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Diasporic Bondage and Material Mobility in Wayson Choy's *All That Matters*

I. Arrested Bodies: Diasporic Matters on the West Coast

On the morning of August 13, 2010, a cargo ship called the MV Sun Sea pulled into Esquimalt Harbour on the southern tip of Vancouver Island. The ship had left Thailand ninety days earlier replete with 493 Sri Lankan Tamils seeking refuge in North America. While one migrant did not survive the three-month journey across the Pacific, 492 men, women, and children arrived safely on Canada's west coast. However, the migrants were not warmly welcomed; rather, the Canadian border officials who met the migrants upon landing relayed them quickly to awaiting cells at various detention centres in the lower mainland. Early reports explained that the "processing" of migrants could take up to seventy-two hours, but after they had spent a week in containment and undergone a complete round of hearings, little information and not a single migrant had been released. The Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) and Public Safety Minister, Vic Toews, declared the continuing detainment of the Tamil migrants necessary until their papers and documentation could be fully analyzed and their identities confirmed. According to the CBSA, the Tamils' incomplete, photocopied, and/or disorganized paperwork slowed the verification process, deemed essential to public safety. Two months after their arrival on Canadian shores, more than 450 Tamil migrants remained in a state of indefinite detention, and by January 2011, over 140 had yet to be released.[1]

Contrary to celebratory discourses of diasporic mobility in which, as James Clifford writes in his seminal 1994 essay, "separate places become effectively a single

[1] See Appendix for a more thorough analysis of the Tamil case as it relates to issues of mobility, borders, and things.

community" (303), the movement of bodies across geopolitical borders and within hostland communities remains fraught in the current transnational moment. Bodies marked by race and gender, as well as those lacking the material means of migration, risk becoming entangled in the legislative, systemic, social, and ultimately concrete barriers inscribed by both the host nation and the diaspora itself: for some, diasporic mobility simultaneously (and paradoxically) begets diasporic bondage. The following essay examines the fictional representation of diasporic bondage in Wayson Choy's *All That Matters* (2004), a novel that traces the struggles of the Chen family in the Chinese Canadian diaspora in Vancouver around the period of WWII. My aim is to trouble, via a reading of Choy's novel, uncritical celebrations of diasporic mobility in relation to both fictional and real, past and present Canadian contexts. As it continues to do for Tamil migrants in the present, the Canadian west coast is shown posing geographic and political barriers for Choy's fictional characters, relegating their bodies to detainment facilities, limiting their social mobility, and privileging their paper over their biological identities (a diasporic conundrum I will take up in the latter half of this essay via the concept of "paper ontologies"). These barriers to mobility, as a close reading of Choy's novel will reveal, are especially acute for diasporic women. Presenting a vital corrective to overvalorizations of mobility in diasporic criticism, drawing attention to gender asymmetries, and provoking a turn to new material matters in diaspora discourse, Choy's narrative bears critical attention now. With this urgency in mind, I argue that *All That Matters* offers a cartographic representation of Vancouver's Chinatown that throws into relief the material boundaries and carefully delineated places that render ethnic, classed, and especially gendered bodies immobile within diasporic space. Furthermore, I contend

that Choy brings paper into view as playing a crucial role in the Chinese Canadian diaspora, constituting false identities, mediating movement across borders, and enabling alternate, though fraught, spaces for diasporic mobility. In other words, I suggest that to engage with questions of mobility and resistance in diasporas, we need to consider both terrestrial space and the transgressive potential of *things* as they co-circulate within and co-contribute to diasporic space. In attempting to bring a materialist focus on things such as paper into productive dialogue with diaspora discourse through a reading of Choy's novel, this essay sets several critical threads into motion, asking readers to follow and bear with its own efforts to cross the boundaries between diaspora criticism and fiction, human subjects and non-human things, past and present histories of migration. I employ this methodology of close reading of a literary text as a means of engaging with diasporic matters because I believe that much is at stake for both diasporic criticism and for diasporic peoples and that Choy's literary representation helps to narrate these high stakes. Moreover, Choy's material text brings these stakes into public discourse, opening new spaces for diasporic mobility through the act of cultural and literary production. In the words of Guy Beauregard, "When we examine the case of Chinese head tax redress, we may appear to be looking backward to late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Canadian history. But in doing so, we are in fact asking how this case raises fundamental and persistent questions about Canada's present—and the sort of place Canada might possibly become" (20). Likewise, I return to the fictional history of the Chinese Canadian diaspora represented in Choy's novel in order to illuminate the risks and potentials for contemporary diasporas and diaspora studies.

II. New Spaces for Diaspora Studies: Contextualizing *All That Matters*

While numerous works of contemporary fiction represent issues of diaspora, mobility, and even materiality, *All That Matters* invites particular consideration for both its provocative historical depiction of the Chinese Canadian diaspora on the West Coast and its own significant underrepresentation in diasporic and Asian North American scholarship. Published nine years after its prequel, *The Jade Peony*, and five years after Choy's memoir, *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood*, *All That Matters* builds on the themes and motifs of these earlier texts[2] to construct a critical and nuanced representation of Chinatown: a visceral landscape in which gender, class, and ethnic borders delimit concrete spaces. By virtue of the restrictive physical landscape of the Chinese diaspora depicted by Choy, the novel troubles ideals of diasporic mobility; on the level of the body, characters are ensnared by the named streets, toxic substances, and encoded edifices that mark Chinatown's internal and external boundaries. While scholars have tended to read *All That Matters* reductively as either a typical "stor[y] of unbelonging" (Madsen, 103)[3] or as an essentializing celebration of ethnic difference—what Françoise Lionnet calls autoethnography[4]—I argue that Choy's text cannot be so easily dismissed. Rather, *All That Matters* constitutes a complex critique of both national and diasporic narratives, resisting valorization of either while experimenting with alternate spaces—

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[2] Both earlier texts explore the secrets and ghosts that circulate in the diasporic space of Vancouver's Chinatown. Choy's first novel, *The Jade Peony* was published by Douglas & McIntyre in 1995 to critical accolades and popular success. *Paper Shadows*, which chronicles Choy's childhood in Vancouver, was published by Penguin in 1999. *All That Matters*, Choy's more recent and, I believe, more complex novel has not been as widely studied or celebrated as his first book.

[3] Madsen argues that a "rhetoric of nation" (belonging neither here nor there) in Choy's text operates in service of nationalistic and essentializing ideologies.

[4] See Chapter Three of Lionnet's *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* for a more thorough discussion of autoethnography as "the defining of one's subjective ethnicity as mediated through language, history, and ethnographical analysis" (99).

constituted by paper and things—of diasporic mobility. Unlike other Asian North American writers with whom he has been compared (such as Amy Tan and Joy Kogawa), Choy situates his intervention in the *material* everyday conditions wrought by exclusionary national and diasporic processes and, further, locates a fraught resistance in this same materiality. In what follows, I mobilize a number of diverse terms and concepts in the hopes of exploring a new direction for diaspora studies. Related terms such as diaspora, (im)mobility, and space figure prominently alongside concrete notions of place, borders, and things to mark an intersection of theoretical approaches. However, each of these concepts necessitates further explication and critical contextualization before I turn to their specific appearances in *All That Matters*.

While there remains a significant lack of critical material on Choy and on *All That Matters*, more specifically, Lily Cho, Ien Ang, and Eleanor Ty provide useful contexts for Choy's work with their formidable contributions to scholarship on Chinese North American literature. While Cho focuses on the histories of indentured labour that distinguish Chinese migration and diaspora formation, and Ang turns a critical eye on the very idea of Chinese diaspora as a bounded entity, Ty considers the ways in which Asian North American bodies have become "unfastened" (1) in the last several decades, crossing borders fluidly and negotiating new spaces. In "Asian Canadian Futures: Diasporic Passages and the Routes of Indenture," Cho imagines a future for Asian Canadian scholarship in which the critical lens of diaspora studies informs our reading of Chinese Canadian literature and lends a sense of dislocation and "precariousness" to the notion of Chinese migration (183-4). Furthermore, Cho argues that the lingering colonial history of Chinese dispossession and exploitation must remain paramount in current

studies of Chinese Canadian literature (186). She concludes that the work yet to be done in diaspora studies is "that of understanding the proleptic power of forgotten and suppressed pasts" (199).

While Cho's claim that diasporic pasts are always imbricated in and constitutive of diasporic presents largely informs my approach to *All That Matters*, I also draw from Ang's critique of diasporic insularity. In "Together-in-Difference: Beyond Diaspora, into Hybridity," Ang challenges the very notion of a Chinese diaspora, calling instead for a focus on cultural hybridization. She suggests that while the Chinese diaspora provides a strategic transnational challenge to borders of nation-states, it simultaneously forms an "internally homogenizing" boundary around itself (142). Unlike an ambivalent hybrid subjectivity that resists all borders, Ang sees diasporic subjectivities subverting externally imposed borders only to fortify internal lines that result in ethnic insularity. Finally, Ty proposes a more optimistic view of the Chinese diaspora that takes recent changes in transnational migration, or "globality,"[5] into account; she argues that the Asian North American experience of mobility has become more liberatory and less restricted (xvi), and she explores "how globalization and travel have pushed [Asian North Americans] to seek new spaces, both geographically and psychically" (xxviii). While I find Ty's optimistic belief in global mobility problematic in that it obscures the experiences of refugees and other migrants who do not meet the *material* preconditions for transpacific fluidity and inasmuch as it largely overlooks the bondage of racialized, gendered, and classed bodies within diasporic hostlands, I am intrigued by her focus on "new spaces."

[5] Ty borrows from Manfred Steger to define globality as "a social condition characterized by the existence of global economic, political, cultural, and environmental interconnections and flows that make many of the currently existing borders and boundaries irrelevant" (xiii).

Although Ty specifically bids us to examine psychic and geographic spaces, I contend that other material diasporic spaces, too, bear close consideration.

This leads to the preliminary question of terms: how, in the parameters of this paper, do I conceive of "space," and even more crucially, what do I mean by "diaspora"? While definitions of "diaspora" remain varied and flexible, I use the term here to refer to communities of people dispersed from a homeland to which they retain emotional, political, and/or economic ties. In particular, my reading of Choy's novel will serve to problematize a postcolonial discourse of diaspora that, as David Chariandy notes, "seems to …idealize or even celebrate experiences of dislocation and displacement" ("Postcolonial Diasporas"). While diasporas certainly hold a powerful (and partially realized) political potential, namely that of challenging national boundaries and identities, drawing rights of citizenship into question, and facilitating transnational activisms, I remain wary of the tendency to overlook diaspora's negative undertows. I build on Avtar Brah's argument that "the materiality of everyday life" constitutes imagined diasporic communities (183) and that borders and location are implicit in the term *diaspora space* (208) as a foundation for further exploring the potentially restrictive enmeshment of diasporic peoples and landscapes. I grapple with the term *space* as a way to define how diasporic bodies – not all of them human – mediate various opportunities or obstacles to both spatial (territorial) and social mobility. For Ty, as mentioned above, space is manifested in geographical and psychic terms, in the edifices and coordinates of *place* and in the immaterial realms of affect and imagination. However, I attempt to address Ty's call for a focus on new spaces by conceiving of space as relational: a negotiation between bodies (or things) and physical places that allows concepts of space to include

both the figurative and the material, opening new ways of thinking through the limits and possibilities of diasporic mobility. Furthermore, while Brah defines borders as "arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic" (198), I consider the ways in which they are also all-too-concrete. In other words, by examining the borders, spaces, and places that are constitutive of diaspora, I hope to interrogate one of the most valorized and seemingly inherent features of diaspora: mobility.

Denoting both the physical movements of people through space (as in transnational, national, and local transportations) and the vertical movements of individuals through the social stratum, the term "mobility" figures largely in theorizations of diaspora. Indeed, mobility is constitutive of diaspora inasmuch as diasporic subjects *move* (often by force or coercion) from countries of origin to new locales or "hostlands." Yet, the fluidity of this transnational movement tends to be overdetermined in diasporic criticism. Displaced bodies, exhibiting mobility in migration, do not always (or often) remain mobile upon arrival at international destinations, and papers do not always travel alongside the bodies they identify but often precede or belatedly follow their arrival, assuming a liveliness of their own. For Wayson Choy's characters, as for many actual Chinese immigrants prior to WWII, (false) identity papers become more legitimate and more mobile than the biological identities of their holders, thus constituting a new mode of being: "paper ontologies." Signaling a return of history in this current transnational moment, human diasporic mobility is almost always facilitated and often surpassed by the movement of things. In his 2004 text, *What do Pictures Want?*, W.J.T. Mitchell provocatively contends that "in this [globalized] New World Order, freedom means the freedom of commodities (but not of human bodies) to circulate freely across borders"

(150). He wonders how things - namely, images - exhibit agency, autonomy, motivation, or other signs of life (6). Likewise, in "Thing Theory," Bill Brown asks "how inanimate objects constitute human subjects, how they move them, how they threaten them, [and] how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects" (7). In other words, how do objects *act* on people? These questions become especially productive and pressing in relation to diaspora studies and to *All That Matters*, in particular, as papers travel, cross borders, and constitute "legitimate" identities — animate actions paradoxically denied to human bodies.

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V. Diasporic Futures: The Potential of *Things*

The relationship between paper and borders that Choy depicts and embodies in his own act of diasporic fiction carries significant implications beyond literary representations of diasporas, speaking to diasporic spaces and movements more broadly. The way paper circulates across national borders and within diasporic hostlands, the mobilizing and simultaneously restricting power of paper ontologies (or other official documents), the autonomy and agency exhibited by paper, the changing nature of paper-facilitated subversions, and the various incarnations of paper as official, cultural, or artistic *thing* all deserve further consideration in future diaspora studies.[6] Moreover, as paper continues to be a contested space in the politics of diaspora, where migrants and border officials vie for control of identity documents and their authenticity, the increasing value of other *things* demands critical attention of its own. Just as falsified identity

[6] Projects that explore the relation between things and diasporic migrations are emerging across the disciplines. Juanita Sundberg's geographic work on "the cultural politics of objects left behind," which deals with objects discarded by Mexican migrants crossing the Mexico-U.S. border, provides one exciting example of this emergent work.

documents challenge ontological borders, shifting the legitimacy of being away from flesh and into paper, so too have other materialities begun troubling what Bill Brown recognizes as the dichotomy between thinking and thingness (16). And, in the ensuing tension between ontological borders, these things continue to raise the question: who (or what) manages to cross diasporic borders and who (or what) does not?

Last October, news releases across B.C.'s lower mainland flaunted side by side photographs of an elderly Caucasian man and a young Asian man with a censor bar over his eyes. According to reports, the two photos (leaked by the CBSA) depicted the same man with and without a silicone mask. The imaged individual, a Chinese man in his early twenties, had boarded an Air Canada plane in Hong Kong ensconced in the wrinkled plastic skin of a white senior and had emerged from his guise midway through the Vancouver-bound flight. Upon landing, border officials met and detained the man, who subsequently articulated a claim for refugee status. While most information about the case remains confidentially guarded, some outcomes are clear: the "masked man," like the Tamil refugees who arrived several weeks earlier, was immediately and indefinitely detained after crossing the national threshold; border officials authenticated the masked man's ID papers but determined these papers inadequate for confirming his identity and thus for securing his release; and the widely-publicized incident sparked a thorough investigation into procedures and security at both ends of the masked man's transpacific flight. Interestingly, government officials and media treated this particular border crossing as exceptionally menacing, a threat to the perceived truth of flesh as a racial signifier, the false rhetoric of egalitarian mobility, and the real, policed boundary of transnational transportation.

The circumstances of this (albeit arrested) transpacific migration point to the very significant imbrication of things in acts of diasporic mobility. Unlike paper, which inscribes the constructed identity of migrants seeking cross-border mobility, here silicone contours the biological identity of a would-be migrant. The masked man physically inhabited the *thing* that enabled his transpacific crossing. In this case, silicone overlays the seemingly prohibited skin of an immobile subject and enables a new space of diasporic mobility. Skin and silicone come together in a strategic blurring of bodily boundaries. Of course, the enabling agent is not only silicone, but silicone in the form of a white face—a testament to the continuing impenetrability of ethnic borders and the unequal freedom of white subjects in the present moment. How the mask of a white man operated in lieu of proper documentation demands consideration. Presumably, the migrant did not possess the paperwork required to legally traverse the policed boundaries of airport security. Yet, by occupying the plastic visage of a white male, he was able to pass through borders unhindered. Rather than generating a new, mobile identity, the white mask seems to enable invisibility: the erasure of an ethnically marked subject. Furthermore, the devaluation of paper in proximity to the white mask (which in its whiteness seemingly obviates the need for legitimate documentation) speaks to the heightened significance of paper and things for racialized bodies. The importance of these alternate material spaces relates directly to racial and socioeconomic status,[7] increasing with one's visible distance from white, patriarchal ideals.

While drawing the inequalities associated with cross-border mobility into relief, the silicone mask also highlights the provocative potential of things to mediate new

[7] Despite a dearth of details, lawyers on both sides of the "masked man's" case have confirmed that his transpacific migration involved a large monetary transaction in exchange for organization and facilitation of transit.

diasporic movements and challenge extant boundaries. The reaction of the Canadian government to the masked man's transpacific crossing testifies to the subversive and surprising power of things. In the words of government officials, it was "an unbelievable case of concealment" (Woo). Carrying threatening connotations, the term "concealment" here does not refer to weapons or toxic substances but to the Asian face of a young would-be migrant; his racialized, undocumented body is itself the ominous "concealed" entity trespassing the guarded space of national borders. The masked man's mid-flight transformation thus becomes a simultaneous manifestation of persisting embodied immobilities and potential material border subversions. Moreover, occurring in the transpacific space of the moving airplane, the masked man's revelation marks an undeniable intersection of mobility, bodies, and things—an intersection that holds rich potential for the future of diaspora studies and diasporic populations alike. As evinced by the Tamil migrants awaiting paper "identification" in detention centres along the West Coast and by the partially successful border crossing of an Asian man in a white silicone mask, the concrete borders and materialist subversions depicted in Choy's fictional diaspora continue to matter for our present moment, constituting an ongoing struggle for new mobile spaces.