

**FIVE**

**GLOBETROTTING QUEERNESS: PATRICIA  
POWELL'S *THE PAGODA***

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In his article “Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies” (1997), David Eng calls for an expanded notion of queerness. Eng begins his discussion by noting that queerness refers to not only identities or practices that exceed the norms of compulsive heterosexuality, but also “traumatic displacement from a lost heterosexual origin” (p. 32). The implication of estrangement or distance from a heterosexual center indicates conceptual affinity between queerness and diaspora. Hence Eng suggests that these two concepts are integrated together to make one critical frame. The new framework will emphasize that diasporic subjects and queer subjects share the experience of “impossible arrivals”: to both, “to ‘come out’ is precisely and finally never to be ‘out’ - a neverending process of constrained avowal, a perpetually deferred state of achievement, an uninhabitable domain [between origin and destination]” (p. 32). As a consequence, Eng’s discussion opens up the possibilities of a sexual critique of geopolitical belonging and a diasporic critique of heteronormativity. Expressing dissent to a given fixed order, whether sexual or geopolitical, the integration of queerness and diaspora serves as a critical tool which reveals what the concept of home limited by national and sexual boundaries cannot accommodate. In other words, the new theoretical framework enables us, to use Eng’s words, to “rethink home and nation-state across multiple identity formations and numerous locations” (p. 43).

In this essay, I discuss Patricia Powell's 1998 novel *The Pagoda*, using the queer, diasporic framework that Eng's analysis provides. I will begin this essay by showing that during Lowe's migration from China to Jamaica, the novel's protagonist embodies exile from home in its triple meaning – domestic space, national homeland, and our sexed body. As a result of this embodiment, Lowe's failure to belong to Jamaican society as a Chinese immigrant becomes inseparably intertwined with his failure to discontinue his male gender masquerade and to reclaim his female identity. Showing that Lowe's effort to return home rather reinforces his exile from home and makes it ever unreachable, *The Pagoda* demonstrates the untenability of the concept of home that supposes it as a fixed, static origin. Narrating the story of a queer diasporic woman who cannot be accommodated by the restrictive politics of belonging, Powell's novel then reveals the limits of the concept of belonging underwritten by heterosexual gender binaries and national boundaries. In the last section of this essay, I discuss the significance of the Pagoda. As a shifting, flexible locale that creates emancipatory possibilities for queer, diasporic subjects, the Pagoda always stands in incomplete form.

### **Home: Domestic, National, and Sexual**

A brief summary of the novel is necessary to get our discussion started. *The Pagoda* describes the life of Lowe (Lau A-Yin), a Chinese woman who emigrates to Jamaica in the mid-nineteenth century. Born a girl in China but raised as a boy by his Chinese father, Lowe grows up, uninhibited by patriarchal restraints, until puberty strikes. To see that his dream of having a son is frustrated, Lowe's father hurriedly marries Lowe to an old crippled man in the village. But Lowe tries to escape the forced marriage by taking a ship bound to the Caribbean. After the emancipation of slaves in 1834, the plantations in the Caribbean are in dire need of cheap labor to replace the former slaves, and the high influx of indentured laborers from India and China meets the need. To leave China, however, Lowe dons male clothing, because during the time,

China prohibits women's immigration. Unfortunately, Lowe's female identity is disclosed in the middle of the voyage by a man named Cecil, who trafficks laborers from Asia and Africa to Jamaica. After repeated rapes by Cecil, Lowe arrives in Jamaica, pregnant with his daughter Elizabeth, and with the male clothing permanently attached to his skin. Cecil opens a grocery shop for Lowe and takes a big share of the profit for himself, and to cater to the local demand to see a conforming, respectable shopkeeper in the neighborhood, Cecil sets up a fraudulent marriage between Lowe and Miss Sylvie. A dark skinned woman who passes for a white, Miss Sylvie has terrible secrets from her previous marriage: In fear of the disclosure of her true racial identity, she sent away the three brown babies who were born to her and her white husband, and when her husband became suspicious, she strangled him to death. Cecil found out these secrets, however, and to prevent him from making news of her crimes, Miss Sylvie yields to Cecil's pressure to marry the Chinese shopkeeper. Meanwhile, Lowe's shop prospers, and a family life begins with Lowe and Miss Sylvie as man and wife, and Elizabeth as their lovely daughter. Thus begins our protagonist's immigrant life and gender masquerade, which continue for thirty two years. Lowe experiences emotional turmoil everyday inside himself, but on a surface level, everything looks fine.

The novel begins, as Lowe wakes up in the middle of the night to write a letter to his estranged daughter Elizabeth. He starts to write "wildly, feverishly" (p. 7), but his letter is filled with negative sentences, such as "I am not your father like you think," "it is a long story, full up of a lot of deception, a lot of disguises," and "I am not what you think" (p. 8). Lowe does not write any positive sentence revealing who he is. He simply states that it is "almost impossible to reveal all of who he is" because "there is so much" (p. 9).

Lowe's letter writing is violently interrupted, when the news of the destruction of his shop arrives. The shop burned down to ashes,

because someone set fire to it. The central symbol of Lowe's thirty two years of "successful" immigrant life is completely gone. So is Cecil, who was sleeping in the shop. Having lost Cecil and the shop, Lowe is symbolically returned to his first day on the island, when he had to start a new life from scratch. But the first chapter of the novel closes, without providing a clue to who burned the shop for what purpose. Accordingly, a number of questions arise: Who is Lowe? What has he done in Jamaica? Why has his relation with his daughter gone awry, and why does he fail in his business?

A complete answer to these questions is not given until the last pages of the novel. Only there, he completes the letter that he begins to write in the opening pages of the novel, and readers are able to develop a full picture of Lowe's life history. In the finished letter to his daughter, Lowe writes:

Ask anybody, I been writing you this letter for years. But maybe the shop had to burn down first, maybe Cecil had to die first, maybe Dulcie had to leave and Miss Sylvie, maybe I had to lose every damn thing first and fall down so low and so deep that I almost hit bottom before I could finish writing it finally. (p. 245)

That the novel's two ends are marked by Lowe's beginning to write a letter and his finishing it, respectively, suggests that the novel portrays Lowe's penitence for his life, which he says is "never lived fully" but "only halfway, only some of the time, and always sheltered, always through some kind of veil" (p. 245). The central thread of the novel's plot leads to the larger thematic of the novel: that is, from his penitence of the half lived life, Lowe develops an understanding of why he fails to live a full life, "not one that his father or Cecil had routed out for him, but one he could weed out for himself" (p. 39).

Lowe's penitence of his veiled life begins, as he reflects on his girlhood in China and his turbulent relation to his Chinese father. About his father, Lowe says:

A man with too many visions. A man full up of fantasies.  
A man who infused fantasy into a girl. A girl full up of  
filial piety. A girl wanting to remove the screen of shame  
from a father's face. Screen of hopelessness. A girl  
wanting her father's affection forever. A girl full up of her  
father's fantasy. A girl pregnant with her father's dreams.  
A girl with a bloated head full of dreams. A restless girl  
thinking of expeditions. (p. 139)

In this passage, Lowe thinks about his first diasporic experience. In Chinese patriarchal society where enjoying the "father's affection forever" is granted only to boys, and girls cast "the screen of shame" over their fathers' faces, Lowe's father forces his daughter to recognize her sex as a lack, failure, or atrophy. By bringing up Lowe as a boy, therefore, he exiles his daughter from her female body. In this regard, the devastating event that takes place shortly after Lowe turns thirteen – marriage to a crippled man in payment of a family debt – does not indicate his first displacement from home. The marriage certainly banishes Lowe from his native home, but this spatial displacement from parents' home to husband's home adds to and exacerbates the alienating experience that the young Lowe already experienced in her body: women's sexual diaspora from the ideal origin of maleness.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This idea is loosely based on Luce Irigaray's argument of "the repressed female imaginary" (p. 28) in her book *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Within the male economy which reduces female sexuality to the complement of male sexuality, women's sexuality remains an undiscovered, archaic civilization that cannot be understood or represented by the logics of the patriarchal Western traditions. Irigaray thus calls for the recuperation of the long lost home of women's pleasure, which is marked by contiguity and

After he is alienated from his home, he turns his gaze abroad, in search for an opportunity to return home. I emphasize that at this point, Lowe still tenaciously holds onto the stable notion of home. Put differently, our protagonist is dissatisfied with one home that Chinese patriarchal society provides but hopeful that somewhere outside China, he will find a better home. However, his desire to return home by leaving home is brutally frustrated at the edges of the nation. To make the meaning of this claim clearer, we need to take a brief look at the historical condition of China during the second half of the nineteenth century. In his study of the history of western penetration of China from 1839 to 1900, James Hevia (2003) shows that since the first Opium War (1839), a number of European powers – British, French, German, American, Russian, and later Japanese – vied in China to secure imperial hegemony. And China's attempt to keep its national integrity intact vis-à-vis the sheer pressures from these western countries resulted in the laws regulating women's immigration. Because patriarchal society imposes on women the responsibility of protecting the nation against the contagion of alien races, and because "women's sexual agency, our sexual and our erotic autonomy have always been troublesome for the heteropatriarchal state" (Alexander, 1997, p. 64), Chinese women are bound in the domestic sphere at the moment of crisis. To elude the iron clasp of the national father, therefore, Lowe puts on male clothing and gets on board a ship to Jamaica. He resents his father's negation of his female body, but he repeats his father's violence on his body by starting male gender masquerade. By initiating the transpacific journey, he meant to return to the home of his sexed body, but he is pushed further away from it.

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multiplicity. But, as my discussion makes it clear later, I ultimately diverge from Irigaray, by disavowing the stable, unchanging notion of home that remains to be discovered and also arguing the impossibility of returning to the origin.

During the voyage to Jamaica, our protagonist is particularly anxious about his gender identity. He does not know what to do with his male clothing. He would like to avoid the fate of lifelong gender disguise, but revealing his female identity en route not only means subjection to sexual violence and harassment by shipmates but also turns him into an illegal immigrant, making his dream of finding a new home in the West Indies impossible. When our protagonist agonizes over this difficult question, Cecil breaks through the layer of male clothing and rapes Lowe. As the only conniver of Lowe's female identity in Jamaica, Cecil uses his knowledge as leverage by which to control Lowe's life. The white man concludes that to keep Lowe's male clothing serves his interests better and prevents him from shedding it off upon arrival. The provisionary male clothing that the Chinese woman puts on for the journey becomes undetachable garments. In this regard, Cecil continues the role that Lowe's Chinese father played previously: Considering Lowe's female identity as an obstacle to legitimate belonging to a nation, the two men are bonded together to deepen Lowe's sexual exile.

Before we move on to the next section, I'd like to add a few more words about Cecil. In an interview, Powell says that Cecil is not only a "violinist" but "a protector" and that "Lowe is not simply a victim" (1998, p. 191). This view of Cecil is reiterated in the novel when Lowe says, "he [Cecil] wasn't the kind of man one could easily box up into a category" (p. 144). In this statement, Lowe remembers that he was saved from backbreaking labour at the plantations, because the white man gave him "the keys to the shop and the bag of money to use as capital" (p. 13). He also remembers that Cecil saved him from sexual exploitation. As Cecil says, "You, the only Chinese woman on the island....Miss China Doll. Miss China Porcelain. You know what them do with the Chinese women in British Guinea. In Cuba. In Trinidad? Bring them to whorehouse" (p. 99). However, I would like to emphasize that Cecil's white authority and the protection he provides hoodwinks Lowe and breeds a false sense of belonging. Cecil's exploitative aspects are

irrefutably clear. He is a rapist, first of all, and even the seemingly benevolent act of setting up a shop for Lowe turns out to be a manipulative, self-serving device. Cecil complains to Lowe:

During all this, Cecil complained. He wanted to know where the profit was from the capital he'd given Lowe. One hundred pounds. If, like a damn fool, he was allowing those nigger people to eat him out and what kind of blasted Chinaman was he, anyway. What kind of blasted China businessman. This he said with laughter clacking through his false teeth. (p. 97)

It is not until Cecil's death that Lowe realizes that Cecil served as his Jamaican father and carefully dictated his life down to every detail. For example, when Omar shows Lowe Cecil's land that stretches over two hundred and twenty-five and a half acres, Lowe finally sees "the way Cecil had thought through and arranged it for all of them so they could be comfortably tied there" (p. 119).

Lowe pays such a high price for Cecil's "protection." Wearing a false mustache in the shop and single-mindedly preoccupied with moneymaking, our protagonist falls to deep political slumber. Thinking that he is a respectable middle class man and that things look, by and large, okay, our protagonist gradually loses awareness of his triple exile from home.

### **Falling to Slumber: Further Away from Home**

Privileged by Cecil's protection, Lowe does his best to resemble the respectable citizen that Jamaican society approves. His Chinese racial identity calls into question his belonging, but owning a lucrative business and leading a traditional, heterosexual domestic life, he seems to have found a new home outside home. Put differently, his economic comfort and his shelter protected from the threats from the dissatisfied black population instigate in Lowe the "mindful forgetting" (p. 36) of his exilic condition. However,



Powell's novel shows that Lowe's sense of belonging becomes quickly outdated by the social changes that sweep Jamaican society after slave emancipation.

In the opening pages, Powell portrays the large scale emigration of Chinese indentured laborers into the West Indies. They are meant to replace former black slaves:

He [Lowe] didn't know, then, that the ship was full up of stolen Chinese. That thin men spare as bones were piled in like prisoners and stowed tight with the chests of tea and silk, for sale to the highest bidder in the West Indies. He didn't know then that that was common accord, that not long before, the Negro people had met a similar fate and that now it was big business again, for the sugar estates were there devastated, broken down in financial ruin. Emancipation had come. Nobody was working for nothing anymore. And so the planters, to save face, had now turned their gaze east, looking for the cheapest labor they could find. (p. 17)

This passage is very important for our analysis of Lowe's life, because his arrival in the island as a yellow slave testifies to the moment when contradictory sites emerge, as "indigenous forms of work and cultural practices encounter the modern capitalist economic modes" (Lowe and Lloyd, 1997, p. 13). The recent work of Marxist thinkers demonstrates that capital, instead of using abstract labor and homogenizing labor forces, as Karl Marx suggests it does, rather profits by differentiating and manipulating laborers according to their racial, gender, and national locations.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd argue, "one of the distinct features of global restructuring is capital's ability to profit not through a homogenization of the mode of production, but through the differentiation of specific resources and markets that permits the exploitation of gendered [and racialized] labor within regional and

Portraying Jamaican society's restructuring after the emancipation of the slaves and foregrounding the increasing presence of the Chinese population in the Caribbean, *The Pagoda* brings into sharp relief these contradictory sites in which new social formations based on the needs of the post-emancipation transnational economy consistently revise the old notions of citizenship, normativity, home and belonging. In the midst of these social transformations, our protagonist cannot afford to sustain the pre-emancipation notion of a well-assimilated citizen.

Meanwhile, indentured laborers from Asia quickly improved their social position in the Caribbean<sup>3</sup>, with the result that "by the late 1880s, the Chinese had become identified as a largely small trader class within the interstices of the colour/class social hierarchy of Caribbean plantation society, jostling side by side with other ethnic groups in the same middleman occupations: the Portuguese in British Guinea, many Indians and Creoles" (Lai, 2004, p. 16). Consequently, the migration of labor force from Asia during the nineteenth century led to a third tier racial hierarchy, with Asian immigrants situated as middlemen under the white elites and above

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national sites." (p. 20). For more detailed discussion, see "Introduction" to *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*.  
<sup>3</sup> In "'A spirit of Independence' or lack of education for the market? Freedmen and Asian Indentured Labourers in the Post-Emancipation Caribbean, 1834-1917" (2000), Pieter Emmer analyzes the causes of Asian indentured laborers' quick success. According to him, "the plantations showed a sustained and high rate of economic growth for the years from 1750 to 1850" (p. 153). And the two groups' different responses to "the most reliable employment sector in the region" (p. 161) after emancipation in 1834 separated the Asian workers' relative high performance from the freedmen's relative low performance: the freedmen left the plantations as quickly as possible, to lose chances to earn market wages, and the Asian indentured laborers took advantage of the continuing high productivity of the plantations.

the settled population that comprised the black and free colored people. The quick, remarkable advancement of the Asian workers' status, however, provoked the settled population's anxiety and resentment. As Edna Bonacich claims, "the establishment of Chinese grocery shops that extended throughout the island prior to 1911 had brought vividly to the attention of the entire population that these once humble laborers were displacing the native Jamaicans as the shopkeepers of the country" (1973, p. 590). The settled population's antagonism to the Chinese eminence in the economic sphere shows us just one facet of what Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd call the "discoordinated structure of civil society" (p. 14). As the old cultural practices based on slave exploitation are replaced by transnational capital's exploitation of racialized labor from the outside of the national boundaries, the old concept of who belongs to the West Indies becomes highly contested. In other words, while our protagonist grooms his false mustache and checks his grocery inventory, practices that draw upon the pre-emancipation notion of the assimilated, normative citizen as a heterosexual middle class man, Jamaican society is moving forward fast, to demand a completely new concept of belonging.

Caught in the breach created when post-emancipation capitalism cannot fully dictate the pre-emancipation social relations, most of the Chinese characters in Powell's novel refuse to think seriously about their contested social standing. Lowe's friend Kywing is a good example. He thinks that it is tactically prudent to be apolitical. When Lowe suggests the idea of the Pagoda to Kywing, for example, the latter dismisses it as too an ambitious plan. Kywing instead emphasizes "we just come here to catch we hands, sell a few things, catch we hands. Some of us going back home, as soon as the contract finish" (p. 40). Equating belonging with national origins, and viewing himself as a temporary visitor bound back to his native homeland, Kywing thinks anachronically within a pre-emancipation frame, living in a post-emancipation age.

Unfortunately, for the past thirty two years, our protagonist has not been much different from Kywing. Despite the increasing anti-Chinese sentiment, Lowe believes that he would receive an exceptional treatment: “though it was common accord for them [black population] to burn down the Chinese people’s shops ...and to clear his people out of the country, he never thought they’d turn on him” (p. 32). Yet, the destruction of the shop rudely awakes Lowe from his long political slumber. He is made to question his long held notion of belonging. If the shop serves as the economic pillar that supports his understanding of the middle class man as the normative citizen, its disappearance causes the shopkeeper to confront the difficult question of belonging head on. And Cecil’s death, another important event that accompanies the destruction of the shop, provides an impetus to Lowe’s development as a new political subject in the West Indies. As I argued earlier, Cecil serves as Lowe’s Jamaican father, and under the auspice of the white man, Lowe is allowed to ignore his diasporic condition. After Cecil’s death, however, Lowe begins to look at his host country with naked eyes not shrouded by the white man’s protection. Right after the fire, he realizes that “the Negro people must have secretly despised him for being there, secretly they must have envied him and his shop and his relationship to Cecil and Miss Sylvie” (p. 13). He suddenly confronts himself as an “outsider, foreigner and newcomer (p. 31)” to his host country.

Over the course of the narrative, Lowe grows to understand complicated ways in which Jamaican society reorganizes its social, political, economic structures in tandem with unprecedented racial and social formations after the official end of slave exploitation. In the novel, his improving knowledge of emancipated Jamaica gives rise to a desire to build a Pagoda, a Chinese meetinghouse or cultural centre. I will discuss the significance of the Pagoda more in detail in the last section of this essay. At this point, one interesting episode deserves our attention for what it reveals about Lowe’s developmental trajectory. Initially, Lowe’s idea of the Pagoda is not well received by his Chinese friends. The following

passage describes Mr. Heysong's response to the proposed building of the Chinese centre:

He [Mr. Heysong] scrutinized Lowe with watchful eyes, and to break up the silence Lowe told him about the center. The man said nothing, he only wheezed into the gloom and jerked up his head now and again as if wondering what the hell all of this was about. Lowe was crushed. It was not what he expected, though in truth he knew not what he'd expected. Still, the man could have been more forthcoming. They were, after all, compatriots. He felt self-conscious and foolish all of a sudden and wish he had worn the mustache, and not this flowery hat but the solemn black felt. Did the man know they had just burned down his shop? That he had nothing now, just pure dreams? Did this man know that he no longer felt comfortable in his clothes, in his skin, that the persona that had once clothed him, shielded him, had come undone and there he was now, just unraveling? (p. 174)

Lowe is disappointed by his friend's lukewarm response to the centre. More specifically, he is disappointed by Mr. Heysong's naïve, anachronistic thinking. Lowe's recent experience taught him that Chinese workers in the Caribbean could not simply be a replacement of the former black slaves. Instead, the Chinese worker is deeply embedded in the Caribbean cultural space that keeps shaping itself in response to the political, economic needs of emancipated Jamaica. Lowe knows that belonging is no longer determined by nation states or the concept of indigeneity. Insightful as it may be, Lowe's idea is less interesting than the way he expresses it. Revealing his objection to Hyesong, Lowe wishes that he wore "the mustache, and not this flowery hat but the solemn black felt." Here, we observe that Lowe's understanding of the Chinese location in Jamaica is expressed in gendered terms. Confronting the destruction of the shop, which once shielded him and enabled a comfortable life on the island, Lowe loses what he

has thus far conceived as an important pillar of his belonging to Jamaica: his middle class identity. And this loss leads Lowe to question the other important pillar of his belonging – that is, his male identity. The last sentence of the previous passage is significant in this context. Lowe pays attention to his gender. He understands that if the shop can disappear over night, it means that “the [male] persona that had once clothed him, shielded him, can come undone.” After the loss of the shop, Lowe rethinks his long held definition of the assimilated Jamaican citizen as a “middle class” “man.”

Lowe’s inner monologue takes us back to David Eng’s discussion with which I opened this essay. Lowe’s meditation in the previous passage reveals that if the triple meaning of home coalesces in Lowe’s body and if his exile is defined not just geographically but sexually, as I argued in the first section of this essay, Lowe’s attempt to formulate new belonging in Jamaica involves a simultaneous exploration of his geographic liminality *and* his sexual liminality. What the previous passage suggests, then, is that our protagonist’s acceptance of his queer identity provides a language with which he expresses his deconstructive criticism of the restrictive politics that define home as a return to the native country or a heterosexual centre. This reading invites us to ask Eng’s questions again: How does Lowe’s queering of his sexed body expand its critical function? What does Lowe’s queer identity suggest about his transnational location and diasporic condition? These questions lead us to an examination of two important female characters: Joyce and Miss Sylvie.

### **Impossible Return Home**

The first description of “fabulous Joyce” (p. 58) is strategically located in the novel to follow Lowe’s lonely dinner in a busy restaurant. In this restaurant, Lowe feels he is “so badly in need of community and of love” (p. 56). In the ensuing scene, Lowe remembers his first kiss with Joyce:

Then one day when she leaned over to indulge him in confidence, she clamped her wide-open mouth on his lips. At first he struggled, and the pressure of her hand on the back of his neck was strong and kind. His breathing by this time had stopped, his stomach turning into metal, and his tongue lay logged in the wide-open door of her mouth, while hers darted and burrowed, and slivered and cornered. He worried about Elizabeth, who might awake from the fuzzy edges of sleep, and about the villagers who might descend on the shop at any moment, herded by Mr. Fine. He worried about the dribbles of saliva leaking from either his mouth or hers, he couldn't quite tell, and he opened his eyes slowly, peering out at the solemn world behind her head. He saw that the light had changed, that the sun was softening, and that shadows were more diffused. He saw the quivering edges of his mustache from the corners of his eyes. (p. 59-60)

About this scene, Powell comments that Lowe is “aroused” by Joyce’s kiss<sup>4</sup> (Smith, 1996, p. 325). And to keep in line with the author’s self-explanation, critic Jason Frydman also argues that Joyce’s kiss “draws Lowe out of his trauma-induced sexual blockages” (2011, p. 106). What I think both Powell and Frydman assume in their comments is that Joyce appeals to Lowe’s female body and his homosexual desire. Homosexual, not only because of

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<sup>4</sup> Powell explains, “one of the protagonist’s customers who had been trying to seduce him/her for a while finally seizes the moment and kisses Lowe. And I think he is aroused. For in his/her own way, s/he had been going along with the seduction. But can you imagine Lowe’s terror? The fear of whether people will see, the woman’s husband, the villagers – hence Lowe’s furtive glances at the world passing by outside, the incredible attention to detail that occurs on the page at that very important moment. (...) There is the fear that the kiss could go further and his/her “true” identity be realized” (Smith, 1996, p. 325).

Joyce's later confession that she has always known Lowe's female identity but because of Lowe's response to his sexual arousal: to see that his female body responds to Joyce, Lowe gets terrified by the forbidden homosexual desire. Quickly recognizing the threat that the transgressive kiss poses to his social status, Lowe stifles his arousal by looking at his mustache and retrieving his masculinity.

The kiss scene is important, because Joyce draws Lowe's attention to his long suppressed female body and sends subtle invitations to be a woman. It seems that Lowe responds to Joyce's invitations to a certain degree: Lowe narrates, "he couldn't pinpoint exactly when he began to discover that he liked things of flowing silk and neat lines, when his appreciation for subtle colors instead of dark solemn ones crept up on him...he found he was no longer comfortable in his netted merino [that binds his breasts]" (p. 165-6).

Lowe's relation to Joyce does not develop any further, but Miss Sylvie picks up where Joyce left off, for the purpose of returning Lowe to the lost land of womanhood. It is not accidental that since the destruction of the shop, our protagonist rethinks his domestic arrangement with Miss Sylvie. Indeed, the question of discontinuing his male gender performance necessarily indicates that he puts an end to his heterosexual domestic life. Perceiving that the end of her fraudulent marriage is looming on the horizon, Miss Sylvie suggests to Lowe that they go to a new place where they can start afresh and Lowe can become a woman. Yet, Lowe knows that he cannot become a woman. He does decide to stop his male performance and unbinds the netted merino. Surprisingly, "they were still there" (p. 166), but he realizes that is as far as he can go. After living as a man almost all his life, the home of the female body disappeared beyond all bounds. Furthermore, for the lack of chances to learn about the patriarchal expectations of an attractive woman, he cannot act as one: he cannot picture himself "smothering inside one of Miss Sylvie's tall frocks with the



billowing hips, not to mention the frightful corset that Omar and Dulcie would have to fight to get him into” (p. 193).

Lowe’s understanding of his distance from a heterosexual origin proceeds further. In the following, he reflects on Miss Sylvie’s proposal:

What she wanted he did not know but he could well imagine: a place where she’d be free from her memories, from the past, a place that would absolve her somewhat, wash her hands clean. But there wasn’t such a place, that he knew; look at how far he had come, so many thousands of miles, running and running, and look how he’d brought everything intact. (p. 194)

Lowe’s refutation of Miss Sylvie’s suggestion can be explained in Eng’s terms: Miss Sylvie’s dream of Lowe’s womanhood draws upon such notions as sexual origin, definite arrival and final destination, but these notions run contrary to the queer and diasporic protagonist’s suspension between origin and destination. By questioning Miss Sylvie’s idealized assumption of final arrival, therefore, Lowe advances his queer, diasporic critique of the restrictive, categorizing notion of home: as his sexual identity is displaced from a heterosexual center and moves away towards something else, without becoming a fixed identity within the grids of compulsive heterosexual normativity, he is moving from one location to another on a geopolitical map, without ever arriving at a final destination.

It must be clearer by now why Lowe’s relation to Miss Sylvie ultimately disintegrates. In Lowe’s mind, his wife’s fantasy of lost womanhood plays those of her Chinese father and Cecil, just in a different chord. If the two father figures commit violence upon Lowe’s body by negating his femininity and thus exiling him from his sexed body, Miss Sylvie now threatens him by assuming that the body beneath his male clothes is still feminine and that the

home remains reachable after the many years of diaspora. Therefore, the narrator cries repeatedly in horror, “who is to say she wouldn’t fold up her fantasies into him and turn him further into something he wasn’t, as his father had done and then Cecil?” (p. 114). Saying that “there isn’t such a place,” Lowe disavows all of the father figures. Our protagonist declares the impossibility of returning home, to embrace his liminality.

### **Queering Home**

I’d like to conclude this essay by discussing the meaning of the Pagoda. In Powell’s novel, the Pagoda serves as the central symbol of Lowe’s articulation of a queer, diasporic identity in Jamaica. Critics have interpreted the building of the Pagoda in particular and the novel *The Pagoda* at large as expressions of Lowe’s establishment of a new identity in post-emancipation Caribbean society. For example, focusing on the representation of the Chinese shops in West Indian fiction, Ann-Marie Lee Loy (2007) argues that Powell’s novel portrays the formation of a Creole West Indian national identity established in and through the resistance of the forces of colonialism. Similarly, reading *The Pagoda* as a narrative of “Lowe’s assimilation to black creole culture” (Frydman, 2011, p. 105), Jason Frydman maintains that *The Pagoda* embodies “an anticolonial Jamaican nationalism grounded in queer intimacies” (p. 106). In Frydman’s reading, “the Pagoda becomes a model for a national dialectic of memory in which assimilation to the creole majority and cultural pluralism shore one another up” (p. 108).

When these critics consider the Pagoda as “a metaphor for how diaspora and displacement can enable new connections, affiliations, and identities” (Chin, 2007, p. 541), they suggest more or less a neat resolution to Lowe’s struggle to formulate new belonging in Jamaica. Yet, I want to be cautious about this interpretive tendency. I stress instead that Powell’s novel is less interested in the final product than a queer, diasporic deconstruction of the heterosexual, static notion of home creates than in the working of the

deconstructive tool and emancipatory possibilities that it generates. One way that *The Pagoda* demonstrates this point is by emphasizing and challenging the Chinese orientation of the centre. The following description of Lowe's vision of the Pagoda makes it clear that he understands it as a place for and by Chinese people on the island:

Further in the future, he saw this club, this benevolent society writing its own newspaper, reporting on events affecting Chinese both here and abroad. There would even be an obituary section and another announcing weddings and births, and still another reporting on those murdered in cold blood by the warmongering people, on those whose shops they looted and burned down, on those opening up new businesses. He would call it ... And he thought for some time, until he arrived at the title of one of his father's short stories. The Pagoda. Later he would add one or two extra buildings, a home for the aged, maybe even a kind of sanitarium for the ones maimed on the estates, those who couldn't work, too poor to pay the passage home. Maybe even a cemetery, where Chinese people could visit their ancestors, instead of those public plots where the government dumped poor people. (p. 41)

Not surprisingly, the idea of the Chinese meetinghouse does not sit well with Elizabeth's husband, who is a member of the Native Defense Team. When Lowe suggests that his daughter Elizabeth runs the meetinghouse with him, Elizabeth's husband says, "at first is farming and such. Then next thing shop, and before you know, a little shop in every blasted corner you turn. Now is school and property. Soon you have my people working for you on the estates, cleaning for you in the big house....What next, eh?" (p. 73). The Afro-Caribbean man perceives that the Pagoda works with, not against or beyond, the existing three tier racial hierarchy. To the man's challenging question, our protagonist fails to present a satisfactory answer. This failure suggests that the Chinese queer

immigrant's belonging to Jamaica requires ongoing work of intersectional coalitions, which amplify their emancipatory possibilities in and through "linkings of localities that take place across and below the level of the nation-state" (Lowe and Lloyd, 1997, p. 25). When viewed in this light, it is significant that the readings that do not fully consider the limits of the Pagoda's Chinese orientation end up resuscitating the idea of returning home. Sheri-Marie Harrison (2009) claims, for instance, "the Pagoda establishes a tradition that will preserve his culture in a foreign land for his descendants and those of his fellow Chinese....The letter that is meant to help Elizabeth discover who he is leads to Lowe's recovery of his female self, Lau A-Yin."

*The Pagoda* criticizes the restrictive notion of home limited by essentialized national, geographical boundaries, but it refuses to portray the final result of successful deconstructions. Instead, it emphasizes that our protagonist's queer, diasporic journey is an ongoing process and that the Pagoda itself needs to be deconstructed. The Chinese centre is significant for what it will accomplish, as opposed to what it has already accomplished.

In this essay, I have shown that Lowe's journey after the destruction of the shop is synonymous with his queering of the triple meaning of home. The journey is successful to a certain degree, but Lowe's project requires unceasing critical scrutiny. I conclude this essay, by presenting Lau A-Yin. Lau is certainly more queer than Lowe but is not quite out there yet. He is "suspended between an in and out of the closet" (Eng, 1997, p. 32).

I stay here with my hair grown way down to my waist, but thin and without any life, with Miss Sylvie's dresses on my back, with her colors on my nails, with her rouge on my cheeks, her jewelry on my fingers and throat. I don't go out much, health is too shaky, plus how to go out like this. The people would put me in asylum. Though am only just being me for the first time in my whole

entire life. People don't like surprises. They don't like truth. (p. 240)

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