a critical love letter to my ancestors: perhaps a therapeutics of recognition?

Gracelynn Chung-yan Lau

Preface: Part memoir, part Chinese history, part theoretical reckoning with settler positionality of my lineage as an immigrant on Turtle Island from Hong Kong, this article is a critical self-study and creative nonfiction experiment that dialogues with colonial recognition and with the abjection method to the self and ancestry, to wrestle with generational failures and what it means to honor my ancestors. I walk through the lens of Kristeva, Fanon, Muñoz, and Coulthard, using their frameworks to understand my distance and relationship with my ancestors and to speculate on their contexts, mindset, and behavior with the colonizers and as the colonizing others, engaging from a place of critical love. This article aligns with the mode of "depth education" as discussed by Andreotti (2021), as an inquiry to expand the researcher's capacities and dispositions to observe our own affective responses and to hold space for complexities and paradoxes within and around us, without feeling immobilized or demanding to be rescued from discomfort. The writing uses a performative writing approach to interrupt conventional scholarly texts and discourse and seeks to generate curiosity and responses in knowledge-creation spaces.

Dear ancestors,

I never thought I would write to you. In my mind, you were the people who rushed for gold and then created Chinatowns. You were the people in Chinese history textbooks, and I had to memorize the immediate and root causes of your actions to get a good grade in my A-level exams. You were the people who spoke certain Cantonese dialects that my late grandparents

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might understand but I don't. My grandparents did not rush for gold on Turtle Island, but they were born in the same province as you, Guangdong in southern China, while the Kuomintang nationalists were ruling your land. When the Japanese Empire warred against the nationalist government of the Republic of China, my Gong Gong (maternal grandpa) was twelve and Po Po (maternal grandma) was five. Gong Gong was born in Dongguan the same year when Sun Yat-sen, the father of modern China, died in Beijing. It was 1925, only two years since the Chinese Exclusion Act was imposed on you on July 1, 1923, on the fifty-sixth anniversary of Confederation in Canada.

Recently I learned that in your world, Gum San (the Gold Mountain) was the single name you had used for Canada, the U.S., and Australia—a name that was a synonym to "a life cycle of upward mobility built out of labour and mutual investments in each other's aspirations of wealth" (Yu 2015, 195). The ancestors of my Gong Gong and Po Po did not chase after the mountains of gold; some of them died in the 1895 Sino-Japanese War instead. Gong Gong lost his father in World War II, but Gong Gong survived. A few years after Imperial Japan surrendered and ended its occupation of Hong Kong, the British took back the Crown Hong Kong colony in 1945, and Gong Gong and Po Po crossed the border to the colony with their kinfolks from neighboring villages. They met in Hong Kong and got married, then Mom, the oldest sibling of seven children, was born in 1953.

I am learning to reconnect with you now, but for a long time, I detested you and the land you came from. When Mom was a child, she had to go there at least once a year. Po Po had to bring household necessities back to the Dongguan village—oil, rice, crackers, candies, clothes, cooked fatty pork belly—even though Gong Gong and Po Po did not have enough for their family and Mom had to work at a boarding factory to make money at the age of eight. Crossing the British colony's northern border to your land had always brought Mom nightmares. Every border crossing was a horrifying experience: people were stuffed onto a smelly train; the food served on the train had a weird yellowish color; chaotic, scary, unfamiliar. The scariest moment happened after the train crossed the border—"They search our luggage and might force us to recite Mao's *Little Red Book*"; "Their world was very different from ours," Mom recalled. On each visit, Mom had to stay at the village for a few nights, where there was no tap water, no electricity, but chickens running around in the dark pooping on her little sister's little

feet. Those were the days, not long ago, when the communists had started to rule your land.

Ancestors, did you feel the same as my mom when the Qing Empire ruled your land? Had living in the declining Qing dynasty brought you nightmares too? Is that why you aspired to go after Gum San (Gold Mountain) even though it might not be as promising as the inspirational heroic success told by your village kinfolks? Chinese Canadian history scholar Henry Yu said, for you, Gum San was "a geographic imaginary" (Yu and Chan 2017, 31), a field of possibilities around the Pacific, where you were known as "a strong commercial spirit [in] all [your] proceedings," where you saw "profit in the face at every hour of [your] labour" (Yu 2015, 194). No wonder near the end of the gold rush period, some of you were buying non-Chinese-owned mining companies, and by 1875 there were over thirty Chinese-owned gold-mining companies in the Cariboo, British Columbia, Canada (Lai and Ding 2016, 20).

But your Gum San is my Turtle Island, and I now live in the same settler-colonial society where you had participated in building. I am learning how to be on Turtle Island, and my Indigenous elders said, "Reconnect with your ancestors." That's why I am writing to you. But for a very long time, I felt a visceral aversion towards you and the land you came from. Just like Mom, as a child, I dreaded crossing the Hong Kong colony's northern border to your land—dirty, foul-smelling, uncivilized, scary, a place of lower state. I was so proud to be born and raised in the colony of Hong Kong; the border differentiates my family from you.

Lately I've been thinking about Julia Kristeva's thoughts on the abject and abjection of self. My dear friend B is a white woman raised on an Indigenous reserve by five different tribes. She once asked me, "Why are you so allergic to your people?" Being allergic is a physical reaction. In Kristeva's theory world, the abject are things that we expel from the body—feces, blood, body fluids—toward which we tend to feel a sense of loathing and disgust, but those things also magnetically draw us towards "the place where meaning collapses," where we recognize that aspects of ourselves can become nonliving: "Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. . . . if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture" (Kristeva 1982, 2). Reading Kristeva makes me wonder: Have you become the "something" that I did not recognize as a thing? Have

I rejected you (a part of my ancestry) and deposited you on the other side of my imaginary border, so that the childhood "I" (the subject of the queen then) can break away from you, so that you can't threaten "me"?

Kristeva encapsulates this breaking away with the border imagery: "It is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border? That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present, or that I hallucinate so that I might, in a present time, speak to you, conceive of you—it is now here, jetted, abjected, into 'my' world" (Kristeva 1982, 4). Though her explanation points toward the developmental stage when infants begin to establish a separation between the self and the mother's bodies, it makes me realize that my disconnection with you might have resulted from abjecting you as the inferior and disgusting other. What fuels my repulsion of you that had deemed you outsider of my family border since my earliest memories? Did I turn you into my project of abjection?

Dear ancestors, I wish I could apologize for expelling you and part of myself, but I can't—I still don't know who you are to me and who I am to you—I want to honor you, but I am angry at you. I am embarrassed and horrified by your entitlement to relentless upward mobility on Turtle Island. Didn't you know that is a defining behavior and characteristic of settler privilege and ignorance? The settlement of your Gold Mountain ambitious dream had taken place on stolen Indigenous land, where Indigenous lives and ways of being were taken away, commodified, and replaced. If I understand Kristeva correctly, abjection arises from the desire to become your opinion of the other's perception of you, since she says, "I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be 'me.' Not at all an Other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be" (Kristeva 1982, 10). In Chinese history classes, I memorized the causes of the Western Affairs Movement reforms of 1861–1895 in the late Qing Empire. I still remember the campaign's motto: 以夷制夷 (*Ji Ji Zai Ji*); it means learning from the West to subdue the West as a self-strengthening strategy. I remember, the reforms involved the imitation of foreign scientific knowledge, foreign institutions, and military technology. Was the "West" an "Other" for you? Yu suggests that you were "early Cantonese pioneers" who had arrived (on the west coast of Canada) as early as the British settler colonists, and that you shared many of the peripatetic practices of the Scottish imperial migrants (Yu 2015, 205, 189). When you decided to chase your Gold Mountain dream and board the ships, was it a general vibe in your

villages to learn from and emulate the West in some shape or form? I want to understand you, and an online etymology dictionary tells me that the old English word *understandan* literally means "to stand in the midst of." If this is what it takes to reconnect with you and understand your contexts, I am willing to stand among you now.

Today I looked it up again. The Western Affairs Movement was also called the Self-Strengthening Movement. After the First Opium War ended in 1842 and Hong Kong Island was ceded to the British, translated Western newspapers, books, and journals began to spread throughout the Qing territories through 同文館, a school system in the late Qing Empire that specialized in teaching Western studies and language since 1862. Chinese intellectuals' enthusiasm for Western learning had soared ever since. Cultural studies scholar Law Wing-sang writes, "Western ideas were propagated as ready-made formulas that would facilitate China's resurrection. . . . Successive Qing military defeats at the hands of Westerners paradoxically both produced Chinese society's admiration for anything foreign and preserved Chinese society's general xenophobia" (Law 2009, 61). Revolutionaries turned to the Western powers seeking possible political alliances or invoked Western theories and experiences to support their calls for a constitutional monarchy, or a Western-style republic, or other imagination of a postimperial China (Law 2009, 58). Was it the root of your "inferiority complex"? Had one of these Western language schools in Guangdong—the one founded by Li Hong-zhang in 1863, for instance—fueled your aspiration to follow the Gold Mountain dream when the gold rush in British Columbia started in the 1860s? Or was it a mere historical serendipity? Had you already felt inferior as Qing Empire subjects and wanted to abject your inside to prove to the West that you could be their equal? Did you feel the same when the anti-Chinese legislation was imposed on you by the white-dominant settler-colonial state when it ruled the Gold Mountain?

I wonder if you and I both had the experience of what we now know as internalized racism or internalized colonialism. I know you and my Mom haven't read *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon. The book was published in French in 1952, the year before Mom was born. I imagine, even if you can read dense and chewy English text, you wouldn't be interested, because there is no financially promising path offered in his book. But Fanon (2008) spotlights the parts of us that we do not even recognize until we see them through the gaze of a "superior" other and the colonial

strategies of producing the effect of subordination. In his book, Fanon tells the story of his kinfolks being Black in France and in the white Christian–colonized French Antilles. His main concern is to end a vicious circle of two facts: "There is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men. There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect. How do we extricate ourselves?" (Fanon 2008, 6).

Dear ancestors, how do we extricate ourselves? In Fanon's theory world, the colonial process isn't only operated through control over land and people, it also creates an inferiority complex in our souls by burying our cultural originality, "walled in" by their violating gaze based on their cultural standard (Fanon 2008, 9). As we were immersed in this foreign language world, their prejudices, myths, and collective attitudes (145) infiltrated our minds and collective unconscious, and we began to see ourselves as lesser than and renounced our characteristics and language to become more like them. I tremble in resonance with Fanon's experiences as he writes: "I am a Negro—but of course I do not know it, simply because I am one. When I am at home my mother sings me French love songs in which there is never a word about Negroes. When I disobey, when I make too much noise, I am told to 'stop acting like a n——.' Somewhat later I read white books and little by little I take into myself the prejudices, the myths, the folklore that have come to me from Europe" (148). Have you ever felt a similar self-division inside and around you or a sense of shame about not speaking fluent enough English? Did you behave differently with a white man and with another Cantonese fellow? Did you come home to the land of your village feeling whiter?

Dear ancestor, I apologize for writing to you in English. Living in Canada for eighteen years, I lost the vocabularies to articulate the most intimate parts of my mind and heart in Cantonese somewhere along the way, though I can't accurately articulate them in English either. Fanon says that language is a cultural tool, and "to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (Fanon 2008, 25). I did not gain mastery of the white language, but I did take on a world and became a different color in Mom's eyes. Mom went to a primary school funded by an American missionary organization in Hong Kong and finished fourth form in the British secondary school system while working full-time in the factory, but she barely speaks any English. Unlike others in her generation who strived to become "the upper classes of the Chinese" (Law 2009, 51), in the late 1970s, Mom didn't need English to be a

supervisor at a garment factory; and soon after Maa Maa (paternal grandma) died, Mom stayed home to cook for our family and devoted herself to serving at a small local Cantonese church throughout my adolescence years. There were a few years when I rarely called Mom from Canada, and my ability to think within Cantonese had slipped through the fingers of my brain and my tongue—I stumbled over words in our phone conversations. When I couldn't pray in Cantonese and was unable to explain to her how I still believe in God but with different theological worldviews, Mom was very upset: "There is only one true God. All truth is written in the Bible." Regardless of how she felt about me, she always finished with this single announcement. And she waited for my return to Hong Kong, year after year.

Have you ever felt yourself taking on a persona in a particular world when you think within its language? Now that I have picked up on the nuances of the white language in Canada, I can only think through certain things within this white language. My relationship with this language was unlike what Fanon described as a "means of proving to [myself that I have] measured up to the culture" (Fanon 2008, 25), but the ability to think within my mother's tongues disappeared when I did not hold onto them. When I think in one language world, the other language world sneaks out from me silently. And by the time I come back to that other world, thinking within its language, it has changed already. That world disowns a little bit of me, though I retain some skills of its language, and I'm left with inarticulate loss between the worlds.

That said, I might have abjected some of our traits and language unconsciously to be seen and recognized by the other—but not just the white other. When you headed to the Gold Mountain, many Cantonese men from your land, Guangdong, followed the British to Hong Kong for the lucrative opportunities for collaboration to reverse their fate as socially marginalized persons, to make themselves a colonial Hong Kong Chinese elite class (Carroll 2005; Law 2009). They perceived us as their inferior other. They did not fight back; instead, they sought colonial recognition and fortified it. Law suggests that as early as the 1900s, Hong Kong's elite Chinese class desired exclusion of the lower social classes within a single racial profile that both of them shared, and English was used "as much as a vehicle for imposing cultural domination of one race on another as a cultural capital effectuating class segregation within the same dominated race" (Law 2009, 50). The ability to speak English "correlated directly with their possession of progressive ideas" (Law 2009, 44), which differentiated the language-speakers from

their inferior other from within Hong Kong: the poor, immigrant Chinese class who arrived later, the category to which my grandparents belonged. As a privileged group in Hong Kong, they "shared the same lexicon for 'character formation'" based on the white colonizers' standard "English sympathies and ideas" (Law 2009, 52). I feel furious with them, but I wonder if I'm angry at myself because I have also othered you and your land as a child on the northern border of the colony. Was I perpetuating their pattern of abjection when I turned you into my project of abjection?

Dear ancestors, what if our internalized racism reinforces the systemic racism imposed on us? When is this cycle going to end? Dene scholar Glen Coulthard finds some answers in his analysis of Fanon's later publications: "[the] strategies that attempt to break the stranglehold of this subjection through practices of cultural self-affirmation can play an important role in anti-colonial struggle as long as they remain grounded and oriented toward a change in the social structure of colonialism itself" (Coulthard 2014, 147). I guess what he means is to use self-recognition as an approach to rejecting the settler-colonial state's politics of recognition and to stop reproducing the social colonial structure and its power dynamic. But how do we reject the abjection imposed on us by the other, when the other is also our people and ourselves? Where do we turn to assert our culture, worth, and agency beyond this colonial social structure, the superior-inferior/other-us (or vice versa) dichotomy? I can't fall into the trap of an essentialist portrayal of our identity when there is no single definition that can capture the complex histories and diverse ways in which people with Chinese ancestry understand the meaning or significance of this ancestry on Turtle Island; nor can I find any dynamic living systems on the land before the white colonizers came on Chinese soil, to reevaluate an Indigenous "past."

Ironically, during the 2019–2020 political struggle in Hong Kong that ended in the massive arrest and incarceration of protesters and pro-democracy leaders by the now communist-ruled government, the British Hong Kong colonial flag made a few appearances in the protests by the grassroots protesters. A people fighting for freedom, liberty, and the right to freedom of expression was their self-affirmative identity. Some ascribe their core liberal attributes to the activist tradition that fights against Hong Kong colonial authorities within limited democracy, and a progressive localism that advocated anti-neoliberal values and centered the experiences of marginalized communities within the colony since the 1970s (Lausan Collective and IZ3W 2021). How come the colonial legacies become that

which defines ourselves? I have no doubt, as Audre Lorde believes, that the master's tools can't dismantle the master's house, yet I am magnetically drawn to what Coulthard (2014) proposes in *Red Skin, White Masks*—to critically revitalized traditions as "a resurgent approach to Indigenous decolonization that builds on the value and insights of our past in our efforts to secure a noncolonial present and future" (Coulthard 2014, 149). I am magnetically drawn to that which I don't have and can't find within the unidentifiable "us" and this unbearable "us"-ness.

Dear ancestors, on the Turtle Island, Indigenous scholars are working toward (re)construction of their decolonized Indigenous nations, grounded within Indigenous cultural politics and land-based ethics as strategies to reject the politics of settler states' recognition. What about us? But now I want to abject you again, because I feel ashamed of your ignorance and privilege as Gold Mountain settlers—as if by pointing fingers at and abjecting you, I'm closer to becoming those on the decolonization academic bandwagon. I know the operation of the settler-colonial states had expelled and demonized you in their white-nation-building strategies, but amplifying your voices and experiences also risked being oblivious to Indigenous nationhood and rendering Indigenous people as diasporic. And because you and your descendants did claim to belong, own land and real estate, and demand equal citizenship rights and benefits in this settler society, you are not too different than white settlers (Lawrence and Dua 2005), even though they imposed a superior/inferior dichotomy on us. But when I do this to you now, am I moving from one colonial social-structure dichotomy into the perpetrator-victim-rescuer drama triangle? From one closed-loop cycle into another? Can we not run in circles anymore?

Dear ancestors, I still don't know who you are to me and who I am to you—you hover at the periphery, constantly challenging my borders of selfhood—and I still want to honor you. You didn't know it, but some cultural studies theorists suggest that disidentification can be a strategy that deals with dominant ideology between identification and counteridentification, to "transform a cultural logic from within, always labouring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance" (Muñoz 1999, 11–12). But I can't disidentify from you. How I can disidentify from you while learning to honor you, if not eventually to love you critically? I can't reduce you to an ideology when I am trying to reconnect with you, because it isn't about me or who I identify with but about the futures and the future ones.

In the academic bandwagon, I learned that to create real change, we must fight against social and political colonial structures. But meanwhile, who is going to heal the pain of abjecting the other, being abjected by the other, and abjection of self and among ourselves? Isn't it in some ways abandonment that involves self-hatred, masking, veiling, or cutting a part off to be someone else? I wonder: Who's responsible for this healing outside of ourselves? Who is there to look at the strategies of reconciling the conflict and tension within and around us, while working towards a "noncolonial present and future"? And what's the point of studying theories if theories can't help us heal ourselves? By reconciling and healing I mean the capacity to recognize these broken parts within us and our lineage, to recognize their contradictory complexities and be able to hold those complexities with love and kindness, so eventually we have more capacity to hold those contradictory complexities around us. Nothing can be reconciled outside of ourselves without first reconciling in ourselves. Can that be a "therapeutics of recognition" alongside the "politics of recognition"? A therapeutics to not lose touch with my own uncomfortable moments and to not run away from them by trying to be a "better settler"? A therapeutics that recognizes that though it didn't start with my generation, it can end with my generation? Ancestors, I don't want to be a politically correct settler hiding behind historical findings of shame and privileges, bypassing the one thing that Indigenous people teach us to do—reconnect with our ancestors. And while I am still learning to honor you, thank you for being here.

Ambiguously yours,
Chung-yan

Gracelynn Chung-yan Lau is an expressive arts therapist and a PhD candidate in cultural studies at Queen's University, Canada. Her research applies expressive arts therapy in critical autoethnography and community-based participatory research, examining the relations between personal healing and social change and their impact on Indigenous-settler relationships. Her doctoral work experiments with creative nonfiction and performative writing to interrupt conventional scholarly texts and discourse and to generate curiosity and imagination in knowledge-creation spaces. Lau can be reached at gracelynnlaudecenteringstudio.com or via email at gracelynn.lau@queensu.ca.

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