Glenn Deer

An Interview with Wayson Choy

Wayson Choy was in the process of researching his memoir, *Paper Shadows* (see review in this issue of *Canadian Literature*), when he agreed to discuss his work and life on September 5, 1997. Before our interview at a Vancouver restaurant, we made a brief trip to a second-hand store to search for the unique eyeglass cases that Choy loves to collect, and which hold the various fountain-pens that are the instruments of Choy's flowing, calligraphic script—the side-trip was a sign of his abiding passion for the symbolic objects in the rituals of everyday life. During our interview over a course of souvlaki, pita bread and tzatziki, we dipped into Choy's preoccupation with the past and his memories of the language of Chinatown. Revealed here are Choy's attitudes towards writing and creativity, and his connections to the writing community at the University of British Columbia in the sixties.

GD We've been talking about how the past returns like a river that's been dammed up and redirected but returns inevitably to its original course. How much of the Chinese language is like this river to you, a form that calls you back? How is the language a part of your memory?

WC My first language was Chinese and I was raised by Chinese-speaking members of the community. Toisanese was the main dialect, but what was interesting to me was what I discovered when I spoke to a Chinese-language expert about the Chinatown voices I hear in my head, voices that were recalled from my childhood. I would say certain sounds, certain phrases, and not only their voices, but the faces of some of the people

would come back to me. She, and another knowledgeable person I consulted, identified about a dozen dialects that are in my head. [Wayson Choy noted later that the *Sam Yup* and *Sze Yup* village dialects dominated Vancouver's Chinatown, but the population also included those who spoke *Tui San, Ha Kai, Hoi Ping, Sung Duck, Nam Hoi* and *Fook Sang.*]

I seem to know the meaning of some of those sounds just as, so long ago, I reacted as a child to their resonance, their sense of directly communicating something to me. Of course, at the time I didn't know the official names of the dialects. I simply absorbed the sounds as meaningful language, sound-puzzles that I could figure out. There were different women and men who had taken care of me, "aunties" and "uncles" who in the privacy of their own homes would speak their particular village dialect. So the streams of Chinese dialects to me are a vital source of who I am as a writer. I think it's quite obviously the source of my character's thought patterns, their speaking rhythms, how they fall back into "sayings" and are sustained by the recurring use of mythic images and their beliefs in positive and negative forces; for example, their beliefs in the male and female elements, in *yin* and *yang*, in ghosts, in wind-water harmonies like *feungshui.* The language memory I have inherited from Chinatown has somehow transmuted into the narrative voices in my writing.

Because of its music and tonal structure, and the amazing subtleties which I'm beginning to appreciate at last, the Chinese language to me is a vital source of who I am and how I write. The village dialects sound very Germanic to me, very guttural and, at the same time, pitched, too, like an aria from the Cantonese opera. These village dialects to me are the music and the drum beat of that past. I recall these rhythms vividly when I hear the voices speak, when I recall that community. They are a source for my childhood memories, like the Madeleine cake had been for Proust; through these voices I can go back to those places in time.

I wrote a scene in *The Jade Peony* where the women were gambling and talking about the Monkey Man and his anatomy. It was interesting to me that I had selected that conversation as one example of that community of women speaking with each other. But I remember as a child that their language was always frank and salty and sexual because they were speaking among themselves. I imagine what was so powerful for these women was that a life force was operating within them which made them a community, gave them discretion, and allowed them indiscretion;

and gave them a kind of bonding within the confinements of a very paternalistic culture.

Social gossip, of course, does help to bond any community of men or women. Gossip (a form of "social storytelling") makes the reality of other people more palpable, makes other individuals a kind of reference point for what is meaningful to the gossipers themselves.

When you ask me how the Chinese language is a component of my writing, well, in a still-living way it remains a major source of my connection to those memories. Ironically, I speak a "Vancouvernese," which is a very elementary Toisanese, mixed Cantonese vocabulary, mixed English grammar, oh, a kind of junkyard mix. It surely must pain those who hear me speak any Chinese whatsoever! After I leave the room, I suspect they double over with laughter.

But the voices in my mind, my memory, seem more intact. They connect my imagination to the past. I think in voices, too. In any rhetoric, there is the sound and the emotive intensity of a speaker that transcends whatever language one speaks. I think that's how all children first absorb language and meaning, through some kind of focused, inner attentiveness. And when I attempt to recreate the past, that's what I draw upon, this focused attention, my *inner ear.*

GD This language is sometimes used for powerful gatekeeping effects, isn't it? Different dialects have different kinds of prestige value in the social setting. We see Poh Poh actually using different dialects to control others and there is a real rift between Grandmother's power and the so-called step-mother's inferior position. As you were growing up, did you sense those power relations being played out amongst the women that you overheard?

WC Yes, absolutely, because sometimes they would suggest that so-and-so from that little village was "that kind", and when you said "that kind" you would say it in a dialect that had a classier or lower intonation or status, depending upon your meaning. In a way, the Chinese of my community understood that, especially in their speaking in English. For example, if the father (in the *Jade Peony*) wanted to be an "equal," he suddenly would speak a reasonably good English. If he had to compromise for his family's well-being or safety, then he would suddenly switch to a very subservient-sounding English, a pidgin English equivalent to the Uncle Tom patterns of the old American Negro. In fact, all lan-

guages have evolved class tones and dialects, social class vocabularies not unlike our *Chinatown-Chinaman English*, or what I prefer to call the railroad, steamship, lumber camp "coolie language." "Number One Bossy, bossy, chop-chop" —and all that.

GD Or sometimes in Frank Chin's work, like *The Year of the Dragon*, Freddie Eng will put on that exaggerated Charlie Chan accent.

WC Yes, that chop-chop language disguised as superior detective-power, and always a bit exotic and *Other*. I think it was one of the tools by which we could both mock and realize in our humility that we had few or no choices.

I remember going to a museum exhibit once and seeing there an actor who was an Australian aboriginal dressed in his native way. He had on a loin cloth, and you would never have expected him, as he did when he was interviewed, to speak suddenly in a pure Oxford English. In fact, he was educated at Oxford and Cambridge. So this kind of juxtaposition of what we imagine must be and what is challenged by the reality, is what I have tried to understand. Why did my father speak this pidgin way when he often knew better, or why did he suddenly *choose* to speak that way? It was not so much a puzzle as an understanding, as I got older, of what that was about. That was about surviving and putting on different language masks to deal with reality, with the enemy, or even with the *low fan* (*foreign*) friend you could not entirely trust.

I love those stories about Tonto and the Lone Ranger, when the Lone Ranger says, "We're surrounded, Tonto!" and Tonto says—no doubt remembering native history—"Who '*we*,' White Man?" (laughter)

GD In your own awareness of the boundary between the so-called "yellow world" and the "white world," language is obviously an important marker of that boundary. There are the Caucasians who speak English, there are the Chinese who provide the immersion in your mother tongue, Toisanese. As you were growing up, did you want to appropriate that master language on the outside? You sound like you were already very comfortable with the Chinese community. At what point did you feel the impulse to master that other language?

WC What's interesting in my life is that I have been a very fortunate person. Among my good fortune has obviously been my love of the English language and my talent for writing. In short, I wanted to speak and write well in the language that I loved. I had unrestricted and encouraging access to English, but not to Chinese.

As a child in Chinatown, my sad experiences with learning Chinese involved expatriates from China as teachers. Many of them seemed to me to be angry, bitter exiled or ex-military men from the Kuomintang.

In the Chinese school I went to at Gore and Pender, they had a terrible attitude to teaching. It was all punishment and drill. Drill and punishment. For me, an imaginative child, it was like being in a prison. I hated it. Now I believe that I would have been one of the children who would have come to love the Chinese language, especially the brush-writing, the calligraphy, but I hated the teaching methods. The one or two kind ones did not save me because there were not enough of them.

I went to Chinese school for three semesters and failed twice. I got to hate the school so much that I started bundling up newspapers so that I could one day crumple them all up, set them on fire, and throw them into the school. Mother thought that was not such a good idea. The school didn't like the idea either. So, abruptly, that door to learning the Chinese language closed forever.

I had a love for the English language. The teachers at our multi-cultural Strathcona school were, bless them, competent to excellent teachers. I actually read English before I spoke it well enough. In fact, I began to "read" in Kindergarten. In *Paper Shadows*, I recreated this experience, how, as a four-year-old, I saw words and mimicked their sounds, mixed with my Chinese vocabulary. To this day, one of my flaws as an English teacher is that I will see a word before I pronounce it, and I will pronounce it the way I see it. My students are always happy to correct me.

GD Is the writing process for you a combination of the sonic and the visual when you compose? You are attracted to the sensuous feel of pen on paper—I know that you collect fountain pens ...

WC I love the look of words. I suppose it's because I always loved the look of Chinese calligraphy. As a young boy, I used to play with brushes as if I were a writer in Chinese. My parents used to tell me that I would have long sheets of paper and I would pretend I was writing Chinese. But I would look at Chinese *running script*, and they said I was able to imitate it even though I didn't know what I was writing. I remember the very aesthetic feeling of seeing the flow of ink on paper. The dip and dash of the brush was something magical. Whether I did it well or not, I could hardly say. The sense that in some former life I might have been a calligrapher felt natural and wonderful to me. But at the school I attended,

Chinese was taught so badly. Those dour textbooks! Dour teachers!

So I went into studying English where you can have fun. But it's interesting that you point this out to me because the look of words is very important to me. When I look at the title of *The Jade Peony* it "looks Chinese" to me, whatever that means. I simply like the P-E-O-N-Y look of that combination of letters. More important, the peony is a flower that has symbolic Chinese meanings.

GD You have referred to how certain objects from the past resonate in an almost immanent way with their overlaid history. The jade peony is a central amulet that brings together many of the characters and their lives. In each section there is something from the past, like Roy Johnson's coat, or Jung's watch, or Sekky's chimes that is a central motif of a past relationship. When you were writing *The Jade Peony* did you visualize these objects and did these help you set up focal points in each of the three chapters?

WC This is something that I can hardly understand myself. I suspect in my creative imagination my subconscious is always operating and connecting elements. I sense something is important before I consciously recognize its importance. I think that in good writing the symbol should arise organically from the situation rather than have meaning imposed upon it. For me what became symbolically important throughout the book was already organically there. I knew, for example, historically, that the jade piece would be important.

The peony flower has a symbolic structure and meaning to the grandmother, for it connected her to the time she met the acrobat who gave her the jade peony. He was her first and perhaps only love. So for me it's a matter of seeing in human life what object is always important to people when they remember others who enriched their lives. To my horror, I have met people who are not able to invest in objects some treasured personal values, people who can't even understand that gesture. Sociopaths, for example.

I like to think that most of us have the need to make our lives more real by understanding that an object that someone gives us, will now have the meaning, will now carry the weight of memory as a kind of triggering point. This object, like the Chinese reverence for jade, will emanate, even if only in our own eyes, as something that connects deeply with something both outside and inside ourselves. I love what

Jung said, that *the outside is also the inside.* To me that comment is very powerful. If you look at the walls of someone's rooms and see what pictures or objects are hanging there, they are also saying here is what is inside me. If they have nothing on the walls, this also tells me much. So I say to my writing students that they should always pay attention to the outside as clues to the inside lives of their characters.

GD There is the outside and the inside, and there is also the old and the new. When Jook-Liang embraces Wong-Bak she seems to embrace an old China, and revivify him so he can become Wong-Suk. When you were growing up, how did you become aware of the old China and the new one, and some of the tensions between being a Canadian and being an Asian-Canadian? I know you address some of this in your other essays.

WC I grew up with some of those tensions as being part of the ordinary way one lives one's life, whether poor or rich, dark-skinned or light-skinned. I did not understand these were tensions in any conscious way until I was old enough to recognize that my confusion was a confusion of identity, of mixed-up associations, of still discovering hidden boundaries and secret borders.

I think that's why at 55 I could finally start writing *The Jade Peony.* From the 1960s, when I was first going to be a writer, and I had some early success as you know in *Best American Short Stories of 1962,* I was self-discouraged from becoming a writer. First, of course, it was a lot of hard work. Second, what did I have to say? I felt I had nothing to say. And there I was falling madly in love with all kinds of literature and meeting the San Francisco writers like Ginsberg and Creeley at the University of British Columbia. It was not due to any humility on my part, but due rather to a kind of internalized oppression that I felt I had nothing to say. I could not understand what I was living through and still struggling with then, that is, with my own banana complex, being yellow on the outside and white on the inside. I think when people are in the middle of these identity struggles, they don't have anything to say because they can't get a fix on anything. Your own compass doesn't guide you when you're caught up in discovering who you are. For those caught being between cultures or between identities, there is no True North on the compass. You find your own way.

Luckily I have lived long enough, that I can now understand that I have much to say, at least to myself if not to anyone else.

GD So what did it feel like when this voice came back to you three years ago? You were able to come back to writing and embark on a memoir and another novel.

WC Well, I hope I can! (laughter) I think that this voice never left me. This voice always said to me that I would one day write and tell stories, ever since I read Hans Christian Andersen's stories as a child. But I did not understand when I would write seriously again or under what conditions. I guess the voice that comes back to me now is the voice of some kind of authority that comes with arriving at my senior age—I'll be sixty in a few weeks. And for better or worse, my experiences now help me to see more clearly what love and disappointment may be about. I now puzzle over the need to understand, in fact, why one lives at all. I want to understand the horrible times my parents and the pioneer generation went through, and why and how they were able to survive at all. Well, I believe I have some answers: there were daily pleasures, there was much to laugh at, and there was strength at being part of a fighting-back community. Chinatown was not a community of victims. There were the racist attitudes towards the sexual activities of a people who were told they had no more right to life than animals. They surmounted all of that, those who did survive.

I really wanted to write a book about survivors. I wanted to write a book about people who were decent and who survived. I think there is very little literature, other than sensationalist [books], that explore ordinary lives lived with decency. I love those grand epics that some people write, and I wish I could write them and make millions of dollars—so don't get me wrong—but I think the grand epics lie. I think it's a phony structure to think of the grand sweep, because you're thinking mainly of camera angles. Rather, you want that inner sweep of character, that enables your characters (and your readers) to transcend storytelling.

I had two reviewers, of Asian-North American background, who reviewed my book and were disappointed. Among their disappointments were that the characters seem to do nothing: they don't do anything, they don't go anywhere, what happened to them? They wanted to know what happened to them. Why didn't the author finish writing this book? These two reviewers, quite intelligent and sensitive in their own way, couldn't understand that one lives one's life in moments, not in the grand sweep of a plotline. And it's the collection of moments, Glenn, as

you yourself told me, of the light that was on that day that you found out your father died, that is all you need to know for the rest of your life. That light says everything of that extraordinary moment. You don't need to know the sweep of his life. If you went to write the sweep of his life, it would diminish the moments that mattered to you. So my book is probably a book of moments and I think a lot of writers are coming back to that. Maybe the bestseller lists will demand a novel that sweeps us from San Francisco to Beijing and to England and all that, but I think plotlines are usually a lot of romantic bullshit. The only plot anyone can be sure of is, finally, to be born, to live, and to die. To quote someone wiser, "Character is plot."

GD But do you think that Asian Canadian writers are forging something that is distinctive?

WC My suspicions are that, if anything, it is a distinctive sensibility. In my case, it has come with maturity, with an angle of view that understands the value of something over the price of anything. I'm thrilled by the children's stories by Paul Yee. I think he wrote a masterwork in *Tales from Gold Mountain* because he developed a narrative voice that captures the allegorical sense of his stories. In her *When Fox is a Thousand*, I think Larissa Lai has also understood the sense of moment. And hers has the honest form of a sweep because it involves an internal sense of revelation, for example, the surrealistic sense of being a woman and a fox creature. There is a marvelous creative sensibility at work here. And of course there is Sky Lee's wonderful book, *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, even though I think her storytelling is not as connected as I would like stylistically. I think her vision is particularly that mix of a Chinese and West Coast Canadian background where she is caught between storytelling and her characters' self-revelations. So all of us story writers—certainly I include myself—may still be finding our way.

GD Many of your stories are set in Vancouver's Chinatown and its specific local history. I know you've spent some time growing up in Belleville, Ontario. Did the Belleville restaurant that your family owned have a distinctive name?

WC It was called *Choy's Fish and Chips* on the Footbridge and then *Jim's Grill* on Front Street. Basically our restaurants had mundane names and they were fish'n' chip restaurants, not Chinese! (laughter)

GD *The Jade Peony* is dedicated to your parents?

WC It's dedicated to my two aunts who took care of me in Vancouver. Interestingly enough, I'll tell you about some signs. When the publishers asked me if I wanted a dedication, I said, "Yes, of course." And I wrote "To my aunts, Frieda and Mary." And then, instead of writing, "To My Parents," and I don't know why I didn't write that, it never dawned on me, I wrote, instead, their names, "To Toy and Lilly Choy." (Somebody pointed that out to me after the novel was published and I discovered I was adopted.) That's odd, I thought. I just assumed that everyone would know that Toy and Lilly Choy were my parents.

GD And both of your adoptive parents worked in the restaurant. Did you also hang around?

WC I worked in those restaurants, yes.

GD A great place to listen to people and their conversations, and get in on the gossip.

WC It is, and I was young enough to be an observer and small enough to be forgotten. When you're a kid and you look like you're harmless, people will talk right in front of you as if you weren't there. Invisible. I have always been a reasonably good listener. I absorb information in strange ways. I retain hot bits. Whatever my kind of mind finds interesting, becomes memorable. I guess this is true for everyone. However, I'm not always conscious about the amount of memory that I am retaining until I call for it, as happens when I'm writing.

GD Later what was it like when you were a student at UBC doing Sociology, English, and Creative Writing with Earle Birney and Jake Zilber?

WC Yes, Earle Birney was one of my teachers. I really had a fine time. Again, I was fortunate, and I was spoiled. Earle Birney, Jan de Bruyn, and Jake Zilber began mentoring me as someone who they thought had a particular talent and potential. But I assumed that all of the students were treated just as well as I was. After all, from that era came George Bowering, Fred Wah, Daphne Marlatt, Frank Davey, and a whole bunch of those future writers and poets who were nurtured by them. I wasn't the only one. I now understand what they did for me, which was to say in their way that I was a writer and that this potential should be supported.

GD As a visible minority writer, this writing ability is a special distinction. Did you feel something special about being able to enter this area of English study?

WC Yes, I did. I felt I wasn't so much special, as having been empowered by

the other writing students' sense of superiority, and by their real talent which was superior to mine, perhaps because I hadn't explored my own talent. The others weren't being snobs about their abilities, and in fact I think, looking back, I was quite welcome to join any group like the TISH gang, and there would not have been anyone objecting. But I hung around with a Chinatown crowd that I grew up with, and so didn't hang out with a university crowd. Mine was a kind of self-alienation; I didn't feel I belonged even though I was welcomed. If I sat too long with the other writing students I discovered that I couldn't speak their literary language. I didn't have all the references they had. Many of them took for granted whole genres of American and British names and I was only beginning to discover these. I probably felt discomfitted by their knowledge and my lack of similar knowledge.

GD Does this experience serve you well when you are trying to create inclusive contexts within your own classrooms at Humber College? You spoke of how, in dealing with students of Afro-Canadian heritage, you urged students to look at their own family and tribal histories. Do you find yourself enabled in your teaching because of your own past?

WC A handful of students are aware of my past, and there are always questions about how I wrote *The Jade Peony*, and why, and all that. My awareness of the past helps me to teach my multi-backgrounded students.

In all my readings and meetings with the public, I always emphasize the power of story, the power of narrative. As Carol Shields puts it, "There is a hunger for narrative in this generation." Because their history—black or white—has been homogenized by television and by the Disney paint-brush, this homogenization has caused many of my students to ignore the stories of their own families. Their own families watch the same television programs that mesmerizes them.

Meanwhile, the grandparents stay silently put away somewhere, probably with a television set, too; and no one talks to anyone else. We all seem to think, as I tell my students, that everyone is supposed to come from Beverly Hills High. They usually laugh at this, so I say, "Find out where you actually came from—explore your family history—because this will guide you to understand who you truly are."

I encourage my students to understand their history. This encouragement probably comes from understanding the importance of my own stories, the power of stories that are true, not those told simply to entertain.

Susanna Egan and Gabriele Helms*

The Many Tongues of *Mothertalk: Life Stories of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka*

Collaborations

We have begun our work together by trying to understand whose text *Mothertalk* really is.[1] The cover suggests that at least three people were involved in making this book; the life stories of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka have been written by Roy Kiyooka and edited by Daphne Marlatt. However, what seems to be a collaborative venture poses problems from the start, with the risk that "Mary" is subsumed by multiple layers of reading.[2] Marlatt's introduction to *Mothertalk* outlines the complex procedures whereby Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka's life stories travelled from Japanese conversations to English print: Mary Kiyooka told her stories, in Japanese, to Matsuki Masutani, who taped and transcribed them. He then translated these transcriptions into fairly literal English, which Roy Kiyooka re-translated in order to capture the effects in English of his mother's Tosa dialect. Adding to his mother's stories from his own knowledge and memories of her storytelling through his childhood, Kiyooka also rearranged the material he had received. When he died in 1994 before completing his book, his daughters asked Marlatt (a writer and one-time partner of Roy Kiyooka) to see it into print. NeWest published *Mothertalk* in 1997, rearranged by Marlatt, and now including significant additional materials. Every addition (such as the inclusion of Kiyooka's poetry) and every change marks accretions of meaning and purpose for this text as new readers become involved. From the photographs on front and

* We have used some of the materials for this paper in presentations at two conferences: "Approaching the Auto/Biographical Turn" in Beijing, June 1999, and the "Roy Kiyooka Conference" at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver, October 1999. We regret that publication timelines do not allow this paper to reflect discussion at the Roy Kiyooka Conference.