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**Storytelling in Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*: belonging and the transnationality of home in older age**

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**Abstract:** Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* is a fictional account of a Chinese American woman and her mother, a first generation migrant, who is negotiating dementia in later life. Analysis of diasporic novels can provide insight into migrant belonging, especially the emotional geographies of home and emotional subjectivities of ageing that are not commonly or easily elucidated even by qualitative interviewing methods. This article examines Tan's construction of ageing as an intergenerational, cultural and emotional process, and highlights the role of storytelling as an everyday home-making practice through which the transnationality of home in older age becomes evident.

**Key words:** belonging; home, ageing, emotion, fiction, Asian American diaspora

In this article, I turn to Asian American diasporic literature, specifically *The Bonesetter's Daughter* published in 2001 by Chinese American author Amy Tan, to provide insight into the emotional and everyday experiences of ageing and home for Chinese middle class migrant women in the US diaspora. In line with global demographic trends, the United States has an ageing population, including among its Asian American communities (AoA 2015). Yet, Purakayastha et al (2012) note that

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Asian Americans are relatively invisible in the ageing literature: on the one hand, persistent beliefs about their “model minority” status focus on the assimilation of Asian American seniors into mainstream middle class (white) America, obscuring continued marginalisation and/or multiple attachments, while, on the other hand, assumptions about “Asian families” and “Asian cultures” lead to expectations about care for elderly Asian Americans that may or may not be realised in a society where multigenerational co-living is increasingly uncommon (see for example, Seo and Mazamdar [2011] on Taiwanese elders living independently). Any exploration of Asian American ageing requires an approach that is attentive to ethnicity, generation, gender, and class (Purakayastha et al 2012). Indeed, Lowe (1996, 27) reminds us that even while the label Asian American is deemed necessary to counter racism and marginalisation, it also obscures heterogeneity among the diverse group of people it encompasses:

‘... being men and women at different distances and generations from our “original” Asian cultures – cultures as different as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Indian and Vietnamese – Asian Americans are born in the United States and born in Asia; of exclusively Asian parents and mixed race; urban and rural; refugee and nonrefugee; communist-identified and anticommunist; fluent in English and non-English speaking; educated and working class. As with other diasporas in the United States, the Asian immigrant collectivity is unstable and unchangeable, with its cohesion complicated by intergenerationality, by various degrees of identification and relation to a “homeland,” and by different extents of assimilation to and distinction from “majority culture” in the United States’.

Among Asian Americans, Chinese Americans constitute the largest ethnic group (22.6%) and this is reflected in their higher numbers of elderly with 229,081 Chinese

Americans over the age of sixty-five (Purakayastha et al 2012, based on 2000 census data). Chinese Americans are more likely to live in poverty than white Americans, but less than 20% of Chinese Americans seniors fall into this category (Purakayastha et al 2012). Most live in the suburbs and could be considered part of the middle classes, so existing accounts of the difficulties faced by those who live in Chinatowns, such as the seminal contribution on Asian American ageing by Purakayastha et al (2012), while important, need to be complemented by further analysis.

This article begins with a short review of relevant literature on ageing, migration and home to contextualise my foci and introduces Asian American literature as a genre, as well as my approach to analysing it as a source of understanding of the everyday. The analysis section that follows examines the emotional geographies of ‘ageing-in-place’ (Warnes and Williams 2006) in three parts. First, I explore how the novel narrates experiences of ageing and dementia. Secondly, I focus on storytelling as a significant home making practice. Finally, I focus on the content of this storytelling as a narrative articulating the transnationality of home and belonging in older age. In each part, I explore how the novel constructs an understanding of ageing, through its commentary on home making, as an intergenerational (Hopkins and Pain 2007), cultural (Phillipson and Ahmed 2006), and emotional (Oliver 2016) process entwined with migration. It is the latter understanding - of ageing as a process entangled with our affective life – that, I would argue, is currently being neglected within studies of migration and older age. As Grecco and Stenner (2009) argue more generally: emotional subjectivities continue to be obscured within the social sciences, in spite of their significance to how everyday life is lived.

## Ageing, migration and home

Over the last decade there has been increasing attention to issues and experiences of ageing by gerontologists and migrationists studying labour and retirement migration in Europe (e.g. Warnes and Williams 2006) and immigration in the US (e.g. Lamb 2002; Zhou 2012), since:

‘ethnicity and race have a profound influence on the ageing experience, whether it be as a consequence of expectations for old age, and preferred lifestyles, intergenerational differences, living arrangements, family supports, the use of ethno-specific health and social services, or the problems of racism and discrimination’ (McDonald 2011).

Much of the emerging literature in this field has focused firstly, and understandably, on issues relating to social welfare, marginalisation, and inequality, since ageing migrants include some of the most disadvantaged and socially excluded older people (e.g. Phillipson and Ahmed 2006). A second focus of the literature is the transnationality of ageing that migration engenders, ‘a new kind of ageing in which the dynamics of family and social life may be stretched across different continents and across different types of societies’ (Phillipson and Ahmed 2006, 160), giving rise to transnational care (Baldassar 2007; Lamb 2002). Neither of these dimensions of transnational ageing are central to the experiences of the elderly Chinese American mother (Luling) and her daughter (Ruth) that Amy Tan depicts as a central characters in her novel *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*. Nonetheless, transnational ageing is a useful framework to explore here, since questions of belonging do not disappear for elderly Asian Americans, even if legal citizenship restrictions have been overcome

(Purkayastha et al 2012), and may involve material or intangible connections to the homeland that impact upon ageing subjectivities.

The relation between home and migration has been much explored over the last fifteen or so years (e.g. Ahmed et al 2003). Processes of ageing, including the renegotiation of social identities, as well as everyday corporeal experiences of the ageing, have an impact on how older people understand and practice home (Gardner 2002; Walsh and Näre 2016). Though migration may expose the fiction of the nation, most migrants do not abandon a ‘homing desire’ (Brah 1996). The focus on desire is significant here as, like others, Brah is situating the notion of ‘home’ within our emotional lives. For Yuval-Davis et al (2006, 2) too, an emotional dimension is central to notions of belonging, since belonging is not only about citizenship but also identity, ‘about emotional attachment, about feeling “at home.”’ For many scholars intrigued by notions of home in the contemporary world, diasporic literature has provided a productive starting point for analysis. As Nyman (2009, 10) argues, ‘By focusing on stories of mobility and identity construction, diasporic writing delves into the globalized world of transnationalisms, hybridity and mobile identities’. Yet social scientists have been slow to embrace the study of fiction. The next section explores Asian American literature more specifically and outlines my approach to the analysis of Amy Tan’s novel *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* within this wider genre, putting forward an argument for social scientists interested in emotional subjectivities to recognise the opportunity fiction provides us for insight into everyday lives.

### **Asian American literature and diasporic fictions**

Fiction by Chinese American women is recognised as a distinctive sub-genre of Asian American literature with which it shares certain preoccupations with ‘family, home, community, origin, loss, dislocation, relocation, racial differences, second generation Americanisation and assimilation, identity destabilisation and reformulation’ (Lim 1997, 292). Nonetheless, heterogeneity is a feature among Chinese American women writers, since they speak from different social locations in terms of class, gender, and generation, and with different agendas: political, historical, fictional and autobiographical. Born in America in 1952, as the daughter of a Chinese couple who migrated in the late 1940s, Amy Tan is a second-generation member of the Chinese diaspora (Huntley 1998). The cultural complexity of her upbringing resonates with the wider experience of second generation Chinese Americans who may be bilingual and for whom neither ‘Chineseness’ or ‘Americanness’ can be straightforwardly claimed (see also Louie 2001): being Chinese by heritage, but not by residence; American by birth, yet ethnicised, racialised and minoritised within America. Difference across generations is played out repeatedly in Amy Tan’s novels, appearing as a source of tension in mother-daughter relationships. This conflict is one of the strongest thematics found more generally in fiction by Chinese American women (Lim 1993), alongside: the acknowledgement of cultural roots in China and Chinese myth (Ong 1999); Talk-story (Huntley 1998; Tsiu 1989); language (Chen 2000); and translation (Cutter 1997); all of which are also apparent in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*.

Creative works can be understood as a vehicle by which Chinese American writers characterise their sensibilities as members of a minority group and their experience/practice of home, belonging and identities in diaspora. In spite of being

constructed by an individual author, novels are cultural texts and reveal narratives that articulate and shape wider cultural meanings. In academic and media commentaries on her work, Tan is often grouped with her predecessor Maxine Hong Kingston, and their work is said to speak of a *doubly marginalised* position within America of Asian women. However, Tan's novels have attracted criticism from literary theorists and social scientists (e.g. Aitken 2008, Huntley 1998, Wong 1993) for a dichotomy they set up between China and the US. The temporal distancing Tan employs by setting the mother's narratives in pre-revolution, pre-occupation China leads to a depiction of an intensely patriarchal, oppressive and rigidly codified society, while the difficulties of Asian immigration in America are mostly obscured. Yet, more optimistically, Lowe suggests there are signs of a transforming understanding of ethnicities within Asian American diaspora literature, with latter efforts that take into account its intersections and active cultural construction (Lowe 1991, 27). Lowe is commenting a decade before the publication of *The Bonesetter's Daughter* so does not include any analysis of this text specifically, but my analysis of this later novel suggests it, too, is more complicated, constructing essentialist narratives of belonging-as-cultural-inheritance, while also highlighting cultural production through storytelling practices. Although it is necessary to consider Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter* with reference to a wider genre of Asian/Chinese American writing, I do not suggest here that a single fictive work is in any sense a representative account of Asian/Chinese American experiences. Indeed, in interviews Amy Tan (2001b) herself resists the homogenisation of this genre and places her writing as part of a more personal identity quest: "I guess I've always been searching for who I am through who my mother was, but I don't think I write about Chinese American culture."



Methodologically, I am especially interested in the complex knowledge produced and represented by fiction in relation to the *emotional* geographies of people's everyday lives: the embodied, situated and emplaced emotional lives that rarely appear in social scientific accounts of ageing and migration (see Oliver 2016). Sharon Krummel (2014) has convincingly demonstrated, in a previous issue of this journal, that the analysis of literature offers considerable potential for increasing our understanding of women's emotional and embodied experience of migration. There is also a long-established effort to engage with fiction within the social sciences, some of which has productively engaged with themes of migration, postcolonial displacement, and diasporic identities (e.g. Jazeel 2003; King et al. 1995) and this resonates with a wider interest in storytelling (see Cameron 2012) and a broader interest in narrative accounts, biographical interviewing, and oral histories among those studying migration (e.g. Gardner 2002; Halfacree and Boyle 1993; Thompson 1999). In terms of how we might approach a novel, poststructuralist notions of language encourage the disruption of boundaries between fact/fiction by recognising that language is always historically and geographically situated. Indeed, Goellnicht (1997, 340-51) suggests that this is imperative in studying Asian American fiction 'as theoretically informed and informing rather than as transparently referential human documents over which we place a grid of sophisticated Euro-American theory in order to extract meaning,' since 'these texts problematize not only the text-context division but also the theory-narrative fiction division; they recount and interrogate, are shaped by and shape, history and theory'. Within Human Geography, there is a tradition of approaching literature in such a way, rather than as a separate order of knowledge that maintains an objective/subjective, real/imaginative dichotomy (e.g. Daniels and Rycroft 1993, 461). Respect for the textual construction of the fictive novel is

essential to establish a critical dialogue between the text and the researcher, and to understand the *particular* way it constructs imaginative geographies of place (e.g. Cresswell 1999).

### **The emotional geographies of home in older age**

In many Chinese American women's texts, a desire to ensure ethnic continuity is played out across generations through the mother-daughter dyad. This is the case in most of Tan's novels (the exception being *The Hundred Secret Senses* in which an elder sister takes on this role), where mothers are figured as the single most powerful influence of China upon their daughters (Heung 2000; Shear 2000; Xu 2000). Huntley (1998, 37) argues:

‘At the emotional center of Amy Tan's novels is the archetypal older woman – the Crone or the Great Mother, as she is sometimes called – who embodied the history of a family or a people, and holds within herself the ancient wisdom and speech of her community. In myth and religion, as in folklore and popular culture, the Great Mother represents growth and fertility and nurturance, even as she dominates and overwhelms, possesses and devours.’

In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the relationship between Luling and Ruth is central to its representation of the two inter-related themes I am concerned with here - ageing and home – and the emotional dimensions of these. The contemporary story forms two thirds of the book (the first and final sections) and is narrated from the perspective of Ruth. From this we can learn much about the negotiation of ageing in

relation to the identity intersections and structural locations of the ageing person and their caregivers. The central third of the novel is Luling's life-story. Since the mother characters in Tan's novels feel anxious at the unfamiliarity of their daughters with their Chinese heritage (Xu 2000), storytelling practices become a part of their everyday life and central to their relation with their daughters. *The Bonesetter's Daughter* is no different in this regard - the practice of storytelling is prompted by older age and highlights a cultural sense of belonging and identification as actively constructed – and I explore this in the second part of the analysis. In the final section, I turn to the content of the story itself, as an indication of the transnationality of home in older age. Throughout the analysis, ageing is figured as an intergenerational, cultural, and emotional process in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*.

### ***Ageing, home, and the mother-daughter dyad***

The novel narrates experiences of ageing, especially living with dementia, from the perspectives of the two main characters, Luling and her daughter Ruth. Tan provides the reader with insight into the embodied and emotional dimensions of ageing through the diagnosis of Luling's dementia and the transformations in familial relations that result, including discussions surrounding Ruth's decision-making in respect to parent care. The mother-daughter dyad is significant in this representation of ageing as an intergenerational process. In this section, I consider how the narrative Tan constructs resonates more universally with our understanding of ageing in contemporary Western societies, yet also highlights particular challenges relating to cultural norms and sensitivities among Chinese Americans.

Within *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, Tan also reflects upon how a daughter experiences her mother's ageing and how this might transform the mother-daughter relationship that has been so central throughout her fictive exploration of Chinese American experience more widely. The first part of the novel provides us with insight into daughter Ruth's life and, perhaps tellingly, it's not until some forty pages later that she visits her mother. When Ruth finds her mother confused on the day of the doctor's appointment, her emotion is strongly embodied:

'Ruth felt a twinge in her chest. It quickly grew into an ache. She wanted to embrace her mother, shield her, and at the same time she wanted her mother to cradle her, to assure her that she was okay, that she had not had a stroke or worse' (Tan 2001a, 52).

Likewise when the doctor confirms Luling's symptoms indicate dementia and the MRI scan suggests shrinkage in parts of the brain consistent with Alzheimer's, Ruth 'felt her stomach had been punched' (Tan 2001a, 60). While Luling continues to complain and 'intrude' upon Ruth's own family life, so that the narrative resonates with the mother-daughter conflict trope in Asian American literature, Ruth now recognises her mother's *fragility* and feels protective, later comparing her with a baby bird. The idea that intergenerational tension across the mother-daughter dyad might be diminished with ageing marks a distinctive move away from the conventions of this genre.

Later, from her life-story written six years previously, we later learn that Luling herself was already starting to notice and worry about early symptoms of her memory loss:

'Towards the end of her life, Great-Granny had thoughts that were like crumbling walls, stories without mortar. A doctor said the inner mind was cold and her pulse

was slow, a shallow stream about to freeze. He advised foods with more heat. But Great-Granny only grew worse. Precious Auntie suspected that a tiny flea had crawled into her ear and was feasting on her brain. [...] Yesterday, when I could not remember Precious Auntie's name, I wondered if a flea had run in my ear! But now that I am writing down so many things, I know that I don't have Great-Granny's disease. I can recall the smallest details even though they were long ago and far away' (Tan 2001a, 139).

By this point in the novel the reader is already aware of Luling's diagnosis of possible dementia, undermining her self-reassurances. Dementia is often poorly understood by those experiencing and witnessing it, and Jones et al (2006, 11) suggest that among Asian Americans, 'beliefs regarding the disorder [Alzheimer's disease] may be influenced a least as strongly by folk wisdom and culturally acceptable partial truths as by scientific information'.

The doctor's examination is a key scene in the novel in this respect. Tan articulates through Ruth that Luling 'is *not* like other Chinese people.' Luling speaks with British-accented English that she acquired in Hong Kong. Ruth describes it as 'choppy talk' because the pronunciation and vocabulary had not changed in fifty years of living in the US, and considers it the reason Luling frequently fights with others. Although Luling attends a hospital with mainly Asian doctors and patients, the doctor and nurse speak Cantonese, rather than Mandarin, so the assessment is made in English. Ruth, in denial about the extent of Luling's confusion, finds herself wanting to protest:

'Her mother had not even understood the question! Of course she hadn't. She had always depended on Ruth to tell her what people meant, to give her what they said from another angle' (Tan 2001a, 57).

Luling's segregated life means that she shares the linguistic isolation that is more common for Chinese American seniors, reliant on services in China Towns, who experienced downward mobility and/or continued poverty upon immigration to the US (Purkayastha et al 2012). Nonetheless, it is acknowledged by scholars of ageing that access to accurate healthcare assessments and care can be made more difficult for Asian American elderly by a relative scarcity of culturally sensitive and linguistically able specialist practitioners (Jones et al 2006). Yet, in coping with dementia, 'ethnic matching' may still be insufficient since specialised training is necessary to help practitioners find the appropriate way to discuss these issues with their patients: 'doctors whose Chinese backgrounds allowed them to overcome the language barrier still might hesitate to raise the subject of dementia because they know that its Chinese name, "Chi-Dai," also means "silly," "stupid," "idiotic," and "retarded" (Jones et al 2006, drawing on Huang et al). Due to the stigmatisation of mental illness, as well as cultural acceptance of memory loss, Asian Americans are unlikely to receive a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease until they are in the later stages of the disease, making treatment less effective (Jones et al 2006, 12).

The intergenerational, cultural, and emotional dimensions of ageing are also evident in Ruth's dilemma about how best to care for her mother. In the context of an ageing US society, parent care has emerged as an important issue more widely, but may be experienced differently by Asian Americans. In *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, we are told Ruth feels 'uneasy, distracted' (90) and 'empty and anxious' (91) when she can't visit her mother. While Luling is looked after by her aunt for a week, Ruth starts to clear and clean her house, discovering the extent of her mother's collecting and hoarding of junk and even food. It is Ruth's partner who suggests Luling move to

an assisted-living residence, offers to pay for it (although this later becomes unnecessary when Ruth finds her mother's investments), arranges a visit, and comes up with a plan to deceive Luling, whose 'Depression-era' sense of economy is shared by other residents (277), by pretending she has been invited to stay free of charge in a five-star hotel because her house is at risk of a radon leak. His role is therefore to voice a pragmatic, rational, individualistic white American solution for the middle classes: "She'll require more and more care, and she can't do it alone, and neither can you. You have your work and a life too, and your mother would be the last person to see you give that up for her sake" (Tan 2001a, 271). In contrast, Ruth remains sceptical of the elderly care business and its 'concept-sanctioned forms of happiness,' but allows herself to be persuaded that twice-weekly takeaway will counteract the lack of Chinese food on the menu, given that Art is offering with this choice the chance for them to become a family again. Her Chinese aunt questions her decision, prompting Ruth to reflect momentarily on her dilemma:

"Ruth was ashamed that her aunt saw her as neglectful, uncaring...she felt unsteady about her intentions. Was this really the best solution for her mother's safety and health? Or was she abandoning her mother for convenience' sake"

The character of Gaoling represents values associated with traditional notions of Asian families – reciprocity and sacrifice – that persist mainly in stereotypes, while Ruth represents the dilemma of the second generation responding to shifting norms of elderly care among Asian American communities. However, it is important to note Seo and Mazumdar's (2011) research that explores how multigenerational living arrangements were unpopular with Korean-American elders who were instead living independently in small apartments, suggesting that these changes are not always driven by the 'Americanisation' of the second generation children.

While this section has explored the ‘unhomeliness’ of ageing, the next section explores how practices of storytelling in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* are key to the re-making of transnational homes in older age, as well as the intergenerational and emotional transmission of culture and belonging.

### ***Home making and practices of storytelling***

*‘But it must be something that should have been remembered... otherwise ... why did a person write it down?’ (Tan 2001a, 142).*

In order to deepen our understanding of the fictional expression of ageing and how it plays out relationally and intergenerationally through the mother-daughter dyad of Tan’s *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, this section examines in more detail the relationship between Ruth and Luling, focusing on practices of storytelling. As a result, this part of the analysis explores the relationship between transnationality and culture through attention to ‘herstory’, as a practice involved in the transmission of cultural belonging and home from one generation to the next.

Typologies of transnationalism often highlight the physical and frequent material cross-border mobilities of people and objects, obscuring the significance of ‘transnational imaginaries’ that sustain diaspora. Transnational belonging, home, and identities, while often based on intangible and abstract connections, also unfold through grounded practices of everyday life. In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, this is brought to our attention by the centrality of storytelling as a discursive process within which belonging may be simultaneously created, sustained and understood. ‘Talk-



story', referring to the intimate spoken stories told between women, especially mothers and daughters, is widely recognised as a feature of Asian American women's writing (Huntley 1998). Tan herself suggests she developed her own gift for storytelling from continued childhood exposure to fairy tales, bible stories and her father's sermons (Willard 2001). Even before the publication of *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, storytelling was recognised by literary scholars as both a central and explicit feature of Tan's writing. Huntley (1998, 15) argues that storytelling takes on multiple functions for the characters within Tan's earlier novels as: 'a device for shaping their histories and making coherent sense of the significant events of their lives ... a means of keeping the past alive and building a bridge between it and the present, of transmitting cultural codes and rituals, of subtly educating their daughters, and finally of somehow imprinting the essence of their selves on the next generation.'

Within *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, however, Tan departs from convention by reconfiguring the motif of talk-story into a written story. Luling's memoir tells of her life in China from girlhood, until she leaves for America. She gave a copy of this story to Ruth who, unable to read the Chinese, placed it in the 'to do' draw of her desk and forgot about it, but the text resurfaces when Ruth clears her mother's possessions from her house. Prompted by the new sense of urgency resulting from her mother's illness, Ruth employs a translator to rewrite the story in English for her. Part II of the novel is this story. Each of the chapters in this section are named and have the corresponding Chinese character printed above: heart, change, ghost, destiny, effortless, character, fragrance. At times, the narrative in English is interspersed with a Chinese word to reflect the impossibility of a full translation.

Tan's choice of a *written* story has significant implications, refusing as it does an automatic connection of Asian women's narratives with oral history or, more specifically, the portrayal of Chinese migrant women as the 'gossiping mothers' of *The Joy Luck Club*, instead presenting the reader with a coherent, determined, linear narrative. Thereby Tan challenges an expectation of Asian American literature and the conventional racialization and gendering of storytelling practices. Furthermore, the written text stresses the importance of Chinese calligraphy, treated as a skilful art throughout the novel and used to elevate Luling and her mother Precious Auntie. The novel has several flashbacks to Ruth's childhood in which Luling is trying to teach Ruth to write Chinese characters, an experience that is difficult and frustrating. At the same time, these occasions highlight how writing is considered a vehicle for the translation of cultural identity between generations:

'Later Luling had Ruth try her hand at the same character, the whole time stuffing Chinese logic into her resistant brain. 'Hold your wrist this way, firm but still loose, like a young willow branch – ai-ya, not collapsed like a beggar lying on the road ... Draw the stroke with grace, like a bird landing on a branch, not an executioner chopping off a devil's head. The way you drew it – well, look, the whole thing is falling down. Do it like this ... light first, then temple. See? Together, it means "news from the gods." See how this knowledge always comes from above? See how Chinese words make sense?' (Tan 2001a, 48-49).

The practice of teaching her daughter also presents an opportunity for Luling to surround Ruth in Chinese thought and expression, using similes that suggest Chinese myth and legend, and attempting to counter the influence of the American television shows that her daughter loves. Ageing leads to this being endangered: although she made extra money as a sign-writer during Ruth's childhood, when Ruth moves in with

her to care for her following the diagnosis of her dementia she observes Luling struggling to write the letters.

The story Luling tells also explains that the act of writing was central to Luling's memories of childhood and relationship with her own mother:

'These are the things I must not forget.

I was raised with the Liu clan in the rocky Western hills south of Peking. The oldest recorded name of our village was Immortal Heart. Precious Auntie taught me how to write this down on my chalkboard. *Watch now, Doggie*, she ordered, and drew the character for 'heart': *See this curving stroke? That's the bottom of the heart, where blood gathers and flows. And the dots, those are the two veins and the artery that carry the blood in and out.* As I traced over the character, she asked: *Whose dead heart gave shape to this word? How did it begin, doggie? Did it belong to a woman? Was it drawn in sadness?*

And Precious Auntie flapped her hands fast: *A person should consider how things begin. A particular beginning results in a particular end'* (Tan 2001a, 135).

Therefore, although older age, bringing with it the prospect of memory-loss and death, is a prompt for storytelling in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the stories reconfigure and remember earlier storytelling that was central to Luling's mothering practices in Ruth's childhood, as well as Luling's own experience of being mothered by Precious Auntie in China. Luling's mothers' words are in italics throughout to indicate that she is signing, having lost her voice in a tragic incident.

The stories require translation, an additional trope that is used throughout *The Bonesetter's Daughter* to highlight not simply linguistic variation, but also generational and cultural difference. As described in the previous section, Luling has difficulty with the doctor's questions during her assessment since they speak

Cantonese rather than Mandarin. Furthermore, the idea of distance between Luling, as first-generation migrant, and Ruth, as American-born, becomes evident when Ruth cannot easily translate her mother's story into English:

'Ruth had tried to decipher the pages. Her mother had once drilled Chinese calligraphy into her reluctant brain, and she still recognised some of the characters: 'thing,' 'I,' 'truth.' But unravelling the rest required her to match Luling's squiggly radicals to uniform ones in a Chinese-English dictionary' (Tan 2001a, 14).

The symbolic implication of the failure to translate is loss: a failure of linguistic and cultural context-sharing between generations, and therefore the absence of reconciliation (Cutter 1997). Mr Tang a college professor who translates the story for Ruth is, therefore, a vital character for the plot. He not only helps Ruth to come to know her mother's past but, in doing so, re-humanises the trope of the mother figure by way of his understanding. As a result, Luling's storytelling is an (extra)ordinary gift to her daughter of a sense of belonging: to family, culture, and place. The next section explores more closely the narratives of belonging and home that Tan constructs for the ageing Luling in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*.

### ***The transnationality of home in older age***

In this section, I explore in more detail the content of the stories Luling tells in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, focusing on Tan's construction of the meaning of home and belonging for Luling as she writes her memoir in older age. The memory loss of

dementia is often accompanied by a stronger recall of earlier memories and for Luling this temporal shift is also a spatial one: the stories that emerge are of a childhood in China, highlighting the transnationality of home and belonging in older age. This is perhaps unsurprising since, across her many novels, Amy Tan's 'mother' characters frequently claim an essential Chinese identity, authenticated by their storytelling of pre-migration experiences. Indeed, Aitken (2008, 446) suggests that Amy Tan is part of the 'old' wave of diasporic migrant writers, whose novels appeal strongly to white Western readers due to their juxtaposition of 'an Orientalistic Chinese ethnic imaginary on the one hand, with the modernity of the assimilated Asian-American model minority on the other'. Of particular concern to Aitken (2008; also Wagner 2004), is that the mother characters in Amy Tan's novels resist the evident hybridity of their daughters subjectivities through narratives of their own belonging that reify ties of blood and nation and are deemed to enrich their daughter's 'cultural inheritance'. Certainly, this is the case in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* where Tan's construction of Luling's life-story presents us with vivid descriptive passages connecting her viscerally to China landscapes:

'Our family sometimes went to the Mouth of the Mountain for temple fairs and operas. If we travelled by road, it was only about ten kilometres from Immortal Heart. If we walked through the End of the World, it was half that distance but a more dangerous way to go, especially in the summertime. That was when the big rains came. The dry ravine filled, and before you could run to the cliffs, climb up, and cry out, 'Goddess of Mercy,' the gullies ran by like thieves, grabbing you and whatever else was not deeply rooted in the soil' (Tan 2001a, 141-142).

Through Luling's narration of an intensely corporeal relation to a local Chinese landscape, it is clear that Tan is highlighting the significance of an embodied understanding of place in marking attachment and belonging to a Chinese homeland

for first generation US migrants. Tan's own knowledge, like that of many second, third and fourth generation Chinese Americans is based instead upon her mothers' memories, mediated images in American culture and, especially, her visits to contemporary China (see also Louie 2001) through which she claims her own Chineseness when interviewed: '...suddenly Chinese, the minute I touched China... I felt connected to that history and landscape, and to everything that formed my family and their past' (Jaggi 2001); 'standing on that land made me feel that I was connected viscerally to history, to my parents past and what had shaped them' (Tan 2001b). However, in each of her novels and, not least, in *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, an imagined Chinese homeland offers cultural reconciliation for the second-generation characters. For Luling, it is also central to a process of re-identification and imagined return during older age.

The storytelling of Luling's childhood in China is a necessarily circular journey: a trip into the past in order to return to the present, based in America, through which China becomes a repository of history and memory. Indeed, it is noticeable that the idea of return is completely absent from this fictive account, in contrast to the way in which many older labour migrants negotiate ageing and home (see Walsh and Näre 2016). This is surprising given the name Tan chose for Luling's village – Immortal Heart (see above) – since this evokes circulatory mobilities, rather than the permanency of exile or diaspora. Nonetheless, return does feature in the novel through the central place given to Luling's memories and storytelling.

Within Luling's storytelling, we can also find a second evocative motif relating to identity, belonging and home: a metaphor of bones. Bones, so prolific in

the China narratives discussed above, suggest the potential for healing, due to their medicinal properties, and thereby symbolise the potential for reconciliation for the family (Tan 2001b). The Bonesetter's daughter is Precious Auntie, mother to Luling and grandmother to Ruth, and her family's occupation gave them this name:

'For nine hundred years, Precious Auntie's family had been bonesetters. That was the tradition [...] That was their inheritance. They also passed along the secret location for finding the best dragon bones, a place called the Monkey's Jaw. An ancestor from the time of the Sung Dynasty had found the cave in the deepest ravines of the dry riverbed. Each generation dug deeper and deeper, with one soft crack in the cave leading to another further in. And the secret of the exact location was also a family heirloom, passed from generation to generation, father to son, and in Precious Auntie's time, father to daughter to me' (Tan, 2001, 143).

Notions of ancestry and inheritance are thereby made explicit in Luling's storytelling and establish an understanding of identity and 'Chineseness' as fixed, timeless, and reliant on descent. Tan explains how she has used the metaphor of the excavation of bones in the text: 'It's so much like how we learn about our own parents, our ancestors and origins, We discover pieces and then lose them, and so much remains a mystery' (Jaggi 2001a). She incorporates a fictionalised tale of the 'Peking Man' archaeological find, in which the bones became symbolic of the strength and longevity of China's history and culture. Finally, the story of the novel, rather than the life-story Luling presents, involves Ruth finding out her family name. While the books' opening passage suggests it might be forgotten since Luling writes– 'there is one name I cannot remember. It is there in the oldest layer of my memory, and I cannot dig it out' – on the final page it is revealed by Ruth piecing clues together with her aunt:

'Ruth began to cry. Her grandmother had a name, Gu Liu Xin. She had existed. She still existed. Precious Auntie belonged to a family. Luling belonged to that same

family, and Ruth belonged to them both. The family name had been there all along, like a bone stuck in the crevices of a gorge' (Tan 2001a, 305).

More than any of Amy Tan's previous novels, *The Bonesetter's Daughter* humanises the first-generation migrant mother, establishing an understanding of her parenting choices and celebrating not only the strength of her cultural identity but also her capacity to preserve her story of belonging. Even in older age, Luling is able to anchor her daughter, providing her with strength through the enduring and intimate connections of 'bone' through her storytelling. She thereby gains a hugely significant role in enabling her daughter to work through her own emotions towards her American partner and the meaning of their life together. Indeed, by finding her own voice, Luling also restores her daughter's voice so that her annual experience of becoming mute, symbolic of her lack of communication with this partner (but also hauntingly resonant of her grandmother), disappears. The idea that Ruth is finally listening to her mother's stories and, furthermore, that the stories she tells of belonging have the potential to be such a transformative force for her daughter is, I would argue, an empowering vision of older age and the role of older migrant women in home making.

## **Conclusion**

The varied experiences of Chinese Americans are missing from critical debates on ageing (with the exception of Purkayastha et al 2012) and we know little about how ageing transforms their everyday lives. Since ageing is a central theme in Amy Tan's



*The Bonesetter's Daughter*, it thereby allows insight into the home-making practices and imaginaries of Chinese-Americans in older age, at a point when research based on interviews with a representative sample of this community is not yet available. However, my choice to analyse a single novel resonates with a wider shift to value stories for their texture and specificity, 'a turn toward thicker descriptions and understandings of the small' (Cameron 2012, 577). Stories may provide an understanding of the broader social and cultural processes which they articulate, but Cameron (2012) is convincing in her review of broader trends that suggest we should resist an automatic scaling up from the 'heterogeneous iterations' of smaller stories. Perhaps instead, as social scientists interested in transnational ageing, we might look towards fiction for its more-than-representational qualities and its affective possibilities in relation to its readership, including ourselves (ibid. drawing on Haraway). Doing so, might lead us to take more seriously the questions that diasporic fiction raises, as well as limits it reveals in our existing understanding of diversity and subjectivity in older age and the way in which this informs everyday practices of transnational ageing.

While gerontologists increasingly recognise that we need an understanding of ageing that recognises cultural variation in the meaning of older age and everyday practices in later life (Phillipson and Ahmed 2006), empirical research has not yet fully elucidated the emotional and embodied dimensions of ageing subjectivities. It is not clear that this is an inherent failure of other qualitative methodologies and I suspect not (especially given other contributions to this special issue: Baldassar et. al.'s analysis of the affective kinning process between migrant care-workers and elderly care-receivers is based on a life history approach; Näre's interviewing with Gujaratis

is designed to access ageing as thoroughly embodied). It might be then, rather, a resistance among scholars more broadly to engage with the ‘emotional turn’ of the social sciences. Either way, the analysis of fiction can provide a substantive and theoretical counterpoint to existing accounts of migrant ageing by allowing us, perhaps forcing us, to highlight the emotions through its storytelling about belonging. Beyond the cultural variations seen in this particular novel then, the article has demonstrated the importance of understanding ageing as an intergenerational process that is informed by the intersectional identity of both a first generation ageing person and their caregivers in relation to structural and hierarchical notions of belonging and citizenship. Consequently, it is evident that a gerontological focus needs to include the emplacement of ageing subjectivities through practices of home and cultural belonging that are material and emotional. In doing so, it is anticipated that ageing can be rethought.

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