

Language and Devotion as Throughlines in Fae Myenne Ng's *Orphan Bachelors*
By Danielle Shi
dssshi7@gmail.com
Grove Atlantic, May 9, 2023

“I am still the daughter standing behind my mother’s sewing chair. I know the intimate contours of my mother’s skull, the soft points on her ears, the dip of her lobes, the round of her back, and the protrusion of her shoulder blade. I see her strong back, feel her fierce gaze, hear the bare gasp from behind her pressed lips, and smell her scent as her hands and feet dance cloth to life.”

Closeness is as embodied as it is breathable (“smell her scent”), figural (“the intimate contours”), physical (“her strong back”). In Fae Myenne Ng’s memoir *Orphan Bachelors*, out this May through Grove Atlantic, we bear witness to a narrative bound in the intergenerational trauma of Chinese Americans caused by the Chinese Exclusion Act. Ng’s story aches with tender and heartfelt evocations of family love, conflict, and coming-together, intertwined with stark immigrant realities of historical and cultural significance—experiences that have left an indelible imprint on the Chinese American population as it has cohered across distance and time, and currently stands as it dares to reach beyond merely enduring towards a bold self-realization.

When her mother tells her a story of her father, Ng realizes she “had entrusted me with a family story; I was no longer a child.” Likewise, the reader is entrusted as the recipient of a story larger than life, one dangerous, fragmentary, possibly misunderstood in all its complexity—as nuanced as a Chinese puzzle box in its overwhelming interiority. “Maybe my mother’s trust honed my desire not just to tell stories but also to consider who a story was for,” Ng writes. There is no question that Ng knows her main audience well; a portion of it she teaches, as Continuing Lecturer in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Studies in the Ethnic Studies Department.

Conjuring blooms of night jasmine “on the vine,” and time “sweetened with incense,” Ng watches her mother’s contentment unfurl during the wild abandon of the Summer of Love, what she terms their “summer of work” as her mother studied hard for her naturalization exams. The reader, too, is witness to a personal history full of adoration and a hard-earned fearlessness “toward the dream” of a shared American futurity, the relentless beckoning of the American Dream. It is one in which her mother’s “girlhood hunger” that “followed her to America” was satisfied by the nutty aroma of warm rice; it is one where her mother’s sacrificial years “[eating] bitterness” were supplanted by the “infinite ways to make a revolution.”

“Early tastes are never forgotten. Recipes are eternal—blueprints of love,” Ng writes, returning to delectable imagery of food to combat the common motif by making proud ownership of a central part of Asian American culture; however, she expands the stereotypy associated with the use of food in memoir to develop empathy in her reader about how “hunger had been [her mother’s] regular fare,” thus depicting through sacrifice the uplifting of a family that supported itself through a seamstress, a seafaring father, and a grocery store business so named after her father’s ancestral town. Yet her tastes extend beyond the physical as well, drawing away from haunting intimations of sweet lychees from Canton and crunchy duck chips without the fat.

Her writing tends towards interrogating with her signature bold eye the import of family bonds during one's formative years, as well as into later adult life—what these relationships do for shaping one's conception of the self and of family loyalty and division, especially in the wake of Exclusion: “I write about family; I teach my students how to escape theirs, that it's no crime,” Ng writes. Her parents' “blueprints of love,” along with those of her three siblings, are marvelously intricate, constructing and informing her present as she dissects the indirectness of the Chinese language and communication style, its meandering way and its cascading into stories that fold in upon each other with intimacy and delightful verve.

To speak of Ng's father would be to speak of architecture, whom like a sturdy building holds steady through the seasons of her life, despite the pain he experienced with the immigration lies he had to tell to be himself, at liberty. “His hand—artistic and architectural—inspired my own penmanship,” Ng writes. “His confident lettering, so significant to witness, a man without English writing such beautiful English.” In a culture that prizes handwriting as a mark of character, Ng's homage to her father is one that is woven together with his struggle to find himself at home in a new language, a new station.

Ng knows the other side of this trick mirror, the oft-painful dualities inherent in straddling two languages, well: “I would never live in Chinese, and my father would never live in English, but in that moment, we were companions in one language,” she says of showing to him her stories from Chinese school, her early forays into storytelling already a way to bridge the divide between generations. Their experiences dovetail as she grows older, matures, and brings him with earnestness to her New York artist rendezvous: “Not a Chinatown laborer, not an illiterate waiter, but an eccentric, artistic soul—he fit right in.” His “rascal eyes twinkle,” even as she acknowledges the suffering behind her understanding that “His English, learned by being cursed at, has taught me everything about language.”

Bound up in her father's story is the story of the Orphan Bachelors, a lost generation that experienced sexual damage as the result of immigration policy enacted specifically against the Chinese, for instance the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first law against a nationality that was ratified in 1882. What's more, in 1875, the Page Act excluded Chinese women assuming they were all prostitutes, effectively severing Chinese men from being able to find wives. Exclusion would remain law until 1943, destroying families and “four generations of the unborn”—sixty-one years; “Bloodless,” her father said, of the way in which these laws colluded with the Chinese Confession Program to wither the hope of the Chinese men in the new land. These Orphan Bachelors left their legacy on San Francisco's Chinatown, where Ng's debut novel *Bone* is set.

Ng writes, “They called me a mouthy bird, and one by one, they shuffled off, their steps a Chinese American song of everlasting sorrow.” These Orphan Bachelors taught her valuable lessons about compassion being borne out of companionship, and sympathy for lives outside of one's own circumscribed life—to extend one's hand outward to reach for a stooped shoulder, to seek out an untold tale: “I realized that the art of watching and listening was my training, that I was given the heart of the story all along.”

With a nod to her long lectureship at Cal, Ng makes the time to delve into miniature scenes of classroom antics as well, vignettes that seal the soul of Asian/America into realistic character

studies of young students. The pandemic led Ng to teach a course on Asian/American literature on Fathers and Daughters in Asian/American literature, in which they listened to the Ballad of Mulan; apart from rooting the Disney folktale in its cultural heritage, it was a nod to the power of listening—of hearing, and beginning to comprehend “that work sounds can be art, that a woman’s work can be noble, and how the staccato sounds of the first line inspired me to study textiles and then to write.” These glimpses into the seminar room at Cal offer a fuller portrait of the artist in her element, interspersed with pithy aphorisms about language such as “When writing, consider the vessel of time that holds a story.” Ng takes up her pen for contemporary Asian/America as she addresses the atrocities of Vincent Chin’s racially-fueled murder and the early demise of her childhood friend and 9/11 flight stewardess heroine, Betty Ong, while quietly respecting her students for their inheritances: diligence, and their parents’ legacy of hard work.

“Then the Campanile starts playing its catchy six o’clock medley, my students gather their things. I admire how softly their hands go in and out of their packs, how gently they depart as if in a processional,” Ng writes. “I watch them move into the fading amber light, their faces unsure but unafraid.” The quiet stillness they display, she observes, is the body’s response to suffering. Yet these students, in the way her mother’s “life gives life,” and her father “gives his child courage in life,” are the new wave of hope for pushing beyond model minority stereotypes of economic horsepower and faces without rememory. Hope is the currency of Ng’s memoir, which is replete with valuable and artful depictions of a culture under erasure, as well as a family that “cashed in on luck; we were rich in hope.”

It is through this powerful hope that Ng dares to walk the tightrope between duty and desire, “to do good by my parents but also to have my own life.” As a writer, Ng feels compelled to meet life head-on; as a teacher, she understood the imperative of showing students “how a writer lived.” Her sorrow and the outpourings of grief and melancholia she expounds on are regenerative, as she reminds students the importance of history—to not be afraid to lean into the discomfort of hard feelings and sit with them, applying a critical distance and discipline while yet not letting one’s heart grow cold in the process.

To warmth, then, is Ng’s unspoken mantra as, through teaching, she is given the gift of “the children [she] never wanted.”

Contributor’s note:

Danielle Shi is based in San Francisco, California. Her writing can be found at Jaded Ibis Press, California Magazine, ZYZZYVA Magazine Blog, Sine Theta Magazine, The Frida Cinema Blog, The Drift, and Hyphen Magazine. “Rosemary Folk” was nominated for the 2023 PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize for Emerging Writers.