoric. Instead she takes a detour to link herself with the Chinese subjects produced by Asian modernity. This gesture of treading on the middle ground suggests her alienation from both Chinese communism and American nationalism to follow the cultural logic of Asian transnational capitalism. Her lover Shang is the embodiment of this logic and the master of the art of flexibility.

A third-generation Chinese American whose ancestors came from Fujian, Shang rides the tide of transnational Asian capitalism to refashion himself into a new breed of Chinese American, one who inhabits the interstices of Chinese American and overseas Chinese. Shang had sojourned in Asia for quite some time, living in Taiwan and visiting the Mainland several times from there. Shang's multiple displacements in Asia give him a unique perspective in regard to China and different investment strategies. Unlike most of Western investors, who set their eyes mainly on the developing international metropolitan cities like Shanghai or Guangzhou, Shang's commercial interests are drawn toward the ancient cultural cities like Suzhou, Lijian, Hangzhou, and Guilin. Shang's ability to appreciate the beauty and the commercial potential of these cultural settings in the age of Asian globalization, as Lan observes, is obtained through his contact with Taiwanese businessmen: "Of course a lot of people from Taiwan like Suzhou, so many that people said there were Taiwan-style tea shops all over Suzhou now. Taiwanese people liked to invest money in Suzhou too. That's what people said. They were like Singaporeans that way. Probably Shang just learned to love Suzhou from living in Taiwan" (293). Here Taiwan and Singapore represent the new powers of Asian modernity and the mediators between the new and the old that might help launch China into the new age of Asian transnational capitalism.

Yet, while Lan is drawn to him because he seems to share the same cultural nostalgia, Shang's interest in her lies mainly in her capital value to serve as the go-between for his future investment in

China. The dialogue between Shang and Lan about how Shang sees Lan in their first meeting poignantly reveals the irony in their transnational romance:

---You know what I thought when I first saw you? *He asked me. I shook my head.*

---Buy, *he said.* Buy and hold.

---Where will the business headquarters be? *I asked him.*

---Suzhou, *he said.* Of course. We're going to set up shop in Suzhou like all the Taiwanese businessmen.

*When he reached for my hand, I gave it to him gratefully, with all my heart.* (298; original emphasis)

For Shang, Lan is a stock that can be bought, held, and liquidated to propel his transnational investment. The labor she provides can be easily translated into cultural capital for him to build a network of relations in China. Shang's desire for the easy transformation of labor into capital, for the fluidity of commodity, for the accumulation of wealth, and for traveling physically and metaphorically across visible and invisible boundaries coincide momentarily with Lan's prospect to return to a better time of Chinese civilization, which is materialized in the cultural Renaissance of Suzhou through the Midas touch of Taiwanese-style management.

However, as the plot discloses, Shang is in fact, in Carnegie's words, a bad news and a "wrong story" for Lan. Carnegie has done a background check on Shang when Lan starts to date him and finds that Shang is a shameless businessman who sees the world according to the logic of the stock market. Furthermore, not only is he already married and is unlikely to get a divorce any time soon, he also tends to be abusive with Lan. When Shang eventually falls out of the scene, it is Jeb Su, Shang's driver, a Chinese professor from Shandong, who appears to be the "right story" for Lan. Being a cultivated Chinese intellectual, Su possesses the kind of cultural capital that may seem outdated and irrelevant for the modern Chinese, but prove to be appealing enough to Lan: He can play violin and *erhu*, a Chinese

instrument. Su reminds Lan of her father, an old-fashioned Chinese intellectual. But despite their common cultural background, Su never fascinates Lan the way Shang does. After a serious physical fight with Shang, Lan moves to Independence Island in Maine where the Baileys' family retreat is located. Su follows her to the island and eventually the two get married. Lan marries Su to solve her visa problem and because it is a sane decision. They are able to fit into the ethnic niche provided by multicultural America by opening a small Chinese takeout joint and achieving such a great success that they become the target of slandering townspeople and vicious landlords. Yet the marriage promises nothing but the typical immigrant success story, which might strive toward upward mobility but can never reach the goal of fluidity across boundaries. This is not exactly the dream Lan pursues. As Lizzy observes, commenting upon Lan's marriage decision: "Uncle Su wasn't married, she says. Shang was. But Shang had a great plan for making money in China. Remember how he was going to make her a cofounder of his company? Uncle Su just meant a green card and a job who knew where. McDonald's" (322). For Lan, the immigrant success story is the reality she has to settle for now, but a modernized China and a globalized Asia is the one true "home" she actually dreams about.

### The Discontent of Multiculturalism and Borrowed Nostalgia

As I have mentioned earlier, the novel discloses "two immigrant stories positioned at different moments of assimilation, transformation and transnational homing, forming different relations to the idea of nation and transnational modernity." Lan's compromised transnational homing is intersected with and greatly affects Carnegie's suburban family life, which appears to be a success story of multiculturalism, but is about to shipwreck upon the shore of the newly formed Asian transnationalism. The problems with the Carnegie family, nevertheless, do not occur only after the arrival of Lan. What is truly at fault is the fundamental principle and the belief upon which the family is formed, namely, multiculturalism.

As the ending of *The Great Gatsby* suggests, the movement to

achieve the American Dream is a constant struggle to go back to a past, original national ideal through the progress toward future.<sup>5</sup> But the circular temporal structure underlying the American Dream can only be fulfilled by white middle class Americans with the right past. Multiculturalism, even though a revised version of the American Dream, is likewise circular in its temporal structure. On its surface, multiculturalism aims to encompass difference, exercising free choice out of the spirit of liberalism and democracy. What it has often achieved, however, is the truncation of the racial past, so that the racial present can be juxtaposed with other equally truncated racial communities. The goal of such assimilation is the achievement of a class ideal. Despite our skin colors, we are all affluent middle-class. To reach that goal is to go back to a pastoral past and a national ideal through consumption, not through memories. The freedom of routing, of choosing whatever identity one wants, inevitably returns to, and is based upon a restricted principle of rooting.

As has been mentioned, multiculturalism is often characterized by its liberal thinking, class consciousness, and the specific lifestyle that give the racial or ethnic others enough social respect while compromising their cultural difference. But these benevolent traits are actually supported by unequal power relations between mainstream America and the minority, which are often skillfully concealed to achieve multiculturalism's maximum effect of willing assimilation. As Luis H. Francia points out: "Under the guise of respecting difference by using its most visible symbols—dress, song, text, any and all of a culture's pantheon of signs—the liberal model of multiculturalism consigns the Other to, as the cultural critic Coco Fusco (1995: 103) puts it, 'recognizable standards of difference that rarely question the power relations that define these distinctions'" (200).

While multiculturalism seeks to incorporate racial differences, the terms in which racial differences are accepted and codified are often laid down by the hegemonic mainstream. One of the most conspicuous manners in which such power relations are maneuvered is through social spatialization. Before multiculturalism is in fashion, racial subjects are often ghettoized into specific districts. In the early

immigrant history, Chinatown is, in Francia's words, "a refuge and preserve of 'Chineseness' at the very same time that it represents a centrifugal move from the Middle Kingdom" (204). Chinatown therefore functions as a consigned racial space and a midway house for the racial subjects' final assimilation. On surface, the suburb might promise much better opportunities to become "typical Americans," but its calls for a homogeneous lifestyle and national ideology in fact relentlessly eliminate racial or ethnic difference in a way more effective and seamless than ghettoization does.

The family's suburban home has seemed to fulfill the multicultural ideal of free choice by means of embracing racial difference and the realization of a middle class lifestyle. Yet, the multicultural ideal actually works to conceal the price the ethnic subjects have to pay to maintain their sense of belonging and to suppress the power structures that are setting the terms for the encounters between different cultures. Carnegie, as readers are told, is more a Bailey than Blondie is a Wong in their inter-racial marriage. Wendy and Lizzy, likewise, are drawn to fashion experiments on clothes, hairstyle, hair color, and body arts as substitutes for their lack of resources in pursuing cultural identity. Veiled beneath their "freedom" of choice is a sense of discontent, a secret longing for a past, a narrative and a story that give meaning to their lives. With her farm girl background, and her openness to cultural difference—Blondie is the only person in the house who speaks Chinese—Blondie seems to embody both an idyllic national past and a multicultural future. Yet, her biological trait of a "pure" white body sets up a visual obstacle for her two Asian daughters to entirely embrace the idea that she is their mother. Carnegie, on the other hand, comfortably blending in to the world of the Baileys after Mama Wong dies, is quickly losing whatever link he has with his family and racial memories. In the meantime, Blondie, feeling the pressure of constantly looking out for other's opinions, wakes up one morning wishing that she could have the peace of not worrying about others' view. The progressive suburban family, in a word, is secretly looking for ways to root, to reach out to a different temporality that might break the rigid boundaries set down by the ideal

of suburbia.

When Lan arrives at the Wong family, she brings with her stories of her life in China, Chinese dictums, her philosophy of life, her art of making-do, Chinese cooking and her specific poise and manners. They appear to be strange and familiar, outdated and charming at the same time. But such racial practices evoke the sentiment of remembrance for things in someone else's past. In short, she brings the Chinese "objects" on which one's racial longing can rest and linger over, making it possible for Lizzy and Wendy to exercise their right to nostalgia. Lan's remembrance of old cultural traditions once practiced in Suzhou constructs a historical consciousness and an anchor of self desperately needed in the maelstrom of the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent modernization with superimposed multi-temporalities. She lends her nostalgia, her sense of time to Wendy, Lizzy and Carnegie for them to translate into their own remembrance, their own nostalgia.

It is also Lan who helps retrieve Carnegie's memories and feelings for his mother and instigates his China craze. Interestingly, Carnegie finds that the cyberspace is in fact the best "place" for him to go to claim his "Chineseness." While searching for websites to help him learn Chinese, Carnegie realizes that cultural roots can be traced and located through internet routing:

I began checking in with a number of sites on the Internet, and was surprised how Chinese this made me feel.... There's Han Chinese, I said. Hong Kong Chinese. Mainland Chinese. Overseas Chinese. And now, ladies and gentlemen: Internet Chinese.... I am getting in touch with my heritage, I said. The question is, How does anyone get in touch with himself without the computer. (187)

Carnegie's reconnection with his cultural roots arrives at the moment when he realizes that the meaning of Chineseness is multiple and fluid, and that it can be realized only through a modern-days invention that is capable of transgressing millions of boundaries and infinite reproduction in a blink of an eye. Which is to say, retrieving the memories of a dead mother constitutes only part of the strategies of

claiming one's cultural identity. The negotiation with the Chinese in the age of Asian globalization, which uses the Internet to discover its ethnicity while diversifying its meaning, proves to be more progressive for the suburban Chinese American wishing to come to terms with his roots.

In this way Lan helps bring Carnegie out of the singular, linear national temporality of the American Dream and multiculturalism, which have been the familial ideal guarding the territorialized space of his suburban home. Lan's arrival opens up the box of sealed memories and history and a dimension of life Carnegie never imagines he could reach. Carnegie is drawn from his safe haven in the New England suburb to be in touch with his long lost self, the cultural identity formed in the process of Asian modernity. He recasts the domestic space into a site of intersection of "multiply spatiotemporal (dis)order" (Sassen 221) and creates a transnational space at home. An especially telling scene of such a spatial and domestic transformation occurs when one day Blondie comes home to witness the birth of a new "family," a family in which the traces of Asian modernity are revealed and embodied by Chinese everyday practices as minute as using bowls to eat snack from, drinking from lidded tea cups, wearing slippers while working on computers:

But for that half moment, for a half moment more, I saw them—Carnegie at the head of the table, in a baseball cap; Lan at its foot, in my seat. She sat the way she stood and walked—regally. Her hair shone....

How much more natural this scene than the one that included me. How natural, and how quieter it was—the quiet was almost the worst part. They were eating little snacks, in bowls. No one was eating out of a bag—even Carnegie was eating Chee-tos out of a pair of blue-and-white rice bowls. Carnegie and Lizzy and Wendy had in front of them lidded cups, such as I'd seen in China and Chinatown; Bailey had his sippy cup, which I saw now was also a lidded cup. Everyone was wearing slippers. Lan's were blue, and perfectly plain....

Instead, everyone had a computer on.

Carnegie was working on a spreadsheet. Lan, I guessed, was working at a typing program. More surprisingly, Lizzy, it seemed, was writing a paper, while Wendy jabbed at the keyboard—Math Blasters, I guessed. Bailey, seated next to Lan, was playing with a pile of old floppies. (257–258)

Each of the members of Asian diasporas in this “picture” charts out a different route of migration and different relation to a real and imagined Asia. Yet they are all gathering together at the moment of postmodernity, in which the traditional or local Chinese everyday practices are accommodated into the universal culture of the computer and cyberspace. The family that Blondie witnesses, one from which she feels so ostracized, therefore, is a family-in-process that embraces multiple temporalities and different spatialities in the interstices between global postmodernity and local ethnic cultural performance and the shifting borders of the Asian/American transnational space.

What is intriguing in this scene, nevertheless, is the fact that Blondie realizes no matter how hard she tries to be a member of this transnational space, she will be shut out because of her racial body: “How much more natural this scene than the one that included me” (257). Similar moments of realization of the insurmountable racial differences between white Americans and Asian Americans are sprinkled throughout the novel. Most of them occur not because of cultural difference but through visual experiences of their bodily difference. There is another occasion on which Blondie sees the reflection of the family in the mirror and sees the difference between the Baileys and the Wongs, the self and the other:

how odd our family looked in it—all those heads of black hair, with just two heads of blond.

The Wongs and the Baileys.

Any passerby would have thought that Lan and Carnegie were the husband and wife of the family, and that I was visiting with my son, Bailey....

What did it matter, how a family looked?

Beholding my daughters, I did not see Asians. I saw persons I knew better than I had known my parents....

Yet our reflection seemed to say something willful to deny.

(245–247)

Before Lan joins the family, Blondie was never aware of the bodily difference that separates her and her adopted daughters. Despite her prominent “white” look, Blondie is in fact the one who is most talented in learning things about Chinese. She can speak Chinese better than Carnegie and the girls. She has traveled to Hong Kong while she was a college student. Blondie’s aggressive pursuit of Asian experiences and easy acceptance of Asian/Americans all point to her conscious effort to claim an alternative Asian/American transnational space. Yet the reverse crossing of the boundary between the white American community and the Asian/American community can never be achieved in so far as skin color and racial body still function as the markers of power relations. The racist nickname “Blondie” dubbed by Mama Wong indicates Mama Wong’s reverse racism as well as the conspiracy between visual pleasure/prejudice and racial hierarchy. In portraying the character of Blondie, Jen raises the question that is seldom dealt with in Asian American literature. Can white Americans cross the line between Asian/American and American to reach out to the transnational space? Jen’s answer seems to be pessimistic.

### Conclusion

The delineations of the encounters between Carnegie and Lan highlight the dissolution of their original national identification, and the processes of their gradual transformation from solid, well-defined subjects into subject-in-process once they are placed in the orbit of Asian transnationalism. By means of laying out various different cartographies of Asian transnationalism within the location of a suburban home, the novel discloses the fragility of the rigid boundaries between home and away, routes and roots that have been mobilized to

defend and realize America's national ideal. The suburban home that is previously designated as the site for the realization of the American Dream and multiculturalism is consequently rewritten to serve as a transnational space in which multiple temporalities of Asian/American modernization coexist. However, *The Love Wife* does not end happily. The emergence of the transnational space at home is treated as a disaster and a tragedy that tears the family apart. By the end of the novel, Blondie has separated from Carnegie, taking with her her baby son—the only child in the family who resembles her in whiteness. Lan and Jeb Su open a Chinese takeout joint in Independence Island, Maine with great success. But pretty soon they turn from model citizens to the target of racism. Carnegie, after learning that he is an adopted son and Lan the biological daughter of Mama Wong, suffers a heart attack. That Carnegie's search for his "Chinese" cultural identity through his newfound transnational connection ends up in a relapse into ethnic uncertainty is both ironic and significant. Perhaps the whole point about subject-reformulation does not lie in the outcome of the practice, but in the process in which inter-subject connections produce a complex sense of transnational place. The havoc that ends the novel addresses the conundrums that challenge the Asian/American transnational space. Emerging from this difficult terrain is a politics of groundedness that is always under the pressure of off-grounding.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is based upon the findings of a research project funded by National Science Council—NSC94—2411-H-005-001-BI. The word "disjuncture" in the title signifies a discordant assemblage of various immigrant temporalities within the domestic space. It is not my intention to echo semantically Arjun Appadurai's famous article "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy."

<sup>2</sup> See Liu's *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*, 389.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of the dialectic between home and away, location and travel, roots and routes are widely recognized by critics like Homi Bhabha

(1994), Paul Gilroy (1993), Stuart Hall (1991), James Clifford (1989, 1997), and geopolitical feminists like Caren Kaplan (1994) and Inderpal Grewal (1994). Following Freud, Susan Stanford Friedman coins the term *intercultural Fort/da* to address the condition of rotation between identity and hybridity, rooting and routing in cultural contact zone. She observes: "Narratives of encounter in the contact zone often exhibit a contradictory oscillation between the establishment of firm boundaries between self and other on the one hand and the transgression of fixed borders on the other" (154).

<sup>4</sup> The paranoid tendency to reject contact with the West based upon China's former history of humiliation is referred to as the manifestation of "the logic of the wound" by Rey Chow in her introduction to *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory* (4).

<sup>5</sup> *The Great Gatsby* ends with these passages: "... And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailor's eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.... So we beat on, boats against the current, *borne back ceaselessly into the past*" (189; my emphasis). The novel is advocating an original ideal of adventurous exploration, and the capability to dream and wonder that lie within the spirit of early American Dream. But that dream is quickly tainted by the commercialist principle of accumulation, lavish display of wealth and the decadent style of living as practiced by Tom Buchanans. Gatsby, a misled disciple of American Dream, performs the impossible task of persistent pursuit with such a high degree of moral integrity that the irony of his undeserved goal—Daisy—eventually wears off on him. Yet, as much as one can still claim a sense of nobility by means of a whole-hearted devotion to American Dream, the substance of the Dream itself can never regain its pristine purity. The path to the past is ironically and hopelessly paved by capitalism and to a certain degree, racism, that both Gatsby and Tom live their lives by. In my view, the novel depicts both the longing for the lost ideal and the ineluctable materialism that

becomes the new nostalgia and the Dream for later generations.

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