

*Competing Demands, Intertwined Narratives:
Ethnic, Gender and National Identities in Alison Wong's
As the Earth Turns Silver*¹

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Abstract. This article focuses on Alison Wong's 2009 novel *As the Earth Turns Silver*, the first published by a New Zealand writer of Chinese descent, and considers the expectations and pressures placed on the author as a result of her ethnic background. As argued in the article, the "competing demands" affecting her as a novelist are solved by reconstructing Chinese New Zealand history as interrelated to the history of other New Zealanders. This is done, primarily, by fictionalising the interracial love story between the two protagonists, a Chinese man and a Pakeha woman, but also by contextualising their romance within a range of interrelated debates on ethnic, gender and national identity. Ultimately, Wong's creative choices allow her to recover the silenced Chinese voice while exploring issues that were and continue to be of utmost importance for New Zealanders of all ethnic backgrounds.

Keywords: Alison Wong, Chinese New Zealand literature, ethnic identity in New Zealand, Chinese New Zealand history.

Introduction

When *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature* was published in 1998 the entry for "China" opened by acknowledging the "significant niche" (Millar 1998: 104) that this country has occupied in New Zealand's literary imagination and then moved on to enumerate the ways in which well-known New Zealand writers —like Katherine Mansfield, Robin Hyde, Roderick Finlayson or Michael Morrissey— had variously reflected on the Chinese presence in New Zealand with stories that echoed both early Anti-Asian sentiment and more recent and ambivalent reactions to Chinese migrants and their cultural influence. Likewise, the entry documented the travels of several New Zealand writers in China, as well as the more recent presence of exiled writers from that

country. It concluded by establishing a distinction between these “new migrants” and the long-established members of the Chinese community, who descend from 19th century settlers, and whose literary activity was, at the time in which the work was compiled, still incipient.

Twenty years after the *Companion* was published, the Chinese experience has been documented, narrated and performed by historians, fiction writers, filmmakers and visual artists of Chinese descent, in a joint effort that fortunately now demands a substantial expansion of the *Oxford Companion* entry and in turn a redefinition of New Zealand literature. More recent works —such as *The Auckland University Press Anthology of New Zealand Literature* (Stafford and Williams 2012)— have conveniently acknowledged both the Chinese heritage as part of New Zealand literary history as well as the role of authors of diverse Asian origins in reshaping its contours.

The author I have chosen to focus on, poet and novelist Alison Wong, is among the “new voices” featured in the anthology. Wong is a fourth generation Chinese New Zealander and the first New Zealander of Chinese descent to have published a novel, *As the Earth Turns Silver* (2009). Set in Wellington in the period that goes from 1905 to 1916, the novel narrates the cross-cultural romance between Yung, a Chinese shopkeeper, and Katherine, a Pakeha widow, and the tragic ending of their love story, when Katherine’s son Robbie finds out about their relationship and murders Yung in his shop. Yung’s murder is based on a number of racist attacks which occurred in several New Zealand cities and reflects the sinophobic feelings that dominated New Zealand society from the mid-19th century, when Chinese people began to arrive as temporary sojourners at the onset of the gold rush period and then settled in the country permanently, diversifying their occupations and consolidating as a more numerous community.

My aim in this article is to reflect on the novel’s pioneer status and the ways in which Wong’s creative choices could be read in relation to those debates affecting her as a New Zealand writer of Chinese descent and her novel as the first of its kind to be published in the country. My contention is that Wong’s novel not only serves the purpose of inscribing the silenced Chinese voice, but most importantly of inscribing that voice within a specific New Zealand context, proving that Chinese history must not be seen as separate but as integral to the development of national identity in the past and at present. In the first section of my article, I look at the specificities surrounding the publication of Wong’s novel and its reception in the context of debates concerning Chinese diasporic writing and New Zealand multicultural literature; in the following sections, I focus on how the novel negotiates the intersecting notions on ethnic, gender and national identity as interrelated paradigms that cannot be understood in isolation but influencing each other. Ultimately, I argue that Wong’s novel responds to identity dilemmas affecting New Zealanders not only at the turn of the 20th century, a period that was crucial in the formation of New Zealand’s identity, but also resonate with more recent articulations of New Zealand’s multi-ethnic diversity in the 21st century, when different identity variables interact and influence each other, despite often being dealt with separately.

The Inscription of the Chinese New Zealand Voice

The Chinese voice only emerged in New Zealand literature in the late 1990s with the publication of works like *Ka Shue/Letters Home* (1998), Lynda Chanwai-Earle's monodrama, a multigenerational portrait of a Chinese family and the first play written in New Zealand by a writer of Chinese descent. The project of inscribing the Chinese voice has gained strength at the onset of the 21st century thanks to a younger generation of Chinese writers from various origins and who have experienced varied diasporic trajectories. Although diverse in form and content, these works continue to be grouped as examples of the emergent "Asian New Zealand voice". In Australia, with a wider and more consolidated range of Asian² literary voices, critics have warned us against reading the work of these writers as "typically" Asian, as well as of the dangers implicit in defining these works under "the generic diasporic umbrella" (Ommundsen 2011: 503).

For instance, readings of these works tend to frame them within the scope of international best-selling titles, as examples of what has been variously called "the Amy Tan Phenomenon" (S. Wong 2009), "the Amy Tan-Syndrome" (Wagner 2003) or "the *Wild Swans* Factor" (Ommundsen 2002: 68), in reference to Jung Chang's 1991 best-selling work. Ommundsen claims that reading these works as "diasporic", "transnational" or "transcultural" fails to consider them as firmly rooted in their respective local literary traditions, minimising their particular contribution to the context from which they have sprung (2009: 2). Granting that Asian Australian writing may display some similarities with its North American and Canadian counterparts, Ommundsen nevertheless stresses the need to consider it "in its broader historical contexts, the intersection of personal, national, and literary histories from which the writing has acquired its specificities" (2011: 504). In the same vein, Jacqueline Lo advocates for the establishment of critical models that are relevant to the specific context from which these works originate, models "that are grounded in Australian histories and spaces in order to remain politically relevant to the Australian context" (2006: 24), without losing their transnational appeal and their commonalities with other Asian diasporic models to which, however, they cannot be simplistically and unproblematically related.

Wong herself has talked about the difficulties she experienced when trying to find "home in literature" (Perkins 2011: 23), both due to the lack of Chinese perspectives in New Zealand writing and the remoteness she felt in relation to "Chinese literature from overseas" (Perkins 2011: 23). This demands rethinking the apparently evident connections among literatures of the Chinese diaspora springing from different locations, questioning the very different migration experiences that are often grouped under the term "diaspora", as well as the range of thematic and aesthetic concerns of works by New Zealand writers of diverse Asian descents whose aim is to inscribe their voices as New Zealanders rather than as transnational or diasporic subjects.

This line of thought has been reinforced by several New Zealand critics when discussing the cultures of Asian peoples in the country, especially in relation to the country's specific social and political configuration. Understanding the role of Asian peoples in the making of New Zealand means addressing the conflicts between the country's foundational framework and the recent emergence of multiculturalism in whose consolidation the Chinese, as one of the oldest and largest ethnic communities in the country, must play a relevant role. Leckie and Voci point at the importance of transcending official ethnic

classifications and the rigid separation between Asians and New Zealanders in favour of the development of a specific framework defined by “geographical and historical contexts, but also by specific cultural locations and personal interventions” (2011: 21). This is indeed a complex and incomplete project, as multiculturalism in New Zealand remains politically contested, despite it has consolidated demographically and culturally, with writers and artists of various ethnic origins offering their own personal and artistic interventions into the debate. Wong’s perception of her own work as part of the “organism which is multicultural NZ” (2003: 11) addresses the construction of Chinese identity as an ongoing project which cannot be detached from the interrelated and dynamic narratives of national identity, biculturalism and migration.

Although Wong’s novel has only been a recent addition to these debates,³ its unique status as the first Chinese New Zealand novel has placed her amidst a number of discussions, even before its publication. In 2003, after receiving the Robert Burns Fellowship and while working on the manuscript, Wong tentatively commented on the expectations placed on her novel, its focus and subject matter:

Perhaps I have to shoulder a certain responsibility because we are only at the beginning of what I hope will be a wave of NZ Chinese writers. Perhaps some people expect me to be some kind of spokesperson for the NZ Chinese. (2003: 10)

Wong protested that no New Zealand writer is expected to write the definite New Zealand novel (2003: 11), whereas for ethnic minority writers the expectation is that “what they write is held up to be a definitive work, instead of just one voice and story among what will hopefully become many” (2003: 11). Wong has also talked of her condition as “ethnic writer” as “both a curse and a blessing” as someone who may have “a slightly different story to tell, which can set you apart in the marketplace”, but is also in “danger of being pigeonholed or stereotyped, of being expected to be different when you’re not” (2003: 5).

These reflections remind us of what the Philippine-Australian writer Merlinda Bobis has defined as the “Voice-Niche-Brand” framework (2008): the tensions between the need to inscribe one’s distinctive or underrepresented voice, the concessions often made by ethnic authors to be given a niche in the market, and the eventual process of branding that occurs once these authors have succeeded and are expected to stick to certain identity and thematic parameters. Wong has not been the only New Zealand writer of Chinese descent to point at these problems. In an interview for the New Zealand Book Council in 2006, Lynda Chanwai-Earle made a similar point when arguing that “using our ethnicities at a time when there is a scarcity of this voice in literature [...] doesn’t mean that we should be then neatly packaged in a box and put on a shelf” (NZ Book Council 2006).

The expectations placed on these artists as a result of popular or market demands coexist with internal expectations from their own people. These internal pressures have resulted in harsh criticism on the part of their communities when the work in question does not offer a fully positive portrayal of their group.⁴ To refer to these conflicts, Kathy Ooi talks about the writers’ “insider dilemmas”, which result in pressures from their peers to produce alternative renditions of their ethnic identity to those expected from mainstream

audiences or outsiders, representations which, ironically, appear as similarly reductive and monolithic. “The danger —Ooi remarks— is that the community sanctions only certain images and viewpoints, which potentially suppresses the diversity that actually exists within” (2009: 335). In her study, Ooi also talks about the “inconsistent ascriptions of ethnicity” (2009: 319) affecting ethnic writers; for instance, she contrasts the branding of New Zealand authors like Alan Duff or Lynda Chanwai-Earle as “ethnic”, with the creative strategies developed by others, like Kelly Ana Morey and Ann-Marie Houngh Lee, to avoid such branding.

Wong’s novel has mostly attracted positive responses by both Chinese and non-Chinese readers (Wong 2011: 73; Perkins 2011: 24). Yet, despite this mostly positive criticism, it has not escaped such inconsistent ascriptions of ethnicity, to which she specifically refers as “competing demands” (2011: 73). In fact, to counteract the pressures and expectations placed on the novel as a “Chinese” text, Wong has often stressed her “hyphenated existence”, repeatedly claiming her status as a New Zealand writer who ticks “Chinese” for her ethnicity when “it would be as relevant for me to tick both Chinese and NZ European/pakeha” (2003: 9). A fourth generation Chinese, born in Hawke’s Bay, Wong grew up in an area relatively isolated from other members of the Chinese community, and although she spent three years in China (Wong 2003: 7), she claims that “New Zealand is my one and only home, China and things Chinese are also part of me, even if sometimes a little strange or foreign” (Wong 2010: 489). She has also expressed her ease when approaching Pakeha culture, her reluctance to tell the story from an exclusive Chinese perspective (2011: 68-69) and her preference for her work to be read as informed by those multiple experiences (Liang 2007), a point I consider below in relation to her choice of characters and narrative perspectives.

Critics have mostly read Wong’s novel along those lines, pointing at her achievements as a “New Zealand writer”, stressing her local ascriptions and her rooted sense of identity. A reviewer in *The New Zealand Herald* talked about “a homegrown writing debut” (Hill 2009); a judge of the New Zealand Post Book Awards, awarded to her novel in 2010, talks of her work opening “new windows on the development of our nation” (quoted in Pellegrino 2010). Websites like NZnewsUK proudly mention the international recognition given to a “Kiwi author short-listed for Aussie Award” (2010), branding Wong as “Kiwi”, at the time when she actually moved to Australia, where she now lives, and where, paradoxically, her novel was shortlisted for the 2010 Australian Prime Minister Awards.

Australian reviewers also emphasised her status as a New Zealand novelist. One pointed that “Wong is the Patricia Grace of the Chinese New Zealand experience” (Tay 2009), placing Wong in a similarly iconic position to that held by the pioneer Maori writer. Another saw “an undeniable touch of New Zealand author Janet Frame” in the novel (Jordan 2009), significantly connecting her with the icon of New Zealand letters.⁵ Reviews like these reflect the often ambivalent position occupied by writers like Wong, on the one hand revealing expectations that she will become the Chinese version of Grace and Frame, clearly filling that specific ethnic slot; on the other, firmly placing her within the New Zealand tradition rather than as part of the mass of diasporic Chinese writing. From Australia, Wong has also talked about the specific understanding of her work as distinctively coming from New Zealand soil:

[I]n Australia I am not Chinese. People recognise my accent. They're friendly. Either that or they haven't a clue what I'm saying. At a petrol station a young Aussie-born Maori heard my accent and asked if I was Maori. Everywhere I go Kiwis come out of the brickwork and unreinforced masonry. They tell me they're from Wainuiomata, Invergargill, Christchurch or Auckland. At the Australian Prime Minister's Literary Awards shortlisting, David Malouf said to me, 'Ah, so you're the New Zealander.' He did not say, 'Ah, so you're the Chinese,' or 'Ah, so you are the Chinese New Zealander.' (Wong 2013)

Wong understands her New Zealandness, from her Australian standpoint, as inclusive of the Maori and the Chinese experiences, a definition which seems to be detached from perceptions of her work as typically Chinese or simply as part of the Asian diasporic tradition. Despite being forced to explain her credentials and background prior to the publication of the novel (Wong 2003), Wong's text thus seems to have managed to both portray the unknown or hidden Chinese voice and engage in a redefinition of New Zealand identity, presenting both projects as interrelated and compatible, as seen in her own authorial status.

In the following pages, I focus on how Wong confronts some of the common dilemmas and inconsistencies affecting "ethnic" writers, and how her creative choices allow her to critically engage with the constraining "ethnic" label. I will show that her novel offers a localised and inclusive approach to the history of the Chinese in New Zealand history, including but not limited to the Chinese perspective. Although Wong's main concern is to recover the silenced voice of the Chinese community, her narrative intertwines ethnic and racial conflicts with discussions of gender and national identity, thus reflecting on the multifaceted nature of the debates affecting her Chinese and Pakeha characters, to which she grants equal weight in the narrative. Finally, Wong establishes a bridge between the historical events occurring at the beginning of the 20th century and the contemporary manifestations of those debates in what are still pressing conflicts for 21st century New Zealanders sharing the multicultural national space. This makes her historical revision relevant from a contemporary perspective and pertinent for readers of diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Narrating racial conflicts and interethnic ties

As the Earth Turns Silver is set in the early 1900s and moves forward to the end of the First World War. New Zealand historian James Belich labels the period that goes from 1890 to 1920 as "The Great Tightening", as characterised by what he calls the "three harmonies" (2011: 121): a process of "social, moral and racial integration" (2001: 121), aimed at minimising difference and forging myths of "social harmony, moral excellence and racial purity" (2001: 124) for the emerging nation. Apart from attempting to reduce social differences, there was a moral component in such process intended to "exorcise numerous demons, such as disorder, dirt, disease, drink and difference" (2001: 122), as

well as a more racial dimension, informed by Social Darwinism and Aryanism (2001: 123).

The novel reflects the interrelated nature of the social, moral and racial process of harmonisation, which particularly affected the indigenous Maori people, in an effort to assimilate them to the hegemonic white culture, as well as ethnic minorities like the Chinese who were subject to the so called “White New Zealand Policy” in the form of a series of legal measures taken by New Zealand governments from 1881 to 1920 to prevent or limit the number of new arrivals. The establishment of a poll tax in 1881 and of literacy tests from 1907 ensured that entry into the country could be denied to those who did not conform to the standards and reinforced the establishment of New Zealand as a nation of (white) migrants addressing the risk of a what at the time was popularly perceived as the “yellow peril” (Murphy 2009: 73). Chinese, in fact, personified the fears and anxieties of the period as they were commonly accused of constituting an economic threat, of spreading improper or immoral behaviour in the form of “[s]exual depravity, vice, moral degeneration, disease, miscegenation, racial contamination and ruin” (Murphy 2009: 74).

For those who were already settled in New Zealand, as is the case of Yung and Shun in the novel, the process of racial tightening translated in widespread sinophobic feelings and quotidian racist acts. To exemplify this environment, Wong rescues the figure of Lionel Terry, an English migrant and government official who became infamously known for shooting an old disabled Chinese man in Wellington in 1905, subsequently justifying his act as a way of ensuring his rights and as a defence against invaders (Moloughney and Stenhouse 1999: 43). Wong fictionalises Terry’s visit to Katherine’s husband where he appears as spokesperson of white supremacist theories and the colonial credo of the white man’s burden:

This employment of alien labour is a criminal injustice to the British workman. It’s the chief cause of poverty, crime, degeneracy and disease throughout the Empire [...] The presence of Asiatics in this country jeopardises the rights of our fellow Britons. We have to take drastic measures before it’s too late... (2009: 26-27)

Katherine’s husband uses his position as editor of *Truth* —a tabloid newspaper which appeared in 1887 and published “stories of divorce and fallen women, the malodorous Chow and the Jew” (2009: 52)— to gather public support for Terry after his crime, so that his death sentence is commuted to life imprisonment. Eventually, Terry is sent to a mental hospital from which he regularly sends letters to Katherine’s husband, who continues to defend and spread Terry’s ideas organising petitions and events in his defence.

Wong’s narration skilfully presents these racist ideas as deeply ingrained in society and not merely the result of a lunatic mind or a casual incident; there are also references to other events like a shooting in Naseby or a murder in Tapanui (2009: 29), as well as more quotidian acts which affect the protagonists, who are verbally abused by different characters, including children. Wong thus demonstrates the effective ways in which the official process of “racial tightening” worked its way into the popular imagination and conditioned Chinese people’s lives. In fact, in the author’s note included at the end of the

novel, Wong mentions the historical accuracy of the “anti-Chinese legislation outlined in this novel [as well] as the general climate of racism and sometime violence” (2009: 264) reflected in a number of racist murders including that of her paternal great-grandfather in 1914.

Despite condemning these racist acts, Wong avoids presenting Yung and Shun as passive victims. The novel opens with an incident involving the brothers who are approached by a drunkard asking for money and a resolute and fearless Yung defying the man and walking into the police station to demand protection (2009: 4); later, Yung repels the abuse of “a couple of young hooligans” (2009: 13) whom he manages to kick out of his shop. The novel also hints at harmonious relationships between Chinese and non-Chinese characters, rejecting the idea of New Zealand’s society as homogeneously racist. “Alterity —as Moloughney and Stenhouse suggest— had its limits [and] New Zealanders did not ‘other’ the Chinese as radically and systematically as we might think” (1999: 63).

On the other hand, the decision of telling the story from both points of view allows Wong to explore prejudice and mistrust as working in several directions. For instance, the novel opens with Yung’s older brother’s reflection on the strange *gweilos* —repeatedly defined by the Chinese as “barbarians” (2009: 13, 15) — and their religious practices: “It is a lonely place where the Jesus-ghosts preach. They preach about love, about a god who died of love, yet in the street the people sneer and call out and spit, then on Sundays sing in the Jesus-house” (2009: 1).

Prejudice also affects both Katherine and Yung as they gradually get to know each other and become friends. Although Katherine displays a capacity for empathy since she first visits Yung’s shop and shows a profound contempt for Terry’s ideas, she unconsciously echoes some of the assumptions prevalent at the time at the onset of her relationship with Yung:

She took the carrots, feeling as if the feathery tops spilling out of the newspaper were spring blooms. Why was she so light-headed? He was a Chinaman. A sallow-faced, squinty-eyed foreigner. The dregs of society. Heavens, he didn’t even make it into society. And yet when she was with him she forgot who she was. After all, he had a strong, almost European nose. He was tall. He didn’t *really* look Chinese. (2009: 86)

Katherine tries to naturalise her feelings by persuading herself that Yung’s physique is *almost* European, even though she simultaneously employs common assumptions about his physical and cultural differences. She manages to see beyond these appearances, behind “the buck-toothed caricatures you saw in the newspapers” (2009: 59), stressing Yung’s “warm, generous smile that half-closed and softened his eyes” (2009: 59), and minimising his “strong [accent] and his [limited] English” through his ability to “gesticulate, laugh, commiserate” (2009: 59). Likewise, Yung emphasizes Katherine’s physical differences, while appreciating her appealing character:

All for a devil woman. A devil woman.
Her nose is too big, and her breasts, and her feet. She doesn’t walk like a woman. She has red devil hair. And yet she has kind, sad, beautiful blue-green

eyes and full, luscious lips –and she calls me by name. Mr Wong, she says, as if I am a man and not a Chinaman. (2009: 87)

Yung is described as a cultivated and a politically committed man, with a special poetic sensibility: “He was educated. He was respected [...] people came to him to read and write their letters, their New Year couplets. He went to meet the newcomers off the ships, to help them with customs and immigration” (2009: 13). Wong thus avoids victimisation and presents him as an accomplished and resolute person who moves away from the stereotypical image of the poor and ignorant Chinese shopkeeper, and whose personality attracts Katherine despite the prevailing moral and racial constraints of the period. Likewise, despite her unhappy marriage, the economic difficulties she faces after her husband’s death and the principles that inform her upbringing, Katherine displays open-mindedness, tenacity and a sense of humour that allows her to be critical of prevailing attitudes against the Chinese:

No one knew the names of the Chinese. Occasionally someone might say Mr –Mr Wong or Mr Choy. But usually it was the Chinaman next door to Paterson’s or the John on the corner of Tory and Webb. They were all called John, the Chinese. And even if anyone bothered to find out, who could remember? Their names were like birds that never came into land. (2009: 126)

The relationship between the characters allows us to witness how interpersonal relations eventually work independently from and very often against official and popular perceptions. Wong adds an affective and personal dimension to the discussion, opting for a more inclusive view which condemns the long history of exclusion but engages more directly in less documented instances of intercultural interaction.

On the other hand, the process of “racial tightening” (Belich 2001) that determined official and popular perceptions of the Chinese migrants, was also at the heart of debates about the status of the indigenous Maori, who at the time were fighting against the long accepted notion that they were the last of a “dying race”. The official mechanisms of exclusion for both ethnic groups were therefore related and complementary, as they contributed to the creation of a New Zealand white national identity (Murphy 2009: 56). Hence, in the novel Wong has Lionel Terry equating migrants with Maori people, similarly describing them as being in “a state of moral, mental and physical degeneration” (2009: 27).

Although Wong does not fully develop these connections in the novel, there is a scene in which they are briefly hinted at. Yung remembers his first contact with Maori people, where he already notices that “whatever their standing they never called out names or pulled his braid. They smiled [...] as if to a brother” (2009: 9). This flashback is followed by a brief exchange with a Maori man who enters his shop. This second encounter takes place a decade after Yung voices his first impressions on Maori and, despite its brevity, it is punctuated by mutual respect and understanding:

As he handed over the packaged fruit, the man thanked him.
‘Good luck,’ Yung said.

The man looked at him quizzically.

'Your land,' Yung said.

They almost bowed to each other before the man walked out into the southerly.

What *gweilo* had ever treated him as respectfully? How many had even looked in his eyes. (2009: 10)

Despite the exchange between both characters is limited, Yung openly acknowledges Maori people's indigenous status and their fight to recover their land. Though irrelevant to the main narrative, Wong does make a point to stress similar histories of exclusion as a potentially rich source of intercultural communication and solidarity. Cross-cultural interaction between Maori and Chinese was common, especially in rural areas, where the communities displayed "a certain affinity in adversity" (Ip 2009a: 1); yet, as Ip reminds us, this relationship has "largely been overlooked in the formal historical and sociological discourse of New Zealand" (2008: 1). In fact, Ip explains that "the old Chinese used to regard Maories as allies, people who were fellow soil-tillers and who shared similar cultural norms such as respect for elders, unquestioning loyalty to family members and readiness to share resources with the community" (2009b: 149).

This historical reassessment of the interaction among the Chinese and Maori communities relates directly to contemporary debates which have tended to present biculturalism, the official discourse which advocates the partnership of Maori and Pakeha, and multiculturalism—inclusive of other ethnic groups—as contradictory and mutually exclusive debates. Wong might be suggesting that the claims made by non-indigenous minorities do not work to deny the acknowledgement of the indigenous status of the Maori people. On the contrary, ethnic minorities might contribute to the debate in useful and enriching ways. Wong's recreation of this period reveals the multiple fissures in a process of racial tightening predicated on the exclusion of alien others, but revealing instances of interethnic relationships and understanding

Telling the Wives' Stories

As the Earth Turns Silver combines the discussion on ethnic identity with debates on gender in relation to both the effect of migration on Chinese women and the fight for women's rights taking place in New Zealand from the end of the 19th century, thus avoiding the tendency to consider ethnicity and gender as separate debates. As Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis remind us, "settler capitalism exacerbated and transformed relations based simultaneously on colonialism, capitalism, gender, class and race/ethnicity" (1995: 5), which far from being considered as discrete categories should be discussed "as falling along a continuum rather than within clear and fixed boundaries" (1995: 3). Leckie similarly condemns the neglect of gender issues in the discussion of migration to New Zealand (1995: 50), insisting on the need to undertake a similarly "fluid or intersecting approach between the identities of ethnicity, class and gender" (1995: 53). As does Larner, when explaining that migration brought about an "increasing complexity within and between categories of race, ethnicity, colonial status, gender and class in New Zealand" (1993: 88), foregrounding the need to explore "the partial and contingent

connections that can be developed between differently positioned women” (1993: 88). As *the Earth Turns Silver* undertakes the exploration of such connections, intertwining the discussion of ethnic identity with gender and class variables to illustrate the outcomes of migration for both, Chinese men and women, as well as a range of moral and social discourses determining the lives of Pakeha women at the turn of the 20th century.

Although the focus of the novel is the interracial romance of Yung and Katherine, Wong does not omit a discussion of the effects of migration on Chinese women through the characters of the brother's first wives, left behind in China, and of Mei-Ling, Shun's second wife, who travels to New Zealand with her husband. From the mid-19th century, migration offered opportunities for men who came from overpopulated provinces with a scarcity of land (Ip 1990: 18) and was at this stage an almost exclusively male project, which involved leaving their families behind and travelling to New Zealand as sojourners, with the intention of spending a few years in the country and then returning to China. Once settled, a migrant often paid for a brother or male cousin to travel to New Zealand from China, but not for a woman (Ip 1990: 20). In the novel Shun sends for his brother and they both open a grocery store, a common occupation for many Chinese after exhausting their time as gold seekers. As seen in Yung's story, it was also customary to arrange a marriage for a son before he travelled to New Zealand and postpone the journey until the wife was pregnant; the child reinforced the link between the family and money was duly sent. The duty of the women was to remain in China and take care of elders and children, especially the parents in law (Ip 1990: 19).

Wong gives voice to the brothers' first wives in three chapters narrated in the first person, a narrative concession to the patriarchal nature of their society and the marginal position they occupy in their husbands' lives. Yung's wife briefly recalls her childhood and upbringing and her arranged marriage just six months before her husband departs for New Zealand. As it was the case of many Chinese women, Yung's wife is prevented from travelling both due to familiar obligations and to the physical impediments deriving from her bound feet. After Yung leaves, she gives birth to twin boys, although only one of them survives. Moved by jealousy and the pain of having only given birth to daughters, Shun's first wife attacks her sister in law with a boiling iron lid disfiguring her face. The novel thus juxtaposes the wives' narratives and presents their lives as interconnected by their own respective tragedies.

Wong also includes a very short chapter narrated in the first person by Shun's first wife, who experiences the common decision of husbands to take second wives or concubines to New Zealand leaving their first wives behind to take care of his parents and children (Ip 1990: 20). Shun's wife explains that once he decides to settle in New Zealand permanently, he chooses Mei-Ling over her to accompany him:

Husband went to New Gold Mountain twenty-two years ago. Devils made him pay to get off the ship. [...] This is the poll tax, he said, this is why I could not go with him. I waited twenty-one years and he came back. Bought concubine. [...] Husband took her to Canton. Paid for her to learn to read devil language so she could pass the devil test. He took her with her. [...] She was first woman to see the New Gold Mountain. (2009: 102)

The wife's explanations underscore the fact that Chinese women are not only affected by the racist measures devised to reduce the number of Chinese migrants, such as the poll tax and the literacy tests, but ultimately depend on the wish of Chinese men and of family requirements to be able to make the journey.

Despite being chosen over Shun's first wife, Mei-Ling's position does not prove to be so privileged. Mei-Ling's experience is narrated in the third person in a chapter called "The Concubine's Story", a reflection of the violence and tyranny experienced in her marriage to Shun, especially after he turns to opium and drink to fight familiar pressures and personal conflicts. These pressures include Shun's first wife exerting her right to take Mei-Ling's son to China. The novel thus delves on the suffering and powerlessness of Chinese women as silenced victims of their husbands' wishes and their families' impositions, but also capable of conditioning their husband's behaviour and decisions. Shun appears as both tyrant and victim of his position, as Wong underlines the complex and interrelated operations of racism and patriarchy, showing that all characters have their own burden to bear.

The novel also complicates the well-known repertoire of bound feet, concubines and opium, employed in some diasporic Chinese fiction and its "exploitation of the exotic [and the] sensational foregrounding of the plight of women, particularly in the exposure of patriarchy in mid-twentieth-century China" (Wagner 2003: 19). Although the novel does address such plights, Wong also includes alternative and more positive stories of Chinese women to escape reductive victim roles often favoured in historical and fictional accounts of female diaspora. For instance, there is a reference to historical characters like Annie Wong, the wife of a Chinese missionary, who acted as a helper, translator and guide for the newly arrived Chinese women. Annie helps Mei-Ling to settle down and is said to know "how to live in barbarian lands –she was born in Australia. She spoke fluent Australian and she could read and write. And because she was coming to marry the Missioner, she was counted as clergy and didn't have to pay the poll tax" (2009: 76). Her visits and knowledge contribute to ease Mei-Ling's suffering and dislocation, and points at the existence of female support networks that complement the rivalry and competition among wives and concubines. Although incipient, these networks of female solidarity also work across ethnic divisions as seen, for instance, in the friendship between Mei-Ling and Katherine, which is strengthened after Yung's murder.

The other way in which the novel escapes conventional approaches to diasporic Chinese identity is by placing the Chinese female characters as marginal to the main narrative, shaping their stories as fragmented and certainly in need of further development, and telling the story from the point of view of a Pakeha rather than a Chinese woman. The weight of the discussion on gender thus falls on Katherine and her evolution as a woman amidst a changing background where gender roles and relations are being redefined, partly in relation to new national definitions. The first part of the novel focuses on the expectations placed on Katherine as a housewife and a mother and of her conformance to her husband's wishes. Wong combines fictional and historical material, by introducing real characters like Doctor Agnes Bennett —a pioneer in the defence of female education and in the professional practice of medicine— and fictional characters, like Margaret Newman —modelled after feminist suffrage leaders like Kate Sheppard— who offers Katherine a job as her assistant after the death of her husband and inspires her daughter

Edie “to choose her own destiny” (2009: 81), which she does by attending medical school in Dunedin thanks to the financial assistance of Mrs Newman.

Moreover, Wong perceptively problematizes gender issues as interrelated to ethnic, moral and national discourses, as seen when Katherine decides to start a relationship with Yung. Despite her involvement in social struggles and her liberal understanding of life, Mrs Newman rejects Katherine’s relationship with Yung and blames her for risking her fragile social position:

I have nothing against the Chinese. They’re a hard working race, they keep pretty much to themselves, and they don’t deserve the vilification granted them in the newspapers. [But] you marry a Chinaman and you lose the right to vote, you won’t get the old-age pension, Katherine, you lose everything. [...] He’s a Chinaman. That makes him worse than a Jew and maybe a little better than a dog. Maybe. (2009: 149)

Mrs Newman’s words thus prove, as Belich points out, that the sinophobic attitudes prevailing in this period transcended class distinctions and were shared by workers and intellectuals alike (2001: 229), while illuminating the pervading assumptions that characterised this period of “moral tightening”, sometimes operating in a curious alliance with the incipient feminist movement. In Mrs Newman’s eyes Katherine relationship with Yung may not be immoral, but it is certainly unpractical.

In the eyes of the larger society, engaged in a crusade against immorality, miscegenation and interracial sex, the relationship between Yung and Katherine would certainly be deemed dangerous and unnatural. The novel thus questions views of women like Katherine as morally debased or innocent victims, by explicitly voicing her fears with regards their unusual relationship but also her sincere and intense desire for Yung (Ooi 2010: 83). By reinforcing Katherine’s agency, Wong is also addressing representations of Chinese men as sexual predators and stories about green grocers’ enticing their passive female customers into their shops in order to seduce them (Ooi 2011: 221-222). The novel reconstructs a relationship that grows gradually and solidifies with time, focusing on the multiple emotional, sexual and intellectual connections that exist between the two characters, despite their very different cultural backgrounds. Wong’s narrative explicitly addresses the interrelated nature of gender, ethnic and moral discourses conditioning the love story of the protagonist, and presents Yung’s murder not merely as the result of a racist act but as depending on a number of interrelated factors that eventually relate to debates on New Zealand’s emerging national identity, as discussed in the next section.

Forging a national identity

The “great tightening” process described by Belich can be framed within a more general period characterised by what he defines as “Better Britonism” which consisted of: “a strong collective New Zealand identity as Better Britons; a patriotic and martial British ‘imperialism’; and an assumption of full compatibility between the two” (2001: 116). These features determined New Zealand’s involvement in several armed conflicts, like

the First World War, which serves Wong to frame her narrative. Historian Michael King has also talked of the apparently incompatible desire to “demonstrate the country’s unswerving loyalty to Mother Britain [and] to establish traditions and precedents that were New Zealand in origin and flavour” (2003: 284). Robbie’s decision to lie about his age and enlist voluntarily responds to these apparently contradictory impulses:

Now there was a new vocabulary: Gallipoli, Anzac, Chunuk Bair. Each morning mothers, wives, fiancées opened the newspaper and turned immediately to the Roll of Honour, scanning the names under Killed in Action, Died of Wounds, Wounded Admitted to Hospital. (2009: 196)

In his study of Pakeha male culture, Phillips points out that the involvement of New Zealand men in the Great War was presented as a test to their masculinity and their warrior spirit, their “triumphant manhood was seen as proving New Zealand’s very nationhood” (1987: 163). Towards the end of the novel Robbie has internalised a number of assumptions about his status as a male, a soldier, and a New Zealander of British descent and these clearly mediate in his decision not only to go to war but to put an end to her mother’s romance with Yung. Keen on venting his frustration after his father’s death, he continues to write and receive letters from Lionel Terry and inherits his ideological legacy. Obsessed by the perusal of heroism and confused about the sources of social evil, he walks into Yung’s shop and murders him just before leaving the country:

Something drew him and he didn’t understand why. So absorbed in dreams of battle was he, of heroism in the face of the enemy, of victory over evil, that he did not know where he was going, didn’t realise until he marched right into the light, [...] into his face and eyes. (2009: 213)

The articulation of a national identity so strongly linked to a male Pakeha ethos immediately places the ethnic other as irrelevant to this project. The masculinity projected by Robbie is the result of the misappropriation the Maori warrior spirit while it is simultaneously positioned against the alleged femininity of the Chinese men, often portrayed as “celestials” (2009: 139), as being “thin and small [...] polite and unassuming” (2009: 139-40). These views, as well as common assumptions about Chinese men’s homosexual practices, ironically contrast with the aforementioned perceptions of Chinese men as sexual predators. This shows that the anxieties of national definition and the forging of New Zealand as a white man’s country are partly solved by reinforcing the exclusion and alienation of the male ethnic “other”, simultaneously misrepresented in contradictory ways. Chinese men are represented as contaminating and alien to narratives of national construction and more hegemonic notions of masculinity, hence Robbie reads her mother’s relationship with Yung as an offence at a personal, familial, moral and ultimately at a national level.

The discussion of New Zealand’s involvement in the First World War and its effects on the construction of a male national identity is juxtaposed in the novel with a description of the 1911 Revolution in China. Like many Chinese migrants living in New Zealand, Yung and Shun show their support for the cause, gathering money among the members of the community (Wong 2009: 266). Yung is an admirer of President Sun Yat-sen and

becomes an active supporter of the Revolution, to the extent that he regrets being outside China while his friends are fighting and dying for the cause:

Now, back home, there was so much to be done. Hung-seng had died for this, but what had he done except debate with his countrymen and raise money for Sun and the Revolution?

Wasn't this the time to go home?

Shun Goh would not understand. How could they go home? he'd say. Where was the money? There were carrots to be washed, cauliflowers to be trimmed, debts to be paid. (2009: 161-62)

Like Robbie and the New Zealand soldiers that resolutely leave their country to fight in the war, Yung becomes involved in China's new national project, although he feels he is marginal to such process as he is forced to remain in New Zealand where there are more trivial obligations to be met. Wong thus adds another historical layer to her discussion on national identity, problematizing the position of the Chinese migrants who experience an ongoing sense of dislocation as a result of being away from home and of being excluded from New Zealand's emerging national narratives.

Conclusion

In this article I have considered how "ethnic" writers like Alison Wong negotiate the "competing demands" placed on them when it comes to the choice and treatment of their topics and their portrayal of their respective ethnic communities, especially in a novel like *As the Earth Turns Silver*, the first by a New Zealander of Chinese descent. My contention is that Wong negotiates these tensions by creating a historical narrative for the New Zealand Chinese which relates directly to the lives of non-Chinese New Zealanders. Thus, Wong's novel problematizes the possibility of recovering Chinese history as an isolated chapter of the country's past and the need for a more inclusive revision of the country's history. This is achieved by stressing the intertwined nature of ethnic, gender and national debates, through the development of the interracial love story, as the novel shows multiple personal and familial struggles that develop simultaneously and are in turn affected by wider national debates. The Chinese voice thus has to be articulated not only in relation to its own history of migration, settlement and diaspora, or in relation to a hegemonic Pakeha culture against which they have often been positioned, it needs to be inscribed in more complex manners. Finally, Wong reflects conflicts of the past which resonate with the presence of new migrants and renewed forms of racism in a more contemporary context determined, as it happens in the novel, by competing national narratives.

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¹ The research for this article was carried out within the framework of the research project: “Política, estética y mercadotecnia en las fórmulas literarias populares de consumo femenino: Historia, Exotismo y Romance” (FFI2016-75130-P) funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.

² Like their Australian counterparts, New Zealand critics have also shown reticence about the “Asian” label, as clearly homogenising what are in fact internally diverse groups, cultures and artistic expressions; yet, this is still the label employed in the census of population, used officially and institutionally, as well as in media and popular references. As it happened in the Australian context, the term “Asian” has also been employed strategically as a synonym of “political solidarity rather than [as] essentialist classification” (Lo 2006: 17). Whereas my focus here is on Wong’s articulation of the specific Chinese New Zealand voice, I concur with the strategic use of the label and have used it accordingly.

³ The lack of literary references and the set of expectations placed on younger members of the Chinese community are some of the reasons Wong mentions to explain her late arrival in the literary scene (Perkins 2011: 23). Her first poetry collection, *Cup* (2006), obtained the Best First Book of Poetry Award in 2007.

⁴ This has affected other Chinese New Zealand writers like Lynda Chanwai-Earle whose work has been deemed inadequate and inauthentic due to some of the negative views expressed on some aspects of Chinese culture (see Fresno-Calleja 2009; Ooi 2009; Chung 2014).

⁵ Wong has acknowledged the influence of Frame’s *Owls Do Cry* in her formative years (Perkins 2011: 23). Incidentally, *As the Earth Turns Silver* received the 2009 Janet Fiction Prize.

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