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Jamaican Nationalism, Queer Intimacies, and the Disjunctures of the Chinese Diaspora: Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda*

Jason Frydman

Mr. Lowe, a Chinese shopkeeper living in nineteenth-century Jamaica, presents the reader of Patricia Powell's novel *The Pagoda* (1998) with the dilemma of a character who seems to affirm numerous stereotypes, distributed unevenly and with local variations and emphases, of the Chinese migrant in the Americas. Emotionally isolated and uncommunicative, Lowe "buried his mind with the rust of routine that was the shop, never giving himself the chance to feel."¹ Ann-Marie Lee Loy, author of *Reading Mr. Chin: Images of the Chinese in the West Indies*, identifies such detachment from the surrounding community as a significant trend in Caribbean representations of Chinese shopkeepers.² The US context has prominently conjoined this detachment with a silent lack of affect as a persistent characteristic of the Chinese diasporic male, thoroughly explored in US-based texts such as Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *China Men* and King Kok Cheung's critical survey of Asian American literature *Articulate Silences*. Another stereotypical emphasis aligned more sharply with the US context than the Caribbean

¹ Patricia Powell, *The Pagoda* (New York: Harcourt, 1998), 82; hereafter cited in text.

² Ann-Marie Lee Loy, "The Chinese Shop as Nation Theatre in West Indian Fiction," *Anthurium* 5, no. 1 (2007): par. 9, http://anthurium.miami.edu/volume_5/issue_1/leeloy-chineseshop.html.

concerns Mr. Lowe's lack of "manhood": born a girl but raised as a boy in China, and later living as a man in Jamiaca, Lowe uncomfortably embodies the title of David Eng's classic interdisciplinary intervention, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*. From David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* to the introductory manifesto of *Aieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, writers have trenchantly responded to the assumed effeminacy of the Chinese migrant so acutely present in the United States' racialized imaginary. At first glance, there is something disconcerting about the prominence of these stereotypes, themes, and tropes in *The Pagoda*, not only in terms of reiterating notorious figurations of the Chinese male migrant but also in the transfer of seemingly US-specific manifestations of these figurations to a novel about colonial Jamaica. However, Powell's novel manages to reterritorialize these particular stereotypes, themes, and tropes in a Jamaican context to productively highlight the disjunctures of the Chinese diaspora in the Americas. Furthermore, the erstwhile shortcomings and liabilities of the Chinese male migrant ground the novel's utopian vision of a simultaneously creole and pluralist Jamaican nationalism articulated through the proliferation of queer intimacies.

Despite the testimony of Jamaica-born, Wellesley-educated, and alternately US- and Jamaica-based author Patricia Powell in the acknowledgements that *China Men* was "essential" to *The Pagoda*'s composition, little attention has been paid to the novel's crucial intertextuality with Chinese American literature and cultural criticism. Winnifred Woodhull privileges the rubric of "black culture" in her reading, where she argues, "Using terms and references from black culture, Powell reexamines the history of slavery and indentureship in the Caribbean."³ Timothy Chin explores "the usefulness of a [Caribbean] diasporic perspective—whether embodied as a critical framework and/or reflected in the constitutive features of a literary text."⁴ In spite of his ultimate endorsement of Powell's diasporic positioning, Chin recognizes that "it is also characterized by an inescapable ambivalence to place and questions of authenticity."⁵ Such questions assert themselves in light of how Powell describes coming to write this novel about colonial Jamaica, in which the reader can detect echoes of a US-based cultural politics. "[Discussing] Chinese people who have contributed greatly to Jamaica but whose efforts are often minimized in the pages of history and literature," she remarks, "the story enabled me to reflect on the images of Chinese that are portrayed in Caribbean literature and culture, the racial stereotypes I absorbed while growing up in Jamaica."⁶ The narrative process Powell attests to overlaps with that of "the ethnic literary text in the United States," which according to David Eng "has often been said to function as a proxy for history. This has placed particular pressure and urgency on the literary to perform what is 'missing' in history

3 Winnifred Woodhull, "Margin to Margin, China to Jamaica: Sexuality, Ethnicity, and Black Culture in Global Contexts," *Revista canaria de estudios ingleses*, no. 48 (2004): 120.

4 Timothy Chin, "The Novels of Patricia Powell: Negotiating Gender and Sexuality across the Disjunctures of the Caribbean Diaspora," *Callaloo* 30, no. 2 (2007): 533.

5 Ibid., 536.

6 Patricia Powell, "The Dynamics of Power and Desire in *The Pagoda*," in Adele S. Newson and Linda Strong-Leek, eds., *Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 189.

and to represent otherwise unrepresented communities . . . [and to] inveigh against the bind and sting of injurious racial stereotypes.”⁷ The question remains whether the ethnic literary text in the United States, with its concern with “presence and affirmation,” provides a workable model for literary mappings of Jamaican multiculturalism.⁸ Gayatri Spivak has warned against reflexively assuming this is the case:

Let us learn and teach how to distinguish between “internal colonization”—the patterns of exploitation and domination of disenfranchised groups within the United States—and the various different heritages or operations of colonization in the rest of the world. The United States is certainly a multiracial culture, but its parochial multicultural debates, however animated, are not a picture of globality.⁹

The literary and political disjunctures along the hemispheric American axis of the Chinese diaspora raise precisely such problems for interpreting *The Pagoda*. If *The Pagoda* carries the techniques of the US ethnic literary text to Jamaican territory, it remains to be seen what acts of translation are involved to escape the taint of “parochial multicultural debates” embedded in the stereotypes of Chinese affect and masculinity that the novel appears to inherit from the US ethnic literary tradition.

Set in nineteenth-century Jamaica, *The Pagoda* explores the predicament of Lowe (Lau A-Yin), part of the Chinese migrant population brought to the island in the wake of emancipation. Raised by her father as a son, but suddenly married off at thirteen to settle a debt, Lowe subsequently stows away on the boat of the white Jamaican Cecil, who transports indentured as well as kidnapped Chinese “coolie” laborers to Jamaica. Cecil discovers Lowe under the hull when he (Powell always uses masculine pronouns for Lowe) takes ill during the voyage. After Cecil serially rapes him over the duration of the voyage, Lowe conceives a daughter, Liz. Once in Jamaica, Cecil sets Lowe up as a male shopkeeper in rural Manchester parish, eventually contracting the fair-skinned Miss Sylvie to be his wife and a mother to Liz.

When the novel opens, it is 1893, Lowe is nearly fifty years old, and the reader knows none of this backstory. What the reader learns about Lowe, though, immediately aligns him with the hypochondriacal, voiceless, and affectless China Men of Kingston’s privileged intertext. Lowe wakes before dawn with a troubled mind: “It was as if voices, growing taller, more passionate in his head, daily, were choking him, threatening him to speak. Sometimes the voices lulled, but this week they had rioted his dreams, commanded that he signify, give testimony” (9). This description echoes the story in *China Men* of Bak Goong, a Chinese migrant laborer in Hawaii: “Uncles and Brothers,” he says to his fellow psychosomatically ailing laborers prohibited by their American contractors from speaking, “I have diagnosed our illness. It is a congestion from not talking. What we have to do is talk and talk.”¹⁰ Also like Kingston’s *China Men*, *The*

7 David Eng, “The End(s) of Race,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1484.

8 Ibid.

9 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Making of Americans, the Teaching of English, and the Future of Culture Studies,” *New Literary History* 21, no. 4 (1990): 792.

10 Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 115.

Pagoda constructs its narrative around a father-daughter relationship plagued by silence. Kingston's narrator assumes the position of the inquisitive daughter, to whom, in the words of critic Yoon Sun Lee, "masculine subjectivity seems . . . to eschew intention, disavow desire."¹¹ Responding to this reticence and withdrawal, the narrator comments, "You fix yourself in the present, but I want to hear the stories about the rest of your life, the Chinese stories. I want to know what makes you scream and curse, and what you're thinking when you say nothing."¹² In *The Pagoda*, by contrast, Liz has estranged herself from her father for over twenty years, since she ran away from her convent school to marry a black man who was the "dead stamp" of Cecil. The narrative perspective instead resides with Lowe, who in free indirect discourse expresses (to himself, typically) his desire to communicate at long last: "All these years he had kept his life private, hidden, but there were things now he wanted her to know, secrets he could no longer hide inside" (6).

Lowe's failure to transmit his personal history to Liz compounds his failure to transmit those "Chinese stories" that Kingston's narrator so longs for. Lowe berates himself for not passing down a Chinese cultural inheritance:

Then there was his daughter, a grown woman, who didn't speak one word in Hakka, who didn't understand him or know anything at all about his life, his past. Of course all of it was his fault, for he'd wanted so badly to fit in, for the two of them to succeed. Furthermore, what difference would it have made, when it was just the two of them alone there in the village, cut off from everything familiar, what was the use of his dialect there, and the stories of his family, and the songs of his people, when there was no war to fight, no family to inculcate with values, no power to preserve, it had been just the two of them, the two of them alone there among the Negro villagers. (52)

Lowe had refused to "talk story" to his daughter (136). Powell uses one of Kingston's favorite Chinese-English idioms to articulate this interrupted legacy, and often the very stories Lowe regrets not telling are stories that feature prominently in *China Men*, such as the one about "foolish men who had married ghosts thinking them beautiful women" (173).¹³ In *China Men*, these stories often appear interstitially, supplemented by an author who supplements the silencing of the migrants of the Chinese diaspora. The reader confronts a similar silencing in *The Pagoda*, as Lowe's desire to assimilate and succeed in Jamaica prompts cultural amnesia: "Lowe's Hakka and his Cantonese had long since atrophied, both from lack of use and mindful forgetting, as his only company had been the villagers those early years and he'd so badly wanted to start over" (36). The well-worn motives behind Lowe's deculturation—the desire to make a new life, succeed, and fit in—fail to distinguish his immigration story from a US-based narrative such as *China Men*.

11 Yoon Sun Lee, "Kingston's *China Men*: Circumscribing the Romance of Deterritorialization," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 11, no. 2 (1998): 466.

12 Kingston, *China Men*, 15.

13 See *ibid.*, 74–81.

Yet the threat of a historically specific violence motivates Lowe's assimilation too. In the opening pages of the book, Lowe reflects on the act of arson that had burned his shop to the ground:

He didn't see himself better than them. Above them. But now they had burned it down. Flat. Flat. He was there only on sufferance. Himself and the other five thousand Chinese on the island. He realized now how the Negro people must have secretly despised him for being there, how secretly they must have envied him and his shop and his relationship to Cecil and Miss Sylvie, for here now was the proof. And the whites didn't give one blast if the others burned it down. So long as their houses were untouched. Their daughters. Their wives and plantation equipment. (13)

One villager's response to another villager's tears indicates that the colonial math behind the importation of Chinese labor to the island is clear to the African Jamaican population: "You hear that blasted idiot moaning like is her shop burn down? She don't see how the Chinaman take advantage of we. How the backra put them between we. All the hell we set at they tail, now they bringing in Coolie and Chinee" (15). Powell makes her characters' words resonate with the voices of the "dusty" colonial archive she explored at the University of the West Indies at Mona.¹⁴ Lisa Lowe reports back from that archive in her essay "The Intimacies of Four Continents": "The West Indian Governors' offices stated that needs of the plantation demanded male workers, but even in the early correspondence we see the Colonial Office rationalizing the idea of creating Chinese families through the desire for a stable racial 'barrier' between the colonial whites and the enslaved blacks."¹⁵ Whereas in the United States the Page Law of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 explicitly barred female immigration from China as a tactic to prevent the settlement of Chinese families, the British aspired to encourage such settlement in order to erect a "stable racial 'barrier.'" Lisa Lowe continues: "In 1851 the agent in charge of Chinese emigration, James T. White, fantasized a *class* hierarchy among the groups of the 'Chinese,' 'Bengalees,' and 'Negroes' based on the races' ostensive physical traits and capacities for forming families."¹⁶ This maddening colonial logic is legibly inscribed on the protagonist Lowe's racial difference from his black Jamaican neighbors. His assimilation must be read against the real threat of racialized violence particular to Jamaican history.

The direction of Lowe's assimilation also marks a significant difference between Powell's novel and her Chinese American intertexts, raising important comparative questions about the discourses of racial, ethnic, and cultural formation operative in US and Caribbean contexts. In the US framework, two poles, those of assimilation toward the dominant white culture and pluralist maintenance of cultural difference, frame the trajectory of the ethnic subject. The Caribbean milieu offers a different polarity, positioning the subject between *creolization* and

¹⁴ Powell, "Dynamics," 189.

¹⁵ Lisa Lowe, "The Intimacies of Four Continents," in Laura Ann Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 198.

¹⁶ Ibid.

pluralism.¹⁷ As Kamau Brathwaite and others have argued, the black Caribbean population represents the largest node in the complex field of creolizing relations.¹⁸ Yet a multidirectional cultural traffic distinguishes creolization from the unidirectionality of assimilation. Cristina García's novel *Monkey Hunting*, for example, about the Chinese in Cuba, highlights the contributions of Chinese cuisine and spirituality to the island.¹⁹ On the other hand, assimilation more accurately describes Lowe's trajectory in *The Pagoda*, as the text does not draw attention to similar Chinese traces in the creole culture of the numerically superior yet thoroughly disenfranchised black Jamaicans to which Lowe urgently seeks to acculturate. Consider Lowe's reflections on the consequences of moving into the big house Cecil has constructed for him and Miss Sylvie to live in:

The people would never trust him now. Here he was Chinese, and here he was cohabiting with this white-skinned woman, Miss Sylvie, and here he was now living in the biggest house in the district with a dark-skinned maid and a dark-skinned yard boy. How to explain to the villagers when the very way he and Miss Sylvie lived up there in that house bore stark resemblance to a history and a way of life he did not live through but had heard as a story unfolding so many times at the shop he felt close to it. How to show them that he hadn't changed? (108)

The Pagoda stages Lowe's predicament, which this passage frames as a thoroughly local one, through a trope central to Chinese American literature's negotiation of assimilation: hypochondria. In *Melancholy of Race*, Anne Cheng comments, "In Asian American literature, where assimilation foregrounds itself as a repetitive trauma, we find frequent manifestations of hypochondria as metaphor and condition."²⁰ From the very beginning of *The Pagoda*, the reader too suspects Lowe of hypochondria. On his desk lay "squat bottles of pills and cough medicine without labels but which he knew by heart and swallowed regularly" (5). At times he attributes his ailments to his age: "He was growing old, and arthritis was snaking up his spine and down through his fingers, his asthmatic chest rattled more than ever, his bones ached when it got cloudy or made as if to rain, and his heart wasn't as steady and dependable" (6). However, Lowe often runs through the bush, makes difficult journeys, and performs physical labor steadily. Suddenly, though, he will take ill for weeks at a time, only to wake "with no signs at all of his symptoms" (23). The text returns to Lowe's ailing health after the fashion of a repetitive trauma psychosomatically punctuating his existence.

Yet for Lowe, a number of other traumas compound the repetitive trauma structurally endemic to the racially different body, "a body," according to Cheng, "continuously plagued by questions of its own authenticity and etiology."²¹ These questions multiply: "There was his father, who used to dress Lowe the same way he dressed himself. There was his father, who

17 See Ruben S. Gowricharn, "Introduction: Caribbean Transnationalism and Shifting Identities," in Ruben S. Gowricharn, ed., *Caribbean Transnationalism: Migration, Pluralization, and Social Cohesion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2006), 10–13.

18 See Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971).

19 Cristina García, *Monkey Hunting* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 137.

20 Anne Cheng, *Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 67.

21 *Ibid.*, 69.

used to pile up in Lowe's head all his broken-down dreams, and then it was Cecil's fantasies" (99). Raised as a boy, Lowe is filled with dreams of travel ostensibly foreclosed for girls, but his father's betrayal plunges Lowe into a sexual nightmare: he is sold to a cripple—"an old man with no teeth at all in his head." "What a penchant for a young girl," Lowe remembers. "There had been a string of them before me. Maybe he killed them, maybe he sold them, maybe they hung themselves" (243). Lowe then runs away, though not to safety: "I was too infused with dreams to stay. And what did I run into? Cecil" (ibid.). Scenes of being Cecil's sexual prisoner on board his ship plague Lowe's sleeping and waking life in Jamaica. The sexual confusion and violent trauma of his childhood in China and his encounter with Cecil have crippled his sexual physicality. The "disavowed desire and eschewed intention" that Lee associates with deterritorialized Chinese masculinity in this case seemingly results from Lowe's powerfully individualized sexual history. Lowe's affectless and sexually subordinate figuration resonates with the Asian American literary tradition while also supplementing a distinctive array of "repetitive traumas" that give a unique shape to his drama of assimilation in the Chinese diaspora.

The Pagoda's drama of assimilation plays out at multiple, inextricably interwoven levels, from the household to the village to the imagined community of the Jamaican polity. Lowe's attempt to find his place in the household with Miss Sylvie, Dulcie ("the dark-skinned maid"), and Dulcie's son Omar ("the dark-skinned yard boy") is both aided by and symbolic of his interaction with the world outside. His trauma is personal as well as national-allegorical, and the attempted working through of his personal situation shapes, follows, and intersects with his political situation. The novel repeatedly insists we read the household as a microcosm of Jamaica, as suggested by Miss Sylvie's, Dulcie's, and Omar's backstory: Miss Sylvie's family has been passing for white for three generations. She marries Cecil's best friend, a white colonialist high up in the government, and gives birth three times:

[The babies] turn out too brown and my husband was a big government man with money and clout and a face to hold up and a lot of people working for him and capturing black people and still selling them. Dulcie deliver them. All three. We had to tell him they stillborn. We had quick ceremonies with nothing at all in the coffins. Omar built them. Dulcie give them away to church, to the orphanage. Left them in baskets on doorsteps. I don't know. I never ask. (143)

Her husband hears rumors that his wife was an octoroon and that she is killing their babies. They fight, and Miss Sylvie strangles him: "It was either him or me," she later confesses to Lowe (146). Cecil, though, finds out about it, which gives him the leverage to incorporate Miss Sylvie—over whom he now regularly asserts his sexual dominion—into his plans for Lowe and their daughter. As Omar says of Cecil, "He turn everybody into whore, sir, man and woman. Young or old. He blackmail everybody, sir. So he operate" (227). After Cecil dies in the shop fire, Omar becomes impatient with his status as "yard boy" and takes a page out of Cecil's book, threatening to expose Miss Sylvie's past. After Miss Sylvie tells Lowe about it, adding that it was Omar who burned down Lowe's shop, Lowe ambushes Omar as he steps out of his sleeping quarters one morning. He straddles Omar's chest, digging a blade into his throat:

[Lowe] saw how they all were in this together, how Cecil had thrown them all in together. . . . And now here they were killing and killing and killing to cover up more deceptions, more lies. Here he was with blood on his hands for no good reason at all. Here he was fighting Omar for land and property that didn't even belong to them, that was still damp from prior bloodshed. Hadn't they plundered the Arawaks, the Caribs? Yet here they were like hungry dogs, setting upon each other and biting over the one little dry bone Cecil had flung them. (162)

Coded by class and color, the members of the household parallel the drama of Jamaican colonial and postcolonial history. In the aftermath of Cecil's death, those left behind reckon with the economic, psychological, and sexual aftereffects of colonial domination.

Lowe's efforts to reconcile, and perhaps even ally himself, with Miss Sylvie, Dulcie, and/or Omar, reproduce at the microcosmic level his efforts to assimilate within the divisive class and color complexities of the Jamaican nation-to-be. The sexual blockage produced by his multiply traumatic history operates textually as a political blockage as well. His failure to achieve mutual intimacy with Miss Sylvie, for example, echoes his discomfort with the political history inscribed spatially in their residence. Literary critic Woodhull makes a further note about this residence: "Figures of Asian commodities such as Oriental rugs, tea and silk position the racially and sexually ambiguous Sylvie as a not quite/not white colonizer in relation to Lowe."²² Miss Sylvie's acquisition of Asian commodities and her graspingness in sexual relations with Lowe ("But always she wanted more" [114]) parallels her management of the estate: "Gradually over the years she had pushed off the poor people from their scratch of land and slowly acquired hundreds of acres for close to nothing. . . . [She] had turned the land into an empire" (85, 119). Miss Sylvie's sexual and economic behavior identifies her with the class of colonialists to which she nearly belongs. It is a position and an identification she refuses to relinquish. Her flight from Jamaica, and thus her departure from the novel, removes her from the prospective national community increasingly articulated through Lowe's intimacy with Omar, Dulcie, and a host of figures from the village.

In *The Pagoda*, just as the household and the nation mutually articulate one another, so too do the sexual and the political. Forms of intimacy mediate Lowe's predicament of assimilation. Neither white nor black, he belongs to a population cynically inserted by the colonial government to "keep down wages . . . and keep the Negro population in check" (45). The animosity produced in the African Jamaican population by "what they considered to be the opportunities the government was doling out to his Chinese people" urgently drives Lowe toward assimilation (108). However, the text does not frame Lowe's assimilation as entirely the product of coercion. In *The Pagoda*, the bonds of colonial society—and the prospect of an anticolonial nationalism—are forged through queer sexuality. Even Cecil, the figure who perhaps most closely resembles the exploitative heteronormative model of colonial violence, appears as a queer subject. Though Cecil makes Lowe his concubine aboard the ship, Cecil himself is queered in the process of transgendering Lowe:

22 Woodhull, "Margin to Margin," 125.

One day [Lowe] opened his eyes and found his queue chopped off and lying flat on the floor, and Cecil was there plucking lice big as beans from his hair, the sides of which had been evenly trimmed, a deep part in the middle of his forehead. . . .

. . . He saw fantastic slopes of wool and khaki and felt, saw the jagged jaws of scissors, and Cecil looking on with the frivolous fringes entangled in his red beard. . . .

. . . And he looked again at the spotted-skinned man standing there, and he looked again at the trousers that veered over his legs and at the cardigan that draped along his shoulders, and he swung his head, which felt light without the cord of hair, and he knew he had crossed over again, that he had come to that place of uncertainty and here he was again. (98–99)

With the distinctly feminine gestures of lice-picking and sewing, Cecil as well as Lowe arrives at “that place of uncertainty.” Upon arrival in Jamaica they remain in that place, with Cecil advancing Lowe the capital to adopt the role of male shopkeeper and father to their baby. Sexual violence, gender trouble, and racial difference converge to establish a queer nexus of colonial relations.

There has been a problematic tendency to narrowly construe *The Pagoda* as opening up a Caribbean discursive space “to represent a gay/lesbian/non-heteronormative Caribbean subject.”²³ This critical approach can reduce the narrative to a personal quest to “initiate a healing from the traumas of colonial history.”²⁴ Such a focus on subjectivity and identity expects the novel to function as a queer variation of the ethnic literary text, “to perform what is ‘missing’ in history and to represent otherwise unrepresented communities . . . [and to] inveigh against the bind and sting of injurious . . . stereotypes.”²⁵ What Lowe’s circulation through nineteenth-century Jamaica unveils, however, is not merely the “presence and affirmation” of individual queer subjects absent from colonial and nationalist historiography. *The Pagoda* does not set queer subjects against straight subjects but charts the thoroughly queer operations of colonial society. The novel appropriates this queer terrain, furthermore, to ground the utopian possibility of an anticolonial Jamaican nationalism.

Lowe’s desire to assimilate into the creole culture of the black majority exceeds a merely pragmatic response to economic and physical exigencies. The pleasure Lowe derives from the vicarious experience of queer black desire draws him toward the women of the village who frequented the piazza of his shop: “He liked it most when they lowered their voices and talked about their garish sexual lives and laughed deep, throttling laughs that revealed secrets and insatiable cravings,” notably for “the women they loved on the side” (57). Another public space—the shop of Miss Cora, his former rival—hosts his intimacy with the variously brutal, tender, and queer sexuality of the village men: “Men who beat their wives and fucked their daughters. Men with good intentions. Generous and kind men. Men who loved him and other men” (134). “An effeminate one they called Pretty, who had a penchant for impregnating young

23 Chin, “The Novels of Patricia Powell,” 537.

24 Johanna X. K. Garvey, “Complicating Categories: ‘Race’ and Sexuality in Caribbean Women’s Fiction,” *Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies* 10, no. 1 (2003): 114.

25 Eng, “The End(s) of Race,” 1484.

girls . . . even went as far as to say Lowe looked like a woman he used to know. And at that they stormed into laughter” (172). The communal laughter at the effeminate seducer’s comments suggests that Lowe’s racial difference is not figured as sexual inferiority, as in the case of the emasculation of the Asian American male, but as grounds for a multidirectional queer intimacy.

Yet another repetition of same-sex communal desire in *The Pagoda* shapes how Lowe negotiates his Jamaican status through nonheteronormative intimacies. After his shop burns down, Lowe goes to visit Kywing and his corpulent East Indian wife Sharmilla, with whom Lowe carries on a lifelong flirtation based on her perhaps recognition of his femaleness. Kywing runs a successful bakery and hosts a monthly gathering of Chinese at his home. In this private space, the Chinese shared “the virulent histories of their lives and the woeful conditions that drove them from China” (45). Eventually the affair leads to a bacchanalian catharsis: “Their conversations grew heated, they drank heavily, they sweated, they groped at each other’s groins and at their own, they exchanged soft laughs and knowing glances, they rained insults on one another in seven different dialects and in the next breath recited potent love verses” (46). While it is common to read the bachelor societies of Chinese migrants through the lens of jailhouse sexuality, the pattern of queer intimacy across the novel to which this scene conforms suggests a different reading. As in *China Men*, the poems of “Lu Yu and Su Shi and To Fu” embody a folk canon rendered in dialect songs (172). The text stages a queer articulation of a Chinese popular culture carried into the diaspora.

Lowe laments that “he had refused to teach his daughter [these songs], for the words did not fit here in this place full up of brown people, and the melody was all wrong here against the jolting clangor of this new speech with its crushed-bottle sounds, this new terrain and this rhythm of life loaded up with hostilities and opportunities” (173). The pressing weight of his daughter’s loss, with no sense of her Chinese heritage, prompts Lowe’s dream of the titular Pagoda:

He would rebuild the shop into a school! A school for the Chinese children born on the island. A school and meetinghouse where they could hold weddings and celebrate festivals. . . .

. . . Every day now, boatloads of Chinese came. Maybe interested members could pool together what little money they had saved up and offer out loans, give out scholarships encouraging the next generation to take up law and medicine, public speaking and drama, and liberate themselves from shopkeeping. And just so the children would remember, maybe somebody could teach them Cantonese and Mandarin, so they could read literature. . . .

. . . He had to save his daughter from the amnesia he had brought upon them both, save the other children as well. (40–41, 53)

The Pagoda promises to transfer the monthly gatherings from the private space of Kywing’s bakery to a public space institutionalizing the Chinese presence in Jamaica. In light of his melancholy over his daughter’s simultaneous ignorance of and severed ties to Lowe’s history and Chinese culture, Woodhull reads Lowe’s vision as a mode by which he “testifies publicly”

to being Liz's mother.²⁶ However, such a reading "resolves" the question of Lowe's identity, slotting him decisively into the category of *mother*. It would be more consonant with the novel to read the Pagoda as a space that queers the gendered distribution of family roles. The Pagoda would displace the burden frequently imposed on women to be bearers of traditional culture and would compensate Lowe's failure to fulfill a role that his traumatic sexual history has made impossible. Institutionalizing, rather than gendering, the function of transmitting the Chinese heritage allows Lowe to remain in the "place of uncertainty" that haunts him but also propels his intimate circulation through the many spheres of colonial Jamaican society. Furthermore, whereas colonial administrators and their proxies such as Cecil attempt to manipulate heteronormative institutions such as marriage to order the lines of race, class, and color in Jamaica, the narrative trope of *uncertainty*—and Lowe's intimate circulation that it underwrites—consistently highlights the permeability of those lines, whether in the form of the "white" Miss Sylvie giving birth to black babies or in the "coolie" marriage of Kywing and Sharmilla that collapses the hoped-for divisions between Asian migrants.

The dream of the Pagoda, a benevolent society for the Chinese (and part-Chinese, such as Liz and her children) community, introduces a new complication into Lowe's efforts to find a place for himself in this society. Already what Cheng might dub his "hypervigilance" in monitoring his own body for signs of betrayal—of his biological gender, of his affiliation with black popular culture—has induced a sporadically crippling hypochondria. The Pagoda brings with it the specter of a new physical threat. As Kywing says, "A Chinese school and meetinghouse, man. Then they would really chop we up in this place" (41). Ironically, while popular black violence threatens the status of the Chinese in Jamaica and seems to urge their assimilation into creole culture, in *The Pagoda* only Chinese and other light-skinned Jamaicans discourage Lowe's pluralist project. Kywing articulates his fear of it, and his fears are echoed when Lowe imagines his daughter's response to his idea: "The benevolent society might make them too noticeable, might make them more of a target, especially when already there was so much turmoil and bad feelings; it might really show the Negro people that they planned to stay. Planned to take over" (75). Miss Sylvie too objects: "You only see me when you want, Lowe, when you want clubhouse. And even so, what the clubhouse have to do with me? Even so. Ain't the clubhouse bout you and your people? Ain't the clubhouse meant to absorb you again like the shop?" (211). These negative responses see Lowe's pluralist vision as promoting divisiveness and discord.

However, just as queer intimacies supplant the threat of violence to motivate Lowe's assimilation to black creole culture, queer intimacies similarly make African Jamaicans the privileged advocates of Lowe's pluralist project, grounding a nationalist vision in a mutually sustaining dialectic of assimilation to the creole norm and pluralism. The working out of this

26 Woodhull, "Margin to Margin," 121.

political vision is articulated through, if not a resolution, then at least a mitigation of Lowe's sexual dysfunction. One day while Lowe is shoveling garbage from the burned-out site of his shop, the village mason-carpenter-plumber Jake inquires, "You going build it back, Mr Lowe?" Lowe, hypervigilant as always, "knew better than to tell Jake all of what he intended." "One could never tell, with these people," Lowe thinks, "the exact moment their jealousy would flare up." Instead, Lowe downplays his plans, hedging a bit as well: "No, man, I thinking of building a little ceremony hall instead. Maybe." Much to Lowe's and the reader's surprise, it is Jake who lets his imagination run with the idea:

"Like a benevolent society kind of thing . . . like they have up in Troy, with maybe like a nice little garden and things that grow roses and hibiscus and bougainvillea and marigold. . . .
 . . . "Maybe even a few wood benches and things where one could just sit out and read a book or hold hands with a girl." He chuckled softly and Lowe brightened. (169)

Lowe, so frightened by the specter of black violence at the site of his former shop, dares not reveal his plans for stone lions and corniced roofs. Yet Jake, a regular celebrant of Lowe's gender-bending presence at Miss Cora's shop, encourages Lowe's plans, drawing parallels between the Pagoda and other benevolent societies that serve the local population. In Jake's imagination, furthermore, the benevolent society becomes a romantic space, with perhaps the suggestion of a desire for Lowe him/herself. The suggestion of "a nice little garden and things that grow roses and hibiscus and bougainvillea and marigold" textually links this subtly sexualized encounter to Lowe's on-again, off-again twenty-year sexual liaison with Joyce, a corpulent black-skinned woman of the village who more than anyone is able to draw Lowe out of his trauma-induced sexual blockages:

Years later, he would always remember that afternoon and how she had turned him into a garden of flowers and fruits. . . . His fists had become her flowering hibiscus, his elbows her marigolds, his breasts her star apples, his nipples her guineps, his knees her frangipani, his calves her turtleberry bush, his navel her iris, and down there, down there, how to call it, her tulip? (230)

Joyce—who could be said to have a manifesto: "But you know, Lowe, everybody seduce-able. Man or woman"—embodies the inclusive queer intimacy of the black villagers (153). She turns Lowe's body into a garden, whereas Miss Sylvie, whose acquisitive grasping defined her sexual as well as economic behaviors, turns it into a plantation. The textual connection between Jake's advocacy of Lowe's Pagoda and Joyce's efforts to bring Lowe into a fulfilling intimacy reiterates the mutual articulation of the sexual and the political in *The Pagoda*.

Further instances of nonheteronormative sexual behavior confirm this mutual articulation and insist upon an anticolonial Jamaican nationalism grounded in queer intimacies. After Miss Sylvie absents herself from the household, metaphorically absenting herself from the sexual-political national community-to-be, Lowe draws close to Dulcie and Omar. When Lowe takes ill once again, Omar tends to him:

He sat on the floor next to Lowe and spooned him soup. Then he removed his clothes and got underneath the sheets with Lowe and again there was the hot hard thing between them. He rested it on Lowe's hip and it lingered there on the sharp bones and in the silence and untapped desire between them, till it ebbed and Omar tucked it away. (226)

Omar's desire remains untapped, and this somewhat queer intimacy serves to draw them close across the distance of race, class, and gender, opening up channels of communication that work against Lowe's lack of affect, so endemic to literary representations of the Chinese migrant. After Dulcie's departure, Lowe asks Omar,

"What about your mother? You don't miss her? Where she gone to?"

Omar slurped, he looked out at the winking dawn, waiting for the crowing rooster to shh.

"It was time."

Who were these people? Who were they? Finally he found voice. "Time?" (219)

In bed with Miss Sylvie, Lowe had reflected on voice: "He didn't feel as if he had agency, as if he had voice." Through his intimacy with Omar, he at last discovers it: "Finally he found voice." This voice, though, does not serve for him to affirm his presence but rather to inquire after the lives of others. This sort of voice, then, marks yet another departure of *The Pagoda* from the model of the ethnic literary text in the United States. Lowe's queer intimacy with Dulcie will make this even more apparent. Whispers in the village

wondered if she was that same Dulcemeena [from Trinidad] that years ago had a bounty out on her head, starting at seventy-five pounds and rising. News had it that on one of the estates she had organized workers to protest the pittance that was their wages and for which they worked eighteen and twenty hours a day. News had it that she had begged the poor people to band their bellies and so for weeks and weeks workers did not show up and the canefields lay rutted with the abandoned and rotting bundles of cane.

News had it that she and her people had set fire to buildings and to fields, that they had sabotaged the factory equipment and had marched in front of estates with their signs and burning eyes, with their rage pouring in song. (127)

After Dulcie leaves the household, Lowe takes to sleeping in her quarters. He finds underneath her bed boxes of letters and clippings. He asks himself,

Was this her history outlined here in the faded ink on the yellowing sheets, and that of the protesters? The jagged scrawls he could not make out and as a result was misreading and misinterpreting. Was this her history here tied up in the carton box with ribbons, was this how things got set down, by people misreading and misinterpreting? All that was left now were the villagers' speculations. Was that to be the history now, the stories they would tell their children and their children's children about Dulcie? Was that how they made history? He would have no history for his daughter; he had told her nothing, taught her nothing. (213)

Lowe's attempts to draw close to Dulcie's "virulent history" bring his thoughts around to his daughter and her own unknown "virulent history." Lowe attempts to identify so thoroughly with

Dulcie that he performs a sort of drag: “Piece by piece, he went through the boxes. He tried on a blouse, and his throat chafed at the stiff white ruffles. He unwrapped the gauze of cloth that banded his chest and slipped on her undergarment. It puckered around his thin chest” (214). Through a queer identification with the struggle of this black labor leader—broken down by torture, hiding herself in the service of Miss Sylvie, whose husband and Cecil funded her legal defense in order to keep West Indian demand high for low-price coolie labor—Lowe comes around to the importance once again of the Pagoda: “He had to save his daughter from the amnesia he had brought upon them both, save the other children as well” (53). In light of Lowe’s concern over the fate of Dulcie’s legacy among the village children, and given the persistent black endorsement of the project, the intent of the Pagoda exceeds merely perpetuating a Chinese legacy. The Pagoda becomes a model for a national dialectic of memory in which assimilation to the creole majority and cultural pluralism shore one another up. Drag here functions as yet another gesture of queer intimacy and identification that animates the mutual articulation of sexual and political formation. It reveals once more how Lowe’s agon with his body is at once personal and national.

Reading *The Pagoda*, then, as only about a queer or a Chinese presence in Jamaican history sells short the ambition of the novel. To interpret Lowe’s dream of a Pagoda “as the clearest instance of the desire to find a safe space, a site that can release the traumatized survivor from the grasp of painful memories and allow for true integrity” remains too subjectivist.²⁷ This interpretation isolates the Pagoda as a space for personal healing. Even reading the Pagoda as “a symbolic home for the Chinese community which, henceforth, will be recognized as an integral part of Jamaica society” confines the project of the novel to the lineaments of the ethnic literary text in the United States.²⁸ *The Pagoda* flirts with this genre but exceeds it, appropriating the stereotypes, themes, and tropes of Chinese American literature in order to saturate nineteenth-century Jamaica in queer intimacy. The novel imagines how despite the colonial imperative to strictly divide Jamaican society along lines of gender, race, color, and class, queer intimacies reveal the interconnected bonds of colonial hierarchy. Furthermore, the textual groundwork for a popular anticolonial nationalism emerges through gender-bending encounters along a network of disenfranchisement that knits together the African, Chinese, and East Indian populations. Minus, perhaps, the gender-bending part, these were precisely the fears of the colonial administration:

The repeated injunctions that different groups must be divided and boundaries kept distinct indicate that colonial administrators imagined as dangerous the sexual, laboring, and intellectual contacts among slaves and indentured nonwhite people. The racial classifications in the archive arose, thus, in the context of the colonial need to prevent these unspoken intimacies among the colonized.²⁹

27 Garvey, “Complicating Categories,” 114.

28 Woodhull, “Margin to Margin,” 121.

29 Lowe, “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” 203.

The Pagoda queers the creolizing intimacies feared by the colonial authorities and puts forth a revisionist account of Jamaican nationalism. By setting the text in the labor troubles of the late nineteenth century, Powell's novel displaces the labor movement of the 1930s as the originary moment of anticolonial Jamaican nationalism. While Jamaican historiography, and canonical literary accounts such as V. S. Reid's *New Day*, often focus on the heroic, masculine figures of Alexander Bustamante and Norman Manley from this period, *The Pagoda* distributes anticolonial energies along lines of queer desire among an anterior, alternately creolizing and pluralist popular culture.

In attempting to locate this inclusive nationalism in the popular, the novel continues to work against the grain. As the scholar of Caribbean music and popular culture Wayne Marshall writes,

It is a longstanding charge in Jamaican public discourse—particularly from fundamentalist Christian quarters and certain sects of Rastafari—that oral and anal sex and same-sex relationships are not only taboo and proscribed by the Bible but are “decadent” products of the West, of Babylon, and are thus to be resisted alongside other forms of colonization, cultural or political.³⁰

Alternatively envisioning the roots of a popular anticolonial Jamaican nationalism taking shape *through* nonheteronormative intimacies, *The Pagoda* takes the form of a queer utopian historical romance. Not merely agitating for a queer or multiethnic historiographical “presence and affirmation,” after the fashion of the ethnic literary text in the United States, the novel invokes what Eng reads as a queer temporality: “The past conditional tense of ‘what could have been’ [that] indexes the space of melancholic loss and forfeiture, a privileged time of the possible albeit unverifiable.”³¹ Through this “temporal grammar,” then, *The Pagoda* seeks to restore what it figures as “the loss and forfeiture” of a “possible albeit unverifiable” Jamaican nationalism. Perhaps for the author, as for Lowe, this gesture of recuperation is for the future: “Is not so much for us, but for the baby there coming up” (174).

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30 Wayne Marshall, “Dem Bow, Dembow, Dembo: Translation and Transnation in Reggaeton,” *Lied und populäre Kultur/Song and Popular Culture: Jahrbuch des Deutschen Volksliedarchivs*, no. 53 (2008): 136.

31 Eng, “The End(s) of Race,” 1485.