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Alain Régnier

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See table of contents

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Building a Practical Past: Wayson Choy's *Paper Shadows*

Alain Régnier
Université de Sherbrooke

The childhood memoir of Chinese Canadian author Wayson Choy, *Paper Shadows,* made its first appearance more than twenty years ago. Having played a prominent role in the emergence of Asian Canadian literature that took place toward the end of the last century, Choy is best remembered for his first novel, *The Jade Peony*, published in 1995. Set in Vancouver's Chinatown during the 1930s and 1940s, the novel depicts the life of a Chinese immigrant family from the point of view of its three youngest, Canadian-born children. In the memoir *Paper Shadows*, Choy portrays the lived experience that went into the writing of what would become his bestselling work of fiction.

In April 2019, Choy died in his Toronto home at the age of eighty. It was in the fall of 1995, at the age of fifty-six, while in Vancouver to promote the release of *The Jade Peony*, that Choy learned in a rather abrupt way from an unknown Chinatown woman that he had been adopted as a child. The discovery would lead to the writing of *Paper Shadows*, and the story of this moment and the author's subsequent delving into his family's past frames the main narrative of the memoir. Choy was never able to uncover the identity of his birth parents, although he was eventually told that his father was a member of a Cantonese opera company that was active in

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Alain Régnier holds a doctorate in comparative Canadian literature from the Université de Sherbrooke in Quebec.

Chinatown during the time in question. Indeed, as will be illustrated, the secretive nature of Vancouver's Chinatown in this period, tied significantly to the community's history of illegal immigration, made necessary by the need to circumvent racist immigration restrictions imposed on the Chinese, rendered Choy's search into his own and his family's past in preparing *Paper Shadows* more difficult than might be expected.

An engaging piece of nonfiction writing on the one hand, Choy's memoir remains an important cultural and historical document on the other, because of what it has to say about a time and place in Canada's past that still remains largely overlooked in the nation's public memory.[1] Set in Vancouver's Chinatown during the 1940s, *Paper Shadows* tells of the author's preadolescent years on the west coast prior to his family's departure for Ontario for economic reasons in 1950. Elsewhere, Choy has referred to the "silence" of Canadian history, where minority experience is concerned, as well as to the "historical amnesia" that he takes as characterizing Canadian society, and he sees his work, both fiction and nonfiction, as an attempt to counter these tendencies ("Importance" 103–05, and quoted in Lee 41).[2] In what follows, I seek to demonstrate the ways in which Choy has responded to this inhibiting silence in his memoir, in a manner that brings together both the public and the personal. In the first section of the article, I explore the ways in which public memory in Canada today remains detrimentally Eurocentric, given both the current and historical presence of racial and ethnic minorities within the country's national space, and how Choy's *Paper Shadows* can be seen as a corrective to this shortcoming. I then go on to examine in a second section the discursively constituted nature of the "truth" that Choy seeks to represent in the memoir, how it is in a somewhat unexpected manner deliberately built from the fragmentary knowledge that Choy was able to gather on his past, before returning in the conclusion to a brief consideration of *Paper Shadows* as a contribution to an antiracist rewriting of Canadian public memory, or what can be said to be the country's "practical past," through its use of a form—the personal memoir—that is generally more accessible to the public than more formal modes of historical writing.

1 I use the term public memory in the present article synonymously with collective memory, as is the tendency within the academic discipline of public history.

2 See also Choy, "Being Wayson Choy" 22, "Importance" 94–95, "Interview" 44, and Lee 40–41.

Altering the whiteness of Canadian public memory

Despite ever-shifting demographics, racial and ethnic minorities today continue to be largely absent in Canadian public discourse about the past. In their introduction to *Settling and Unsettling Memories*, Nicole Neatby and Peter Hodgins speak of how rapid cultural change in the present period has led to a wide-scale re-evaluation of the historical past in many Western countries, spurred by the demands of long-marginalized groups, such as women, sexual minorities, and workers, in addition to immigrants and Indigenous people (8–9). They observe how, at this time, "every Canadian cultural group, region, and political movement seems to have its own preferred reading of the past that alternately contests, compliments, or renegotiates the others." However, notwithstanding this sense of diversity within academic circles, an older, traditional historical narrative remains at the forefront of public awareness in the country, a narrative that "typically follow[s] a 'colony to nation' storyline in which Canada's past is recounted as one of unbounded, incremental, and progressive success" (12). In his chapter in the same collection, Timothy J. Stanley notes as well how the national space in Canada remains predominantly white, understood in general Euro-Canadian, settler-colonizer terms (215–16):

> This landscape marks racialized white Euro-Canadians as properly and naturally belonging within the spaces of the Canadian nation-state, while marking those racialized differently as "Other," either as newcomers whose presence needs explanation or as outsiders who can never belong. In effect, depending on how people are racialized, they are pre-read [in essentialist ways] as belonging or as not belonging within the imagined community of the nation-state. ("Playing" 215)

Where people of Chinese origin are concerned in particular, their "Canadianness," according to Stanley, continues to be tacitly denied, even as it is publicly proclaimed (224). Although a great deal is known historically of the Chinese presence in Canada at a more formal level, especially pertaining to those migrants who arrived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the years leading up to the Exclusion Era, very little of this knowledge actually circulates within public memory (216).

This seeming contradiction is in fact part of the well-documented conundrum of living in a multicultural society such as Canada, where legally designated "visible minorities" are accorded a certain prominence in official state discourse but have remained chronically marginalized in everyday life in social and economic ways. Indeed, multiculturalism, as

promoted by the federal government in Canada, has often been taken as an orchestrated attempt to uphold what is variously seen to be a dominant white/Anglo/British-French social order through state policy that, all the while speaking the language of civic equality, superficially and reductively extols the country's cultural diversity and difference in a way that allows for more systemic problems, such as racism and class formation, to be purposefully passed over. As Roy Miki puts it,

> The Canadian take on "multiculturalism" needs to be read as a contradictory zone of vested interests, made more so by the engineering role played by the federal administration. While its more benign public face has supported cultural "diversity" and "pluralism," the company it keeps with hierarchically structured relations of "difference" exposes a subtext of racialization.
>
> In other words, as a top-down term "multiculturalism" has been deployed strategically by policy makers to project a political and cultural history built on "tolerance" and "inclusiveness." For those who have internalized the networks of racialization, this narrative remains a fantasy that deflects the colonial history of white supremacist power. (211)

For Miki, the federal policy on multiculturalism introduced in 1971, with its "Anglo-European priorities," has by now "exhausted its credibility" (106, 107). To this extent, and despite the changes that have been made to the policy in Canada by successive governments over the years in order to make it more responsive to the evolving social and political climate (Brosseau and Dewing, sec. 2.2), the criticism of this aspect of the policy has remained remarkably consistent over time.[3]

In the case of Chinese Canadians, the one exception to this rule of historical invisibility would appear to be the general recognition in mainstream society of their involvement in the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1880s, which is frequently taken as their "contribution" to the building of the Canadian nation itself. However, as Stanley points out, this widely held assumption is in some ways false, as the great majority of Canadians of Chinese ancestry in the country today arrived as immigrants beginning in the latter decades of the twentieth century and usually have no connection at all to the railway builders of the 1800s ("Playing" 216, 223–24). In his article "Playing with 'Nitro,'" Stanley exam-

3 See, for example, Bannerji 5–6, 8–9, 44–46, 47–50, 78–79; Srivastava 291, 293, 294–95, 307; Galabuzi 58, 60–61, 62, 64, 66, 74–75; Day 128–29; Mookerjea 91, 99, 102–04; and Ziadah 8–10, 19.

ines the short Historica Minutes film of this title, which deals with this aspect of the Canadian past and which he takes to be "almost certainly the most widely circulated text on the history of people of Chinese origins in Canada." According to Stanley, the Historica Minutes film series as a whole was, in the 1990s, initially made available to schools, libraries, television stations, and movie theatres at no cost, and is part of the efforts of the Historica Foundation (now renamed Historica Canada) to disseminate knowledge of Canadian history among young people and the general public (217–18).[4] As such, "Nitro" demonstrates how a minority group can be publicly honoured as a manifestation of Canadian multiculturalism on the one hand, while having its real history distorted on the other.

Reflecting on the racialized nature of the characters in "Nitro," which involves a white foreman assigning a Chinese labourer to the dangerous task of carrying a jar of nitroglycerine into the depths of a dark tunnel, Stanley observes that "[t]he narrative being told in this minute is one of Canada's progressive movement towards multicultural inclusion, but this narrative only works if the viewers of the minute read it in racialized terms, i.e., as not just about workers and bosses, but as about 'white' bosses and 'Chinese' workers in particular" (219). In his view, "Nitro" misrepresents the reality of anti-Chinese racism during the period covered in the film (1880s to 1930s [219–22]), serving in a way to actually reaffirm belief in "modern-day Canada as a racism-free and tolerant place, a Canadian nationalist trope almost as old as Canada itself" (220). "By celebrating the workers who built much of the [CPR] section from the British Columbia coast to Craigellachie," he writes, "'Nitro' is the quintessentially Canadian story that marks Canada as the land both of cultural and racial diversity and of multicultural tolerance by making room in the narrative of nation-building for people of other-than-European origins" (221–22). However, for Stanley, the historical narrative told in "Nitro" is effectively a "fiction," due significantly to its failure to account for forms of racism that were in fact state legislated up until the middle of the twentieth century. By making racism appear to be "a thing of a now distant past," confined to a period in the nineteenth century, the film allows viewers to go on dismissing racism as a problem in the contemporary world (222). As Stanley writes, the story told in "Nitro" "is not about the actual past lived by racialized people so much as it is about the grand narrative of Canadian history that is primarily concerned with reinforcing contemporary nationalist myths.… A narrative reflective of the historic realities of anti-Chinese racism would

4 The film series is now available on Historica Canada's website under its original title, Heritage Minutes.

not have allowed the minute to carry out its mythologizing purpose." A more faithful rendition of the past would have placed greater emphasis on "Canada as a land of white supremacy, rather than of multicultural tolerance" (222). Although there are times in Canadian public memory when other more accurate representations of Chinese Canadian history do "break through" the surface of the official state narrative, says Stanley, what a film like "Nitro" conveys is "the dominant cultural pattern in Canada," which involves "the exclusion from knowledge of people's actual histories" (224, 233 n50).

In a basic way, then, Wayson Choy's *Paper Shadows* can be seen as adding to this reality-deficient historical narrative.

In a basic way, then, Wayson Choy's *Paper Shadows* can be seen as adding to this reality-deficient historical narrative. In terms of content, the greater part of the memoir is about growing up in Vancouver's Chinatown during a difficult period, and the text does indeed contain numerous informative passages on this particular historical experience, regarding, for example, the women's contribution to the fundraising for the war effort in China (57–60) or the late-wartime boom that develops in the district, bringing an end to the Depression (67–69). In Grandfather's presence, the young Choy (and the reader) are given a detailed view of certain Chinatown shops and lessons in Chinese etiquette (78–80). Chapter 6 opens with a history of Chinese immigration to Canada beginning in the 1850s and speaks of the society of "bachelor men" that eventually formed as a result (72–77). Chapters 16 and 17 tell of attending, and skipping, Chinese school and include an intimate look at the cramped living quarters behind the Modern Silk Shirt shop (236–37). At the same time, the memoir simply portrays what everyday North American existence would have been like for an average working-class family of this epoch. As a boy, Choy is faced, for instance, with the experience of a first day at school, of having to wear itchy, but economical, Irish tweed trousers (93, 96–97), of receiving a dog as a pet, and of learning to build a sand/mud castle (169–77).

Of added interest in the memoir is Choy's rendering of his experience as a racialized subject having lived through a time of elevated racial tension. The issue of racism is undeniably present in *Paper Shadows*, beginning with the experience of the first Chinese immigrants that Choy tells of, involving the initial head taxes and, eventually, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923, introduced by the federal government in order to impede the entry of new arrivals and whose effects persisted into the writer's own lifetime (72–77). Racism occurs overtly, made to seem almost normal, as when signs in store windows are said to have "boasted" the exclusive hiring of white labour (58). But it also takes place more subtly, as when the kindergarten principal gives Choy a Little Black Sambo storybook, from which

the boy will begin to learn to read (118–21). Although present, however, the problem of racism does not overwhelm *Paper Shadows*, which would seem to be indicative of Choy's overall objective, which is to show how people were able to live with dignity despite the discrimination they faced in their daily lives. What is of equal and perhaps even greater significance in the memoir is its portrayal of the cross-cultural experience that affects the narrator's life. Throughout *Paper Shadows*, the cultural boundaries that determine the child narrator's experience are never rigidly drawn. Indeed, the boy's two cultures—North American and Chinese—are often enough shown to coexist in somewhat surprising ways, such as when Choy hears in the tales of Hans Christian Andersen "the Chinatown voices that told me stories of *long-ago* Ancient and Old China" (208). In a similar way, Larry Wong's father, proprietor of Modern Silk Shirt, owns a small movie projector and a collection of Hollywood films, even if he also prefers to wear "a plain Chinese-style shirt" rather than a Western one, such as those he makes himself (236–37, 238–39). One can be "modern" and Chinese at once, the character suggests.

It would be possible to pursue this aspect of Choy's memoir, as *Paper Shadows* contains a wealth of social and cultural detail able to contribute potentially to the formation of a more democratic public memory in Canada, through its representation of a minority experience that has not always figured in the dominant narrative of the nation's past. At this point, however, I would like to address another side to *Paper Shadows*, one that demonstrates in a way how this cultural "content" in the memoir, having to do with Chinese Canadian social reality, is itself discursively constituted, in a manner that will be shown to disturb common understandings of racial and ethnic minority writing more generally.

Facts, meaning, and the search for narrative truth in *Paper Shadows*

In the area of public memory, what are often termed "ethnic" literary authors have a second hurdle to overcome, having to do not only with the first-order historico-epistemological complacency discussed above but also the long-standing aesthetic expectations of mainstream readers, whose view of the work in question has often tended to be excessively reductive. In her book on immigrant women's life writing, which she sees as operating in different ways as a means of translation, Eva C. Karpinski writes of how both autobiography and translation in literary studies have frequently been granted "a marginal status," with each being seen as simply "processing what is 'already written' rather than as 'creative' activities

in their own right." Located within an institutional hierarchy privileging originality, autobiography and translation have often been taken to be "'derivative' or 'imitative' forms," a situation that is exacerbated in the case of racial and ethnic minority authors, whose work has usually been even "further marginalized as 'aesthetically poor'" (6–7). At times, the writing of these authors has been disparagingly categorized as autoethnography, which, in the somewhat derisive terms of Paul Lai, is "the kind of writing that non-white, non-mainstream authors use to give an account of their experience in Canada." As a style of writing aligned with "certain assumptions of objectivity, truth, and authority that we associate with the human sciences," and where the author is often seen to serve as a "native informant," the autoethnographic is said to carry "a veneer of the unsophisticated. It is the underdeveloped cousin of serious literary fiction or experimental writing; it is fiction that mimetically [and thus authentically] produces the cultural experiences of the author's ethnic group (usually in non-white or off-white understandings of 'ethnic'), writing that strives for unquestioning verisimilitude" (56). In other words, classifying the literature as ethnic or as autoethnography authenticates the subject matter anthropologically or sociologically in the reader's mind and, in so doing, limits the ways in which the writing can or will be read.

Still, autoethnography can be seen as having a disruptive side to it if one turns to its beginnings as the "new" or "critical" ethnography that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in response to traditional forms of ethnography founded on the belief in the possibility of objective representations of culture. Commonly taken in a more limited sense in literary studies as "the practice in which a member of a marginalized group studies, examines, and speaks on behalf of that group" (Ty and Verduyn, "Introduction" 4), autoethnography is in fact a widely encompassing category, including works that range from social science writing to literature, and by convention involves a combination of these two genres to some degree (Ellis 37–39). In his introduction to *Writing Culture*, which can be taken as a seminal work in the area, James Clifford comments on how the new ethnographic approach places its emphasis more squarely on the practice of "writing, the making of texts," in a way that goes against the earlier ideology within the field "claiming transparency of representation and immediacy of experience." The authors in the collection, he states, "see culture as composed of seriously contested codes and representations.… Their focus on text making and rhetoric serves to highlight the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts" (2). Fiction under these terms—where the boundary between science and literature is "blurred" (3)—"los[es] its connotation of

falsehood, as something merely opposed to truth.… [Hence e]thnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of 'something made or fashioned,' the principal burden of the word's Latin root, *fingere*" (6). Carolyn Ellis has looked in greater detail at this relationship between truth and narrative in *The Ethnographic I*, where she privileges the idea of a more subjective "narrative truth" over what has traditionally been taken to be "an external, unconstructed truth" in social scientific study (30). She points to the cognitive function that narrative has in human understanding, how "[s]tories are the way humans make sense of their worlds" (32). Where the truth of autoethnography is concerned, she writes, "The 'truth' is that we can never fully capture experience. What we tell is always a story about the past." The autoethnographer's objective, in her view, should "not be so much to portray the *facts* of what happened to you accurately … , but instead to convey the *meanings* you attached to the experience" (116). Under these circumstances, as an autoethnographer, "you are creating the story; it is not there waiting to be found" (117).

In turning here to the autoethnographic paradigm, I am not necessarily trying to generate added interest in the term but only using it for what it has to offer within a context where static and essentialist views of writing and the writing subject are at issue. As I see it, what Clifford refers to as "the banal claim that all truths are constructed" (6) may not be all that banal within the area of racial and ethnic minority literature, where notions of authentic cultural experience continue to circulate. As a matter of fact, similar attention to language and meaning can also be discerned within the fields of historiography and life writing studies at present and is to be linked to the linguistic turn that took hold in the humanities and social sciences in a more general way in the latter third of the twentieth century. As with ethnographers, historians in particular have become more aware of the narrative basis of historical writing and the problematic nature of the archive they draw upon. As Kuisma Korhonen puts it, in terms that will resonate with my reading of Wayson Choy's *Paper Shadows*,

> The past comes to us through traces that it has left behind, and through those mental processes that form worlds and stories out from those traces. We are, at the same time, one with our past—our identity being formed by the very narratives that we make out of it—and strangers to it, incapable of fully grasping either our own or our ancestor's past mentalities and intentions. (20)

In a related manner, Kalle Pihlainen speaks of "the way that 'narrativization' and 'narrative' appropriate the truths of the past; the writing of history always constructs its stories (albeit from and around facts) simply because stories did not *exist* in past reality (and nor do they exist in present reality); they are not a part of any actual existence beyond representation." Whatever stories historians may claim to have "found in the past," they are as subjectively constructed as those we use to order our everyday lives (510).

Situating *Paper Shadows* within range of autoethnography and historical writing, as I am presently doing, however, should not be seen as depriving it of its literary qualities. Although autobiographical narratives have at times been taken as historical documents and as evidence of historical events, they should not, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson emphasize in their guide to life writing, be taken as a simple historical record of the past. In their opinion, "While autobiographical narratives may contain information regarded as 'facts,' they are not factual history about a particular time, person, or event. Rather, they incorporate usable facts into subjective 'truth.'" Or, put in another way, "To reduce autobiographical narration to facticity is to strip it of the densities of rhetorical, literary, ethical, political, and cultural dimensions" (13).[5]

In keeping with the more social scientific nature of the autoethnographic form, then, *Paper Shadows* was thoroughly researched. The memoir, Choy has explained, is in part based on the research begun years earlier in the writing of his first novel, *The Jade Peony* (Levesque). The extent of this research is reflected in the three pages of acknowledgements that close *Paper Shadows*, the first half of which is directed toward various institutions—universities, libraries, archives, museums—and their representatives, as well as dozens of aids and what might be called "informants" in ethnographic terms. Yet, as Kristjana Gunnars points out, Choy's ability as a creative nonfiction writer shows through in that "nowhere does this research intrude in a cumbersome or heavy way" (41). Choy also dramatizes several of his interviews in *Paper Shadows*, which conforms with autoethnographic strategies that serve to situate the researcher within the frame of the story (Ellis 59, 61). His interviews with Hazel Young (279–83) and with Garson Lee and his sisters (329–32) are rendered as informal conversations, and his interviews with his father are referred to in similar terms, although Choy mentions that he had attempted a more formal approach with the latter in the past, involving note-taking and a tape

5 Choy's own views on the narrativization of the past are entirely coextensive with those put forth in the present discussion. See his public lecture, "The Importance of Story."

recorder, which was eventually abandoned (307). Although Choy does not extensively portray his interviews with all of his informants, passing references throughout the memoir, such as those to Fifth Aunty or to Aunts Freda and Mary, indicate that some kind of research has taken place, presumably of an informal nature.

From this vantage, *Paper Shadows* can be said to be in large part about Choy's very attempt to bring meaning to his personal past and, by extension, about the process of historical writing and the construction of narrative truth itself. Indeed, the author's search for meaning in the memoir acts as a kind of subplot that underpins the main narrative. Smith and Watson observe that what and how people remember is culturally and historically determined: "A culture's understanding of memory at a particular moment of its history shapes the life narrator's process of remembering. Often a historical moment itself comprises multiple, competing practices of remembering" (23). As they go on to explain, "remembering has a politics. There are struggles over who is authorized to remember and what they are authorized to remember, struggles over what is forgotten, both personally and collectively" (24). Such a "politics of remembering—what is recollected and what is obscured—is central to the cultural production of knowledge about the past, and thus to the terms of an individual's self-knowledge" (25). This struggle over the recovery and meaning of the past—the construction of its truth value—is an important underlying concern in *Paper Shadows*, where the author finds himself caught between a need to respect the will and memory of his predecessors, who had maintained a silence on certain issues, often out of shame or humiliation over their past experience (289, 310–11), and the need to speak about their lives in a manner that is relevant to the contemporary world.

Indeed, the author's search for meaning in the memoir acts as a kind of subplot that underpins the main narrative.

The difficulty at the opening of the memoir has to do with the limits of early childhood memory in itself. The main body of the memoir begins with the author's "earliest memories" (6)—being woken at four and five years of age by the sound of the milkman's horse and reflections of light in the bedroom mirror while lying in bed with his mother. The second of these memories in particular is rather uneventful: the author recalls watching his mother sleep in the early morning. The only striking feature of this moment, aside from an odd, unaccountable sensation of dread, would appear to be its vividness and the fact that it still exists at all as a memory (8–10). Later as an adult, the author will implicitly associate this moment with his first vague awareness of mortality (11). These memories are characteristically fleeting and disconnected. As Choy writes, "Some come in dreams, mere fragments, weighted with a sense of mystery and

meaning. At such times, a sadness pervades me. I close my eyes: older, long-ago faces, a few of them barely smiling, push into my consciousness" (12). A subsequent scene that is left entirely unexplained concerns a visit to an unknown woman who appears to be dying in a somewhat claustrophobic setting involving narrow alleyways and cramped corridors (12–14). Although the memory is never mentioned again, one suspects that Choy had been taken to see his birth mother on her deathbed.

Choy in a way acknowledges that much of what he knows of this period he has learned second-hand from older relatives. "I remembered none of it," he states in response to Fifth Aunty's story of his first direct encounter with the milkman's horse (7). His recollection of these early events in his life are in fact introduced from within a present time frame—"When I think of my earliest memories … " (6); "This one, I recall clearly … " (8); "To this day … " (10)—in a manner that points to the author's retrospective attempt to interpret and bring meaning to them. The process will be helped along by others as well, as suggested by the mention of their involvement in piecing together moments in the author's early existence: "Many years later, Fifth Aunty reminded me … " (7); "Years later, Mother told me … " (19); Betty Lee "could still recall … " (47). Although they are not entirely eliminated, these references to the memoir's present time frame and especially to the aid of others in constituting the main narrative trail off after the fourth chapter, perhaps to avoid redundancy or perhaps because the author's own memory has become more reliable. The imaginative element implicated in the narrative's construction is also reflected in a moment such as Father's early return home one night, an event where the author was absent: "He arrived in the evening … " ; "Father must have opened the door … " ; "He may have assumed we were out for a little while … " (37). Much in the same way, it is unlikely that, as a three-year-old, Choy would have known that the opera performance he describes himself as attending in the memoir's third chapter is a "fundraiser [that] had been advertised for weeks, and featured all the Canton and Hong Kong professional touring actors stranded in North America by the war in China" (46). Whatever sense of coherence and truth value the narrative may take on throughout the memoir, as a work of life writing it is shown in these early chapters to be crafted, constructed methodically and retrospectively from available materials.

The rather nebulous memories of the memoir's opening chapter are juxtaposed to a sudden declaration. As Choy writes, "These are the documented facts that I have known all my life: I was born Choy Way Sun, on April 20, 1939, in Vancouver, in the province of British Columbia, to Nellie

Hop Wah, age thirty-eight, and Yip Doy Choy, age forty-two, the *gai-gee meng*, the *false-paper names*, officially recorded in my parents' immigration documents. A midwife, listed as Mrs Eng Dick, attended the birth" (14). These "documented facts," as the memoir will demonstrate, are not entirely reliable, however, as they are in part based on the parents' false immigration papers. And in the scene that immediately follows, Choy recalls how, later in life, his mother and father continued to mislead him regarding the identity of his birth parents in a way that conforms with the erroneous historical record (14–15). (He will learn further on that his own birth certificate is a false document of sorts [279–80, 282].) One memory passed down to him that does seem certain is that of his naming ceremony at six weeks of age (15–17). But, given that the story is often told by Choy's mother, who is here apparently prone to lie about the past at times, even this memory now seems somewhat untrustworthy. Reflecting on the ceremony, Choy himself wonders about his grandfather's motivations in selecting the name that he did for his grandson ("too distinctive" or "idealistic," according to some [16, 17])—a detail now lost to the past.

Having exposed in this opening chapter of *Paper Shadows* the limits of personal memory and inherited memory (whether written or oral), Choy will concern himself elsewhere in the memoir with filling in the gaps that occur within what he knows of the world into which he was born. The main body of the memoir portrays Choy's family life in a rather ordinary light, despite his father's long absences and the habitual disputes between his parents. It is only in middle age, well after his parents' deaths and after having discovered that he was himself adopted, that Choy begins to explore his family's past more intently. His parents themselves, whom Choy had taken for granted as a child, are now shown to have another side to them that he had not been aware of. Throughout the memoir, one is somewhat suspicious of Mother's character who, despite being an unquestionable source of comfort and affection to her son, is also, in a relatively benign and motherly way, disposed to prevarication, as illustrated in the early scene just mentioned and in her outings to the opera, where she will sometimes reinterpret the action occurring on stage for her son to spare him from unhappy endings or to avoid undue explanation (55). In one of his last conversations with his father before his death, Choy is finally able to form a better understanding of the latter's own stepfamily in Victoria and the sense of division caused within it by the domineering stepmother Yune-Shee. But the exchange also ends with Father deliberately avoiding a question concerning his birth mother's death in China in a way that points to his own hidden past (309–11).

Learning of his adoption ultimately leads Choy to press his aunts Mary and Freda for more information on the family's history. In a way, his aunts represent a form of living memory that serves to supplement (indeed at times to surpass) the author's own documentary research, which, given Old Chinatown's history of illegal immigration, is not always a reliable source of knowledge. Through his aunts, Choy learns the "shameful story" of his paternal grandmother's adultery and, a detail that few in the family had ever known, that Father had in fact also left behind two older sisters in China (314–18, 334–35). Searching through the government archives of British Columbia, Choy is unable to find the names of his father's family on the list of arrivals for the year of its immigration and concludes that its members "undoubtedly came to Gold Mountain with 'bought names' on false papers, *gai gee* documents, now lost or burned." This seems somewhat unsurprising to Choy, given that such archives are often a source of misinformation, comprising a sort of repository for "the secrets of Old Chinatown families" (288–89). With Mother, things are even less evident. Mother does not come to Canada with Father's family but as a "paper bride" to a man named Hop Wah. Nellie Hop Wah is her false name, and, officially, she is said to have been born in New Westminster, British Columbia, not the Chinese village of Toisan. Hop Wah eventually died at some unknown point, and Choy is unable to say if Mother actually spent any time as his wife, even if she was expected to mourn publicly as his widow in order to fend off ever-present and menacing immigration officials (297–98). The reader never learns Mother's true name, only that she spent her entire life in Canada under a false identity. Elsewhere, Choy speaks of how, when remembering other people's pasts, there are "silences we have to respect" (quoted in Little). He claims to have argued with one of his aunts over the revelation of Father's secrets. "I told her that I had to convey a narrative truth about that time, about the lives of the people who loved me," he states. "Now that my parents are gone, it's really time to tell their story.… I think this book would have hurt them, and I really have struggled with that. But I hope I've paid tribute to them" (quoted in Edemariam). It is never said how Choy learns about his mother's real identity, although it was obviously learned second-hand. If Choy withholds information concerning his mother's past, including her real name, it is perhaps out of respect for the silence that she herself had maintained on the matter throughout her lifetime.

This tension between the need to know and the need to respect people's privacy informs the final chapters of *Paper Shadows*. On at least three occasions, Choy will pursue his investigations into his family's history after

being discouraged from doing so. His conversations with Freda continue after being told by Hazel, "You don't need to know any more" (282–83). As they will again after the interview with Father (314–17), whose breaking down had temporarily put a stop to Choy's research (313). On a third occasion, the author will persist in his inquiries with Mary after having momentarily concluded that he knows "as much as I need to know" about his family's past (333–35). The author is shown to persevere, cautiously, in responding to his curiosity despite the deterrents he encounters. In the end, Choy realizes that as an eleven-year-old he probably watched a significant portion of his family's history burn in the backyard fire set by Mother in the days before their departure for Ontario, a moment that represents a loss of memory that Choy will never be able to compensate for in his research. It is not clear what Mother's thoughts are during this scene, where she destroys the last major traces of her father-in-law's life. "Straws in the wind" is her only comment (270–71, 338), a brief acknowledgement of the transitory nature of human existence.[6] In what is far from a simple retelling of past events, the narrator in *Paper Shadows* is shown to be engaged in a sort of struggle to come to terms with the known and the unknown in his personal history, what one could call its narrative truth, in which the opacity of the unknown proves to be an obstruction that is not fully surmountable.

I would like to end my reading of *Paper Shadows* by looking more closely at Choy's use of photographs in the memoir, as they speak in an added way to the historical nature of Choy's autoethnographic project. Drawing on Roland Barthes, David L. Eng explains how a photograph creates a tension in the viewer's perception of reality as being something that is both present and past. "If 'reality' implies an eternal, interminable, present," Eng writes,

> the temporal "this-has-been" aspect of the photograph tells us that reality is no longer with us, that the real—the live—of the photograph is impossible, that it has slipped away and is no longer. Barthes labels this process the "mortifying effect" of photography, suggesting that the abduction of the object by the camera lens—its memorialization through the represen-

6 Choy has spoken of this scene: "Even when it was happening I knew something important was going on. … I think my mother knew what she was doing. In those days—up until the '60s—the Canadian and American governments were hunting [for] people [with] false papers and deporting them" (quoted in Martin 46; brackets in original). As Sandra Martin adds, "Having nothing seemed safer than keeping papers that might be incriminating" (46).

> tational frame of the photographic image—results not in its final capture but in its ultimate loss. (39–40)

In other words, in its apparent seizing of a specific moment in time, the photograph—in a "simultaneous, paradoxical preservation and annihilation of the object" (40)—also points to its concurrent death. This temporal effect is perhaps most straightforwardly reflected in *Paper Shadows* in the youthful photograph of Father captioned "Toy Choy's first Gold Mountain portrait" (303), which opens the chapter on Father's death in old age. It can also be seen in the juxtaposition of the images that open the chapters devoted to Choy's grandfather (135, 157), one taken in middle age, the other days before his death (147). In her reading of Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children*, Eleanor Ty mentions how, given that "most family photographs are taken at formal occasions or celebrations, they tend to record moments of ineluctible [sic] joy rather than misery" (39). She goes on to point out the disjunction between the formal portraits included in Chong's memoir and the rather harsh reality depicted within the text itself (41–42). Something similar can be seen as being at work in the smiling family portrait of Father and his stepsisters Mary and Freda that follows upon the scene of Father's emotional breakdown, brought on by questions about his own family's past (314, 312–13). Here, the photograph would seem to conceal as much as it reveals. A similar disjunction between the seen and the unseen occurs in the photographs taken of Choy in cowboy costume that open chapters 5 and 7. There is an element of irony in the second photograph that may not initially be apparent in the first, as it follows the discussion in chapter 6 of how Hollywood cowboy culture is in part responsible for the young boy's loss of Chinese culture (80–84). The photographs, taken from this perspective, are in fact evidence of a sort of cultural colonization, and their seeming innocence is lost.

In keeping with the constructedness of narrative truth, the meaning of the images in Choy's memoir must thus be taken as being somewhat unstable and changing. In a way that corresponds with Choy's overall intentions, historically speaking, Ty notes how, although they "are traditionally used as evidence for the existence of people or things" (34), photographs are "not real in themselves." Rather, "they only become meaningful [when] read within specific historical and social circumstances" (41). Photographs, like other texts, must be assigned meaning through a process of reading and interpretation. The first photograph (and visual text) in *Paper Shadows*—a historical streetscape from the Vancouver Public Library Archive (see the memoir's photograph credits)—is simply captioned "Chinatown" and can be seen as summing up the nature of Choy's autoethnographic project,

which is to memorialize this space and its people and to render them intelligible to his readership through narrative description. As a photograph, it exists as a sort of isolated fragment that needs to be explained through writing (3). The opening chapter of the memoir ends with a spare description by the adult Choy of a photograph that he keeps on his desk but that is not visually reproduced. It is a family portrait taken with his parents when he was three months of age (17). At this stage, this is the first photographic trace that the reader has of the author's early existence, but it has very little meaning given that the reader has virtually no knowledge of those depicted. Chapter 21 opens with the reproduction of this family photo. If, at the beginning, the photograph was presented as a sort of undecipherable fragment of historical evidence, all three subjects in the image are now thoroughly recognizable, known to the reader as a result of Choy's narrative. The epilogue opens in a similar way with a final family portrait in which Choy is now a grown boy. However, the same chapter also begins with the author telling of how not only his parents but the whole community, including one of his closest friends, had kept the knowledge of his adoption from him (323–25). In a sense, the image carries a value in the present day, for the author at least, that it simply could not have had at the time it was taken, given that he now has a different understanding of the relationships that bind the subjects in the photograph.

In the end, all of the photographs in the memoir must be seen as historical documents that are only partially knowable. In a way that reverses the tendency to take images as an additive to historical writing, the photographs in Choy's memoir come across, on the actual page, as documentary fragments that are themselves surrounded and "filled out" by the truth-bearing text of Choy's narrative, itself constituted through interpretation and writing. In looking to give meaning to his lived experience, Choy succeeds in bringing to light an element of racial and ethnic minority writing that is usually either concealed within the text or overlooked by the reader, namely, the author's artistic effort in producing the work. Through his use of self-reflexivity, Choy also manages to subvert certain of the assumptions that have at times been tied to this mode of writing, relating to the transparency of representation. What is of interest is that, although not an outwardly experimental text, *Paper Shadows* can be seen as having absorbed some of the poststructuralist principles that have often been associated with experimental writing, having to do with the arbitrary meaning of language and the mediated nature of human reality. As such, the memoir manages to reveal the creative element that goes into not only life writing but historical writing as well.

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Conclusion: building an antiracist practical past

Wayson Choy's *Paper Shadows* can, in closing, be taken as a contribution not only to public memory in Canada but also to what Timothy J. Stanley has called an "anti-racist" history. In his article "Why I Killed Canadian History," which still remains valid today, Stanley puts forth the idea of an antiracist history in response to the "grand narrative" of English Canadian history, which to him remains excessively Eurocentric (82–83). An antiracist history, as he sees it, would consist of at least these three things: it would be "multicentric," giving equal weight to all the histories that make up the country's past (85); it would resist the essentializations on which racist thinking is founded (96); and it would take into account the "meanings," or historical interpretations, of those who have suffered directly from racially based exclusion in Canada (97, 99). *Paper Shadows* can be said to satisfy all of these requirements in that, while addressing an aspect of Canada's past that has long been neglected and providing the author's individual perspective on his own Canadian experience as a racial minority, it also demonstrates how the truth of history and cultural reality is discursively constituted and thus open and fluid in non-essentialist ways. Indeed, by simply writing about his past in the way that he does, Choy contextualizes the historical presence of people of Chinese origin in Canada, which in itself works against static and reductive views.

Stanley's article, however, is directed primarily at professional historians. Although there may be little to distinguish his work from the historian's in some respects, in the way of documentary research and use of narrative methods, Choy is working in a more public domain in his memoir, with the aim of producing what, in the terms of Hayden White, might be called a practical past. In his book by the same title, White makes the distinction, following Michael Oakeshott, between the historical past, studied and established by professional historians and having little implication for the general public, and "'the practical past' of particular persons, groups, institutions, and agencies—that is to say, the past that people as individuals or members of groups draw upon in order to help them make assessments and make decisions in ordinary everyday life as well as in extreme situations" (xiii). Unlike the historical past, whose formulation is heavily dependent on documentary evidence, the practical past has the capacity to take in issues such as "love or work or suffering and the kinds of relationships among them which are (or were) real enough but which are accessible as objects of *practical* study only by way of imaginative hypothesization" (xiv–xv). *Paper Shadows* is thus to be more accurately taken perhaps as a work dealing with the practical past, which can func-

tion simultaneously at different levels, rather than simply adding to public memory, as the experience the text is centred on is set at the intersection of the personal and the collective. What is learned of Vancouver's Chinatown in reading *Paper Shadows* passes through Choy's individual attempt to describe and orient himself within his own family environment. In this manner, it may be the more literary than historical form of the personal memoir that remains best suited to what is at the same time the author's public purpose, which is to help create a national space that is at once more egalitarian and historically aware.

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