

## CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES IN CHINESE AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE (2001-2010)

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### Introduction

At the heart of U.S. mainstream cultural representations of Chinese Americans lies the articulation of racist and sexist prejudice: women have been portrayed as docile China dolls, seductive dragon ladies or model minorities. The role and place of women in U.S. (mis)representations have been influenced by “Orientalism,” a concept coined by Edward Said in 1970. Chinese and Chinese American women thus became the receptacles for all sexual fantasies, from the fantasy of the docile and submitted woman (China Doll) to the treacherous, sexy and manipulative Dragon Lady.

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Chinese American fiction has highlighted different preoccupations throughout the twentieth century. A need to exist and be heard on the cultural scene was translated during the first half of the century by works promoting assimilation, such as *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Jade Snow Wong (1945). But then, during the 1960s and 1970s, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, Asian Americans took a stand against what was deemed exclusive assimilation and the myth of the melting pot. Authors such as Maxine Hong Kingston, theorists such as Elaine H. Kim, strongly opposed the representations of Asians as docile and passive, or that of Asians as model minorities. Nevertheless, *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston (1976) was not directly followed by publications from strongly voiced fiction writers. For instance, Amy Tan, author of the best-seller *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), published numerous novels depicting the plight of the second generation, lost between the demands of the first generation and the assimilation into U.S. society. Many of her works and those of other authors (Lisa See, Jean Kwok, Lan Samantha Chang), even today, do tend to depict Asian characters in that vein. It eventually ends with a sense of reconciliation, between daughters and parents, U.S. culture with Chinese traditions. Contemporary Chinese American literature has been read as exploring the tension between accommodation and resistance to these stereotypes, as explained by Asian American scholars Elaine H. Kim (1982; 1997) and Jeffrey Partridge (2007). For instance, Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) has been put forward as being representative of "a" Chinese American community, on the basis of recurring tropes such as the conflicting yet inalterable mother-daughter bond, an identity crisis, discrimination, or the overuse of the model minority stereotype.

However, as Darrel Y. Hamamoto argues in his introduction to *Countervisions: An Asian American Film Criticism* (2000): "Along with film, self-consciously *Asian American* writing, music, theater, fine arts, and criticism began to assert themselves against the institutionalized racism that had marginalized or excluded creative and intellectual work by Yellow people in the United States" (Hamamoto & Liu 1). Indeed, some works of fiction do defend new themes: love, sex, network of friends rather than family ties, work questions rather than family and existential crisis. In the same decade as Lisa See's *Shanghai Girls* (2009), we find daring works of fiction which push the limits of our expectations in terms of Chinese American characters. The very titles of those works hint at their subversive stance: *Hello Kitty Must Die*, *Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl*. Each one of them, in its own very special way, subverts our expectations of plot, themes, characters and overall representation of Chinese Americanness. The saga *Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl* (Tracy Quan, 2001/2005/2008) portrays the life of a prostitute who battles between her non-normative profession and her straight personal life; the novel *Hello Kitty Must Die* (Angela S. Choi, 2010) opens on the aborted defloration of successful lawyer Fiona with her sextoy, and her subsequent friendship with a serial killer.

These works deal with such issues from an intersectional perspective. As stated by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 2017: "Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race

problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there”<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, we will show that these works of fiction do not merely deal with racial issues, or the mother-daughter relationship, so dear to Asian American fiction writing. Here, we will explore the entanglement of sex, race and social-professional issues that affect American women of Chinese ancestry. These works show that Chinese American women artists have engaged in a new form of resistance to stereotypes: what is deemed taboo in Chinese culture and in U.S. society is fought by means of humor, political incorrectness, and hyper-stereotypical characters. They confirm Linda Trinh Võ and Marian Sciachitano’s statement in their article “Moving beyond ‘Exotics, Whores, and Nimble Fingers’: Asian American Women in a New Era of Globalization and Resistance” (2000):

As Asian American cultural producers—artists, poets, writers, musicians, photographers, filmmakers, and cultural critics—we grapple with how to construct a new politics of representing ourselves, not only to resist ongoing hegemonic fantasies, but also to challenge and counter the damaging internalized sexist, racist, classist, and homophobic representations created by the colonized imaginations of our “own” ethnic communities.

The following works considered here do demonstrate such a point. By doing so, these works will prove to pertain to the field of activism, in the sense that:

Activism can give voice or visibility to members of minorities who are silenced in other spaces. It can offer a space for mobilisation but also for socialization [...].  
 Activism can be poetic, joyful, creative, funny, cruel, ridicule, utopic, irreverent, dark. [...]  
 Activism stirs social change and calls for new forms of artistic and political action. Activism invites to reinvent life with art<sup>3</sup>.

This article<sup>4</sup> endeavors to demonstrate that the breaking of taboos in those works of fiction aims at opposing a mainstream representation of Chinese American women. By doing so, they engage in a form of political, social and cultural resistance and deconstruct stereotypes. We will show that Angela S. Choi and Tracy Quan belong to the category of activists especially because they do not pretend to write mainstream literature, nor do they endeavor to bring reconciliation between U.S. and Chinese cultures. They offer new social, cultural and sexual perspectives. Our analysis will first focus on the use of humor as a way of raising awareness and countering the readers’ expectations. Then, we will study the breaking and deconstructing of taboos through the strategy of *reverse stigmatization*, a concept developed by Erving Goffman in his work *Stigma* (1963). The last point of our analysis will focus on the new power of the margins offered by this form of activism. We will demonstrate that both authors

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<sup>2</sup> Crenshaw, on June 10th, 2017, quoted by the Columbia Law School: <<https://www.law.columbia.edu/pt-br/news/2017/06/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality>>.

<sup>3</sup> Definition found on the following website: *Artivism*. July 26th, 2018: <<http://artivism.online/what-is-artivism/>>.

<sup>4</sup> These novels were previously analyzed along with 37 other ones in a comparative study. The extracts chosen here as well as the textual analyses were selected from my Ph.D. dissertation. This article brings novelty to the conclusions presented in the dissertation in the sense that it provides further information as well as new theories (Bergson, Hamamoto) that shed new critical light on those works of fiction. See Ledru Juliette, *Dialectique de l’américanité et de l’ethnicité dans les représentations littéraires de personnages féminins: l’assimilation à l’épreuve de la fiction sino-américaine féminine (1965-2010)*, Ph. D. dissertation (2015).

succeed in shifting paradigms: what is marginal and what is mainstream are no longer expressed along the axis of ethnicity, but along that of sexualities.

### **Taboo and/or humor in Chinese American culture: a close-up analysis**

At first sight, the heroine of *Hello Kitty Must Die* seems to play within the rules of mainstream expectations of Chinese American representations. Fiona Yu, first person narrator, is a 28 years old successful lawyer who embraces her professional success by indulging in luxurious shopping of products such as Jimmy Cho shoes. She appears to be the epitome of model minority stereotype. As for Nancy, from the *Manhattan* series, she works as a call girl, which echoes the erotic and sexual fantasy about Asian women, China dolls meant to satisfy men's sexual desires. As for Fiona's parents and the other members of the Chinese community, they are all portrayed in a way which reflects the traditional characters of any other Amy Tan or Lisa See novel. Despite the fact that she's a successful lawyer, Fiona still lives at her parents and still has to abide by their rules. Moreover, her parents try to play the matchmakers: they set up dates for her, because it is high time she got married. Not only are the parents trying to force their daughter into marrying another nice Chinese boy, but the other parents are depicted as just as traditional and keen on contracting a marriage.

These works tackle themes which are all part of the cultural background of Chinese American culture and fiction: the pressure of assimilation, of conforming to a norm, the mother-daughter relationship, the conflict between Chinese customs and U.S. lifestyle, but also taboo themes such as sexuality and death. What departs from the literary norm is the way in which they are addressed. Maxine Hong Kingston's mother told her daughter in *The Woman Warrior* (1976): "You mustn't tell anyone, what I am about to tell you," a sentence which epitomizes the burden of taboo, something deeply felt and related to the notion of secrecy. In those works, these themes are explored without silence or secrecy, and I will use Henry Bergson's essay *Laughter: An essay on the meaning of comic* (1940) to analyze the construction of taboo humor.

Firstly, humor is produced by a discrepancy between the situation that is depicted and the reader/viewer's expectations of what should be (Bergson 127). For instance, in the incipit of the first opus of *Manhattan*, the reader has become the spectator to Nancy's lovemaking:

Dear Diary,

Today, I had the most embarrassing experience—with one of my regulars. Howard was flat on his back enjoying our threesome with Allison when I decided to straddle him backward—something I've done hundreds of times. So I carefully lowered my body, confident that my acrobatics looked like zero effort.

Howard stood firm inside of me, but I threw in a just-in-case moan for good measure. With my shoulder blades resting against his chest, all he could see was the back of my neck. Lying still in that position is more work than bouncing up and down, but it's usually the perfect strategy when you're doing a session with another girl. Howard can't check to see whether her tongue is really where it's supposed to be. And besides, it's his favorite position [...] Unfortunately, when I thought Allison was pretending to do *me*, she was really doing Howard (Quan: 2005, 1).

The transformation of the reader into a spectator from the very first lines of the novel indicates that there is a clear departure from the themes and characters as found in other Chinese American novels published by mainstream publishing houses (Putnam, Picador, Pinguin etc.): no mother-daughter relationship, no conflict between Chinese customs and U.S. lifestyle. We do not start with a secret, contrary to Maxine Hong Kingston's novel. If in *The Woman Warrior*, sexuality was a taboo, it has become, in Quan's work, a pillar, a major theme. It is, right from the start, all about sex. Nancy's profession will be the prism through which the plot will develop. The taboo of sex is lifted by means of the depiction of an awkward situation which prevents the anecdote from getting too raw or crude: sex is turned into "acrobatics," the "just-in-case moan for good measure" turns the scene into something theatrical, and the misunderstanding between the two girls gives room for laughter.

*Hello Kitty's* incipit echoes that of *Manhattan*. Fiona makes her sextoy, Mr. Happy, the main character of her story. She has decided to lose her virginity by herself. In this extract, she clearly draws a parallel between her loss of virginity and the loss of family honor, for her family honor is intertwined with the precious membrane that is her hymen. First, Fiona's defloration is described in a humoristic tone: "Go, Mr. Happy, where no man has ever gone before". "My final frontier" (Choi 7), the name of the toy pointing at some anthropomorphism. This extract is also funny because this act, so sacred in many cultures, sees the expected man replaced with a sextoy.

Fiona describes in details her intention to shred her hymen all by herself and she equates her loss of virginity with the transgression of ethnic traditions. This tackling of such a taboo subject (a woman's hymen) in such a way, with many ludicrous details, creates a discrepancy which brings humor. For instance, the sextoy is nicknamed Mr. Happy, which stands in sharp contrast with the description of the first man with whom Fiona had tried to lose her virginity. Chip had lost all his vigor after Fiona had endeavored to sterilize his penis, reduced to the derogatory and childish term, "weenie", not to mention his size, "same size as a low absorbency tampon" (Choi 3). Feeling emasculated, Chip had failed in his task, and had soon been replaced with Mr. Happy whom Fiona calls "Nothing but an eternal, unfailling erection that could be twisted and bent to my satisfaction and sanitized with boiling water" (Choi 4). As Bergson said: "Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a social signification" (Bergson 8). So what is the aim of this tangle of taboo and humor ?

### ***Reverse stigmatization to debunk stereotypes***

At first sight, one may very well believe that these are stereotypical characters meant to answer the expectations of a mainstream U.S. audience. However, the two authors resort to stereotypes the better to debunk them. Here, we will show that the technique used is one of reverse stigmatization, a concept developed by Goffman in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963). In his seminal work, Goffman explains that the individual who suffers from a social stigma, whether it be based on a physical difference, a trait of character - which includes mental disorder, alcoholism, homosexuality - or a "tribal stigma of race,

nation, and religion” (Goffman 4), will align to the social group which is stigmatized for the same reason, and explains that only members of the said group will have authority to discredit the group:

One of these groups is the aggregate formed by the individual’s fellow-sufferers. The spokesmen of this group claim that the individual’s real group, the one to which he *naturally* belongs, is this group. All the other categories and groups to which the individual necessarily also belongs are implicitly considered to be / not his real ones; he is not really one of them. The individual’s real group, then, is the aggregate of persons who are likely to have to suffer the same deprivations as he suffers because of having the same stigma; his real ‘group,’ in fact, is the category which can serve as his discrediting (Goffman 112-113).

In other words, Goffman calls reverse stigmatization the fact that one group or one member of a group may appropriate the stigma (which can come as an insult) in order to counter its effect. For example, in the novel *Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl* by Tracy Quan, the main protagonist is a Chinese-Indian American woman who works as a call girl without her boyfriend - and husband in the sequel - knowing it. Here, we have the conflation of two stereotypes about Asian American women: that of the China doll, passive and docile, submitted to the desires of men; the second is that of the second generation women do try to bridge the gap between their ethnic traditions and their U.S. lifestyle. In her novels, Tracy Quan shows just the opposite. She counters the stereotypes about the Chinese American community and women by pushing them to the extreme. By having a main character as a call girl who thrives to remain financially independent, who uses her body and sexual relationships in order to maintain this autonomy, the author reverses the stereotype. She uses it—as Nancy is playing the doll, in some ways, and sometimes the exotic doll for some customers—but the stereotype is pushed to the extreme and becomes something empowering for the heroine.

As for Fiona, in *Hello Kitty*, the reverse stigmatization takes various shapes. First, Hello Kitty is a Japanese brand which is construed as nice, clawless. A nice kitty which comes in various shapes and sizes. In Choi’s novel, Hello Kitty becomes the metaphor for Chinese American women, very much similar to the China doll stereotype. However, in this novel, Hello Kitty is despised. The title shows as much. The main character expresses a strong aversion to everything Hello Kitty embodies: nice personality, clawless – which means submissive –, something to be consumed, bought, but devoid of a personality of its own. In her mind, Chinese American women do tend to act like Hello Kitties, submitted to their parents’ will, to society’s injunction, to men’s desires. For example, Fiona explains how she despises female Asian characters who conform to the China Doll stereotype, which equates to the Hello Kitty character:

I hate Hello Kitty.

I hate her for not having a mouth or fangs like a proper kitty.

She can’t eat, bite off a nipple or finger, give head, tell anyone to go and fuck his mother or lick herself. She has no eyebrows, so she can’t look angry. She can’t even scratch your eyes out. Just clawless, fangless, voiceless, with that placid, blank expression topped by a pink ribbon (Choi 16-17).

In this extract, Hello Kitty embodies the very stereotypes about Asian American women, confined within the walls of home and men's will. As expressed in the third paragraph, Hello Kitty is characterized through the use of the negation: she cannot talk, she cannot act. This is a reductive cliché which is often imposed upon Asian women. Fiona refuses to abide by this cliché and she goes to the point of befriending a serial killer who represents freedom and the breaking free from norms. Sean Killroy is a serial killer who helps and teaches her the art of getting rid of burdensome men. Hello Kitty has therefore found its nemesis in the shape of Fiona. As such, Fiona makes sure the stereotype is both criticized and destroyed. As a matter of fact, in the incipit of the novel, her defloweration and her subsequent sense of victory are endowed with a sense of transgression of norms and family expectations:

Seeing my success, I bit my lips, trying to suppress a squeal of delight. I had conquered myself. I wanted to carve a notch on my own headboard. I had picked my own cherry. I had been deflowered by my own hand. I would forever own myself, my honor, my all. My virginity will always be mine.  
Penis envy my ass, you losers (Choi 8).

This extract is a clear call for empowerment on the part of the narrator. The very fact that Fiona resorts to a sextoy to take her virginity is a sign of control over her own body. At the same time, it is very transgressive for she shows that she aims at shredding her family honor the same way as she wants to shred her hymen: "I didn't have to have one for a wedding night. I didn't have to save myself from a village stoning. I just wanted some family honor that I could shred into bloody pieces and wear around my neck" (Choi 1). This dark humor about such a taboo subject allows the author to tackle a tense subject: the autonomy and empowerment of women. By losing her virginity thanks to a sextoy, Fiona aims at destroying not only the myth of the model minority but also family honor, the same honor which reduces her to the status of a loyal and submitted daughter. By refusing to engage in any kind of affective relationship, Fiona criticizes the plight of Chinese woman in U.S. society. The mention of the village stoning refers to Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, and more precisely No Name Woman, the narrator's aunt, who committed suicide after being chased down by her entire village for having a baby out of wedlock.

Here the point is not to deconstruct the stereotypes and taboos only through the use of humor, but also to make that humor dark, to unsettle the readers, to embarrass them even. This is due to the fact that the aim is to overthrow the notion of taboo, because the stereotypes are being harsh, and therefore there is a need to push them to whatever extreme there is. Dark humor is one of them. There is something over-the-top in this novel, and this gives a string of political incorrectness which aims at the same objective as the very comical aspects or anecdotes: to call social and cultural norms into question. In other words, Fiona embodies what we may call a hyper stereotype, which subverts its stereotype so much that it destroys it in the process<sup>5</sup>. In the end, the serial killer is taken care of, by Fiona herself. In the end, Fiona goes back to her parents, back to her normal self-with a few skills added in the process.

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<sup>5</sup> See D. Spalding Andréolle's definition in her Ph.D. dissertation: *Dialectique idéologique et sociale dans la science fiction féminine aux États-Unis, 1966-1996: Querelles du présent, utopies du futur* (1998).

These various examples of reverse stigmatization aimed at showing that the use of taboo humor was meant to oppose the dominant representations of Chinese Americans by mainstream society, and that the use of humor was one way of attacking these upfront. We can also add that these authors resort to taboo humor, dark humor and hyper stereotyping because they follow in the footsteps of those who are willing to make waves, as literary critic Elaine H. Kim put it in one of her brilliant works: *Making More Waves: New Writings by Asian American Women* (1997). The story of reconciliation between ethnic heritage and U.S. lifestyle is, for these authors, a story that has already been told and that they choose not to tell. They show that they live in a time when there are other stories to share, not those of reconciliation but some which show that ethnicity is no longer the predominant paradigm. Sexuality has become, if not an uncharted territory, at least, their new paradigm.

### **Shifting paradigms: Reinventing life with fiction<sup>6</sup>**

This tangle of taboo and humor is a form of activism because it does conform to the definition afore mentioned. It does give voice to those who are silenced, and it does use political incorrectness as well as dark humor to change life through art. Through their depictions of characters and their plots, both authors show that to them, ethnicity is no longer a source of marginality. Sexuality has become a new paradigm. They offer three new transgressive themes to what Chinese American literature usually offers: the economic stakes and benefits of prostitution, a clear indictment of society's heteronormativity, and the queering of ethnicity as a response to the burden of heteronormativity.

### ***Empowerment through (a)sexuality***

The *Manhattan* series allows to tackle the theme of prostitution and its economic stakes, while at the same time exploring the possibility that it might empower women. Ever since the age of fourteen, Nancy has worked as a prostitute, which has allowed her financial sustenance. Despite her engagement to Matt, a successful trader, Nancy is responsible for her financial autonomy. The very fact that the heroine is a prostitute allows the author to use sexuality as a new means of asserting the character's sense of identity. The narrator does not define or present herself as Asian, or with ethnic existential angst, contrary to many protagonists in more mainstream Chinese American novels<sup>7</sup>. Here, the plots of the three novels evolve around what it means to be a prostitute, to use one's body to make money, to define who you are according to your own norms, despite social stance on prostitution. She doesn't say it is easy, but prostitution is a choice she makes and has made.

The heroine even discusses the debate between people in favor of the abolition of prostitution - or at least the restructuring of it along professional norms and rights and tariffs - and those who are against any form of regulation. In the second novel, Nancy's best friend, Hallie, still has the illusion that creating a committee in favor of prostitutes (called the

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<sup>6</sup> See J. Ledru, Ph.D dissertation, for an in-depth analysis of this shift of paradigm (including theories of descent and consent, hybridity and impersonation).

<sup>7</sup> See Amy Tan's, Lisa See's, Gish Jen's or Kim Wong Keltner's works, to name a few.



Trollops' Council) will change the face of relationships between sexes. Nancy mocks the war of the sexes, which she turns into something ludicrous: "It's the wrinkle, not the war, of the sexes. Allie joined the hookers' movement thinking she could eradicate this wrinkle, but you can't reconfigure the male animal with a manifesto" (Quan: 2006, 44). In the third novel, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is used as an intertextual reference by Hallie's radical friends who published the essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Whores* (Quan: 2008, 128).

In fact, throughout the three novels, Hallie stands for the call girl who is out and proud, stands for her community and fights for their rights and visibility, while Nancy, along with her colleague Jasmine, speaks for those who want to keep things the way they are: "'A meeting? With Allison? You're not going to join that crazy hooker's union!' Jasmine exploded. 'Do you know what will happen to the price of pussy if those airheads succeed in changing the fucking laws?'" (Quan: 2006, 25). Here, these novels deal with the taboo of selling one's body, of contracting sexual relationships for money, which is still perceived as a symbol of women's oppression. However, for others like Nancy and even Hallie, prostitution symbolizes women's freedom, a form of personal, sexual and financial empowerment. In Hallie's own words: "Sex work is not slavery, it's an informal economic business" (Quan: 2006, 206). To Hallie, the creation of the Trollops' Council, a form of Union for Hookers, represents social progress, which allows for more rights, more care towards prostitutes. This whole debate about prostitution functions as a pivotal theme, for two reasons. First, it echoes the fight of minorities, who have had to take a stand, be visible, fight against prejudice and fight for more rights. The two causes echo each other. Second, these protagonists define themselves along the axis of their sexuality. Nancy is hooking, and fighting for that; Fiona fights, and even resorts to killing, in order to maintain her sexual life as she wants it: a libido close to zero, defloration thanks to a sextoy, and a bird as male companion.

These works of fiction, and especially *Manhattan*, ask a fundamental question: what is left of the power of the margins when they are overtaken by mainstream society? Indeed, these characters show that ethnicity is no longer the margin to which is contrasted mainstream society: Fiona is a lawyer and holds members of her community in very low esteem members; Nancy only mentions her mixed background when a customer is looking for an exotic girl—a hint at orientalism as still present in our society. These characters show that ethnicity seems to have been integrated into the mainstream and is no longer a source of marginality. In other words, sexuality and transgression have become the new margins along which characters identify and which contrasts with mainstream society.

### ***The burden of heteronormativity***

Secondly, characters embrace sexual margins in order to criticize heteronormative constraints. Indeed, even though the protagonists are integrated into the U.S. mainstream, all four works promote marginal lives: Nancy is empowered through hooking, and Fiona befriends a serial killer and opts for a life on the dark side: away from the heterosexual matrix. Fiona's hymen becomes symbolic of her ethnicity, and by losing her virginity thanks to a sextoy, she destroys

not only the myth of the model minority but also exposes the plight of Chinese women in U.S. society. Just as Nancy reveals that sexuality is the new margin which counters the assimilative power of mainstream society, Fiona reveals that her sexuality and her befriending Sean Killroy include her in what we may call the new marginality. Fiona's perspective on sex shows that to her, marital status equals suffering and even leads to death: "I didn't want to be anyone's green card ticket, cook, washing lady, housemaid, personal masseuse, baby machine, regularly-scheduled-hole in the mattress. Only to end up dead, discarded, buried in a ditch somewhere, dumped into the big, blue sea, all used up" (Choi 35). The tone is caustic, sometimes harsh, with remarks attacking the notions of assimilation and society. For instance, she highly criticizes her cousin Katy who tries to bleach her skin:

But Katie was considered more beautiful. Because she bleached her skin with eight hundred and fifty dollar skin lightener.  
I don't bleach my skin.  
I don't cut myself with razor blades (Choi 55).

This criticism comes with a mention of blades, which hint at a possible suicide attempt on the part of Katy. This extract, dark humor indeed, draws an explicit parallel between the injunction of assimilation on the part of the dominant society and the emotional damage it may cause for individuals. In that sense, *Hello Kitty Must Die* is endowed with a camp dimension, Camp in the sense of Susan Sontag's definition, which is well developed in Anne Currier Sweet's article "Camp, Masquerade, and Subtext: The Subversion of Sexuality Norms and Gender Roles in *Xena: Warrior Princess*" (2007): "an over-the-top, tongue-in-cheek attitude toward the world, which pokes fun at social conventions and questions social norms. Camp reveals the artificiality of things we accept as the norm, (such as gender roles)" (Currier Sweet 89). This extract illustrates the camp dimension of Choi's work, especially in the sense that it subverts social and sexual norms.

### ***Queering ethnicity, queering the margins***

This transgression of norms finds echo in the claims of the homosexual communities, for more visibility, more rights. There is a reason why ethnic authors are using sexuality and non-normative sexual behaviors in their plots: it allows for claims, it allows to draw a parallel between queer issues and ethnic issues. In other words, what we see here is a queering of ethnicity. Queer is a concept which is defined by David Eng and Alice Hom as "a political practice based on transgressions of the norm and normativity rather than a straight/gay binary of heterosexual/homosexual identity" (Eng & Hom 1). According to the authors, the concept is rooted in a political dimension. We transcend the sexual binary and deconstruct the different social, political, economic and cultural categories which stem from this binary. If the concept of queer first refers to the LGBTQI community, in its original sense, it remains a social concept whose aim is to fight against social norms, to deconstruct them, as they are rooted into a patriarchal definition of social relationships. As a consequence, queer is a concept which partakes in the empowering of individuals. As such, it partakes in the definition of the Chinese American individual as an active agent of society, an individual with plural identities, not the only one defined by U.S. dominant society. This concept aims at

showing that Asian Americans can be defined not only along the axis of ethnicity, but also along that of sexuality, work, and other affiliations. The individual is a hybrid construction. The concept of queer allows to offer new definitions of Chinese Americans, and in our case those of second generation who cannot conform to the norms of U.S. mainstream society nor to those of their ethnic community of descent.

Nancy, from the *Manhattan* series, is typically the character who leaves room for an interpretation of her vision of the world as a queer one. To begin with, her world is divided in her own terms along the queer/straight paradigm. Many characters, including her boyfriend, are qualified as ‘straight’, as well as her previous life, before she was a successful hooker: “All I knew at that point in my career was straight sex” (Quan: 2006, 183), or Matt, whom she calls a straight guy: “He wouldn’t understand my business. He’s always had a straight job. His entire life he’s been so - so normal that he doesn’t even know how normal he is” (Quan: 2006, 9). By defining her boyfriend as a straight guy in a straight world, Nancy manages to define herself as his utter opposite: she’s not straight despite being heterosexual. She belongs to the world of the queer ones, the marginal ones, not because of her ethnicity, or her lack of integration into US society—she’s a pure New York product—but because of her use of sexuality, because of her refusal to have a straight job and a straight life. Yet, she’s marginal but is empowered by her very status.

Nancy’s queer storylines and queer life are best illustrated in the first volume of *Manhattan*. In the chapter “The Rise of the Fallen Woman”, Nancy meets a male client who plays the part of a woman, Terry. This scene is theatrical because there are embedded role plays. Nancy plays the part of Sabrina, a Madam, while the client plays a lesbian and a novice prostitute. The scene offers many transgressions: dress code, sex codes. Terry’s transformation illustrates Judith Butler’s notion of performance and gender parody:

The notion of gender parody defended here does not assume that there is an original which such parodic identities imitate. Indeed, the parody is *of* the very notion of an original; just as the psychoanalytic notion of gender identification is constituted by a fantasy of a fantasy, the transfiguration of an Other who is already a “figure” in that double sense, so gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect—that is, in its effect—postures as an imitation (Butler, 1991: 188).

Terry does not only mimic a pseudo lesbian identity: s/he builds their own lesbian reality in a role play which shows that gender in itself is a parody. There is a change of sexual identity mingled with the notion of artificiality, the two protagonists seeming to be on stage, performing a theatrical performance: there is a scenario, two protagonists pretending to be two different persons. There is a play on pronouns to defend this idea of gender crossing: “He, or I want to say She,” “Terry’s so convincing that this felt more like harmless pleasure with a girl. My signals were getting crossed, or merging madly” are two examples. Queering ethnicity has thus become one of the possible answers or solutions to the burden of heteronormativity in a world where it has become more and more difficult for non-normative Asian Americans to conform to the norms of their community of descent or to the ones of

their community of assent. They stand in the margins, which, complicated as they may seem, offer room for plural identities.

## Conclusion

If characters embrace sexuality so much as the new paradigm defining what is marginal and what is mainstream, it doesn't mean that the authors feel that they live in a post-ethnic America, to use David Hollinger's concept in his work *Post-ethnic America: beyond multiculturalism* (1995): "[It] favors voluntary over involuntary affiliations, balances an appreciation for communities of descent with a determination to make room for new communities, and promotes solidarities of wide scope that incorporate people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds" (Hollinger 3). Humor, taboos and new themes such as prostitution or serial killing are the new literary means which enable women authors to shed light on the ever present burdens of racism and sexism while at the same time drawing parallel with other social causes which need to be fought for. By reversing stigmatization and embracing non normative sexualities, the authors illustrate and expose the intersectional dimension of sexism and racism. These works, which are an example of the empowerment of the literary margins through activism, point to the fact that the fight against stereotypes can come from the association of margins (sexual, ethnic) in order to make waves, to make voices heard.

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