

3-15-2022

Le Gout Qui Reste: Cultural Identity and Belonging in Ook Chung's Kimchi

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<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.7801>

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Le Gout Qui Reste
Cultural Identity and Belonging in Ook Chung's *Kimchi*

by
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
French

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Portland State University
2022

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ABSTRACT

The emphasis placed on the questioning of identity in Québécois society since the Quiet Revolution of the mid-twentieth century continues to this day. Whereas this search for a specifically Québécois identity was originally cast in terms of an Anglophone/Francophone divide, the influx of migrants from around the world to the province since the 1970s has rendered such a simplistic, binary discourse impossible. The population of Québec in general and of Montréal in particular is now multicultural; visible minorities now constitute twenty-six percent of the Montréal populace. While most migrants in Québec are able to find a niche in Montréal in which they feel they belong, be it within a community of their fellow countrymen or the province's society at large, others are unable to feel a part of the society of their adopted land.

One such migrant is Kim, the narrator of Ook Chung's *Kimchi*. Born in Japan to Korean parents and raised in Québec, he does not feel completely connected to any of these three countries. In this thesis, I explore the means by which he systematically deconstructs traditional defining factors of identity (race, language, ethnicity). Although he accepts that race, language and ethnicity have a bearing on one's sense of self, particularly in the form of cultural identity, he rejects the argument that they are in themselves sufficient to offer a sense of belonging. I argue that he focuses instead on the creation of community between individuals, irrespective of these factors.

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural Identity and Community

in

Kimchi

La place d'Armes is perhaps the most historically significant square in Montréal. Situated in Vieux-Montréal, the remnants of the original European settlement on the Island, it owes its name to the fact that it was the site of the first battle between French settlers and the native Iroquois. Bordering it to the north is the Basilique de Notre-Dame. Within the imposing Gothic Revival façade of the church, it is not the usual biblical scenes that are represented in the stained glass windows, but instead the foundation and early history of the city, focusing understandably on the importance of the Catholic Church. Next to the Basilica is the oldest structure in the city and its first educational institution, the Vieux Séminaire de Saint Sulpice. Beyond these buildings are further reminders of the French heritage of Montréal: cobblestone streets, cafés, markets, signage uniquely in French. Seeing this view, one would be apt to mistake it for a square in France.

Turning to the left, however, one quickly realizes that, to paraphrase Dorothy Gale, “on n’est plus en France.” Seeing two skyscrapers, small as they are by contemporary standards, the North American identity of the city is immediately apparent to the viewer. The preeminent position of the Anglophone elite prior to the *Révolution tranquille*¹ is made clear by the names of the two buildings: New York Life Insurance

¹ *Révolution tranquille* refers to the political period in Québec between the mid-1950s and late-1960s during which, in addition to a rapid secularization of Québécois society

Building, the first skyscraper built in the city; the Aldred Building, which marked the arrival of the Art Deco style of architecture in Montréal.

Turning once more to the left, in the space between the New York Life Insurance Building and the Banque de Montréal diagonal to it, the viewer is shocked once again by a building, this time further afield, both geographically and metaphorically. Atop an otherwise mundane edifice, two Chinese pagodas are perched, complete with religious iconography. The sensation of confusion and geographical unease created by this unexpected sight is not negligible. Venturing to investigate what kind of building this could be—a Daoist place of worship? a Chinese community center?—one is disappointed to discover that, instead of sheltering some exotic and exciting secret, it is only a Holiday Inn.

In many ways, this short walk of less than half a mile gives an accurate impression of the city as a whole. Schizophrenic, combining disparate elements of many different styles and cultures into one organic if not totally cohesive whole, torn between different poles to such an extent that, instead of giving in to any one, it constantly swings between them all. Walking in the streets of Montréal, one hears French, English, Jòual, Kréyòl, Italian, Chinese—sometimes all within a few meters. While it may be jarring to people from other areas, this linguistic *mélange* is taken in stride by Montrealers who think nothing of beginning a sentence in English and finishing it in French. As discussed elsewhere, the culture of Montréal is the *nec plus ultra* of cosmopolitanism. With a

and devolution of political power from the Federal to Provincial Government, much legislation was passed giving the French language a predominate place in the province's society.

population that is overwhelmingly bilingual in French and English and a relatively large proportion of visible minorities (26% of the population of the city), more than 200 languages are spoken (Statistics Canada), each with its own particular culture. While it might be expected from such a situation that ethnic conflicts would inevitably arise, this is not the case: unlike in France, the immigrant communities of Montréal cohabit peacefully.

The diversity of Montréal is cherished and celebrated, as illustrated by a recent advertising campaign in the Métro showing cartoon-style figures of people in all different colors with the caption “On est tous montréalais.” The literature of the city, of course, does not ignore the ethnic mosaic of the city, but instead celebrates and even exaggerates it. If literature is taken to be an expression of the *zeitgeist* and common concerns of a group at a particular point of time, the modern *Montréalais* condition can be qualified as a search for identity which simultaneously rejects the traditional labels of ethnicity, race and language. While some *Québécois de pure laine* writers continue to follow the paradigm of *Maria Chapdelaine* and write on topics of family, religion and the history of the province’s Francophone majority, the largest group of contemporary writers interrogate identity, most notably in relation to groups historically marginalized in Québécois society: women, homosexuals and, above all, migrants.

Migrants are disproportionately represented in the literature of the city and of the province as a whole (although the two are nearly synonymous due to the fact that half of the province’s population lives in the Greater Montréal Area); while visible minorities are only estimated to represent 9% of the province’s population (SC), anecdotal evidence shows that the proportion of writers from migrant backgrounds is greater than this.

When, during the 2003 *Salon du livre de Paris*, the Québec delegation included six members from migrant backgrounds, a flurry of articles appeared in the French press touting the literature of Québec as a “nouvelle internationale littéraire” because of the importance accorded to these authors by the Québécois literary establishment. This situation does not have an equivalent in France.

As a literature of the New World, Québec literature as a whole can arguably be characterized as a “migrant literature.” The first writers active in the province were the explorers who, like Jacques Cartier, kept diaries of their experiences and impressions of the newly-discovered land. Following a long period of literary silence, the literature of the early 1900s was largely concerned with the industrialization of the province and the migration of the hitherto rural population towards the urban centers, where they were forced to negotiate the challenges posed to traditional values by the modern world. Concurrent migration from Francophone Europe also left its mark on the literature of this period, although the vast majority of “migrant literature” in the strictest sense appears in English. As the century progressed and migrants from other areas of Europe arrived in greater numbers (most notably Jews from Central and Eastern Europe and Italians), these communities too contributed to the evolution of literature in Québec. Although several notable authors migrated to the province during this time and, like Marco Micone and David Homel, began writing in one of the two official languages, many others, not possessing the fluency required to write literature in these languages, wrote instead in their native languages: It was during this period as well that Montréal became a center of Yiddish culture and literature, hosting such authors as Harry Wolofsky and Ida Mazè (Chartier 314).

The *Révolution tranquille* of the mid-twentieth century and the stress it placed on the Francophone identity of the province created a large demand for skilled workers fluent in French. In response to this, Francophone immigrants from throughout the world arrived in Québec. It is during the period from 1959 to 1983 that most migrant writers of visible minority backgrounds, among them Mona Latif-Ghattas and Marie Cardinal, came to the province. Because they were already French speaking, they were able to record their experiences and difficulties integrating into a North American Francophone society as members of ethnic minorities and, due to their command of the language, were able to publish soon after arriving. These authors, noticed by critics and the reading public almost immediately, heralded a new trend within the literature of Québec: that of migrant writing in the strictest sense. The next wave of migrants, those from Haiti, will continue to explore these topics, but focusing to a greater extent on the creation of a new life within the society of the Province, hindered greatly by their racial identity. Dany Laferrière, author of *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer*, is not only the best known of this group, but is indeed among the most renowned writers currently active in Montréal and is a large presence in the cultural scene of the province.

The revision of the Immigration act in 1967 and the continued liberalization of Canadian immigration in the 1970s led to a subsequent increase of migration to the province from non-Francophone areas, and thus a diversification of the province's society which continues to this day. Notwithstanding the fact that many of these migrants had not mastered the French language before their arrival, this group has produced many authors who publish in French. Although Asian immigration during this period increased greatly, this community has not produced a significant number of writers, unlike the

Latin American populations who also arrived during this period. Nevertheless, authors of Asian origin do exist, albeit represented to a far lesser extent than any other group. Only Ying Chen, Aki Shimazaki and Ook Chung have published more than one work to critical acclaim. None of these authors migrated from countries where French was an official language and thus they are not native speakers of the language.

Japanese-born Aki Shimazaki's novels retell, in slightly different ways and from different points of views, a single plot, which takes place in Japan with Japanese characters. Although themes of migration are touched upon in her work, she does not directly explore this and it is thus debatable to what extent she can be qualified as a migrant writer. She is perhaps best described as writing "littérature ethnique" according to the taxonomy of migrant literature and related concepts that Chartier outlines in "Les Origines de l'écriture migrante" (305).

Ying Chen, born in Shanghai, is indisputably a migrant writer as defined by Chartier and the best-known of writers of Asian origin in Québec. It was not until her arrival in Québec that she began writing in French, which she had previously studied in China. In her work, she explicitly writes on issues of migration (*Lettres chinoises*) and cultural integration and the migrant's schizophrenic, double-sided characters (*Querelle d'un squelette avec son double*). Her characters deal directly with problems of cultural identity and migration, as well as the troubles that arise from the interaction between their traditional cultures of origin and that of the adopted country. Because of this, Ying's work is, of the three, that which is most closely representative of migrant literature as a whole.

Between the two extremes of pure migrant literature and literature dealing only tangentially with migration lie the works of Ook Chung. Born in Japan in 1962 to Korean parents, he migrated to Canada at the age of 2. He earned a doctorate in French literature at McGill University after studying in France and Japan. Although couched within metaphors and further obscured by his generally macabre and surrealist style (notably in his short stories and *L'Expérience interdite*), the theme of the migrant's cultural identity is omnipresent in his corpus. Although apparently balanced, his *oeuvre* of two collections of short stories and two novels belies the fact that he is primarily a writer of short stories. This predilection is immediately noticeable in his novels, which, instead of a traditional, chronological presentation of events, Chung divides into sections that are often only tangentially connected and can only loosely be called chapters. This is most clearly seen in *L'Expérience interdite* (2003), in which the narrator and even the form of the text change between sections. Beginning with a fragment taken from the diary of an individual obsessed with and searching for a yeti, the narrative is continued through stories written by writers imprisoned in a cave in the Philippines and then through the notes of Bill Yeary, their captor, who carries out the experiment referred to in the title in an attempt to distill the captive writers' creativity in order to sell it. While there is no common subject tying together the different parts of the novel and a unitary plot is all but absent, together they do present a critique of the commercialization of art and create a complete impression of the circumstances of this experiment.

While more closely conforming to the traditional definition of a novel in that it has a single narrator and takes place in a realistic environment, *Kimchi* nonetheless does not have a single definitive plot, nor do the sections logically follow each other in

chronology or in subject matter. Rather, they are presented as *tranches de vie*, although they are not limited to single events. These individual sections, while not sharing common subjects or following a strict chronology, are bound together within three different parts of the novel which, except for the prologue and epilogue, does follow a chronological order and presents the narrator's experiences of cultural confusion and dislocation in Japan. It is perhaps this structure that is the most salient aspect of Ook Chung's novels, which gives them their particular style and makes them reminiscent of local instead of grand narratives, placing emphasis on individual and discrete realities instead of a larger, shared truth. While the various sections and larger parts of the novels are only loosely connected and do not have a single plot, together they express a single theme; it is the expression of the theme of cultural identity and confusion that is the goal of Chung's writing.

Kimchi is, however, the work least representative of Ook Chung's typical style. Whereas his short stories and *L'Expérience interdite* are macabre and surreal, the general tone of *Kimchi* is much lighter and the plot is fully anchored in the real world in which we live. The large extent to which *Kimchi* is a work of *autofiction* is undeniable due to the numerous similarities between Kim, its narrator, and Chung himself. The question of the effect this has on the reception of the work is a valid one, but it is not the theme of the current thesis and will thus not be explored as such. Instead, I will focus on the treatment of cultural identity in the novel and the narrator's realization that this very concept is devoid of objective meaning since he rejects cultural identity as a means to belonging, finding instead that “[la patrie est] un ensemble de coeurs humains qui recherchent et ressentent la même chose” (Chung 155). As a replacement for the empty categories of

race, nationality and family that promise but are unable to deliver a sense of belonging, the narrator proposes the creation of one's own community, composed of the people to whom the individual has an actual, profound attachment.

The work begins with a history of the narrator, Kim's family's immigration to Canada and a description of the confusion that the narrator lives in due to his lack of connection with either his ethnic Korean heritage or with Japan, the land of his birth. Although Kim experiences constant cravings for *kimchi*, the staple of Korean cuisine, he has only been to Korea once (for two days) and he does not speak the language; although he was born in and has returned to study in Japan, he relates that he is not accepted within mainstream society there because he is an ethnic Korean and thus suffers discrimination in Japanese society; finally, although he has lived most of his life in Canada, his skin constantly marks him as an Other there. Because of the numerous identities he must juggle—an overabundance of identities which, in fact, results in him feeling that he lacks a single one—he feels he is a constant outsider. Furthermore, he feels he has no connection even to his own family because, as he discovers as an adult, his biological father was not the man who raised him. Ultimately, Kim rejects the links to both family and to nationality as empty signs that carry no real value for his identity. It is only through the creation of his own community that his feelings of not belonging and unfulfilment are resolved. The dynamics through which cultural identity is first considered and then ultimately rejected as a solution to the narrator's woes related to identity, to be replaced by the idea of community as a means of belonging, form the subject matter of this thesis.

The first chapter will take up the issue of the narrative of return and whether or not it exists within *Kimchi*. I present Ireland's definition of "narrative of return," as well as the three distinct types that she theorizes. I also discuss Seiler's view that the final and most important journey for a migrant is the return to the country of origin. I argue that, although Ireland identifies *Kimchi* as a narrative of return through writing, it is not truly a narrative of return as she defines it because Kim finds he has nothing to return to.

The question of language and its link to identity is one that the narrator explores both directly and indirectly throughout the text by means of the untraditional transliterations and misleading translations of Japanese words that he provides. This theme constitutes the subject matter of the second chapter. I will show that through this manner of transliterating, the narrator privileges his own personal reality and thereby asserts his identity as an individual instead of that which is imposed on him by outside forces. The third chapter focuses on the issue of writing. Although Kim first sees writing as a refuge through which he is able to escape the feeling of alienation he faces in his daily life, he ultimately rejects this solution, looking instead for a sense of belonging.

Notwithstanding the narrator's rejection of essentialist labels, he does accept that the bonds of community are necessary for his well-being. Although he initially believes that simply being with people of a similar ethnic background could provide this, he realizes that that does not suffice; instead, it is necessary to create one's own community. The means by which such a community is realized, most notably food, drinking and sex, are discussed in the fourth chapter.

To conclude my thesis, I discuss the theme of *métissage* in the text. The figure of the *métis* is omnipresent in *Kimchi* and reaches the height of importance at the end when

the narrator realizes that everyone, no matter their ethnic or cultural background, is a product of *métissage*. I conclude by connecting this worldview to contemporary global developments in literature and culture.

CHAPTER ONE

Return and Belonging

The return to a country of origin has been a common theme in literature since its earliest beginnings in Greece (Homer's *Odyssey*) and the Middle East (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*), although rarely has it been foregrounded as much as it is in migrant literature. Because migrant literature is characterized by the themes of travel and cultural integration, the return journey undertaken by the migrant is frequently mentioned, both as a remedy for and as a further aggravation of his *mal du pays* and the sensation of exile suffered in the adopted country. This voyage is often represented as problematic as it creates further questions about the identity of the migrant, who is neither fully a part of the original nor of the adopted society.

The migrant's condition can be resolved only through a personal coming to terms with his new hybrid identity—that is, by going forward instead of returning. Although characterized as return journeys—voyages *back* to an imaginary (because nonexistent) origin—the empty center of the idealized homeland makes such a return impossible. The country of origin has often changed as much as the migrant, who, because of nostalgia, creates an image of it that is all but completely divorced from the material reality.

Since return to the homeland-as-remembered is impossible, the migrant must depend on his imagination and memories to effect such a return; for the migrant author, this return is at once created and memorialized through writing. In her chapter “Narratives of Return,” Susan Ireland explores the different types of return available to the migrant character in literature. Drawing heavily from Seiler's article on the fictional journeys in Canadian migrant literature in English, Ireland does not question the

importance or validity of Seiler's argument that the return plays a pivotal role in the cultural integration of the migrant in his adopted country. She instead merely identifies what she considers to be the two main types of return, that through memory and that of an actual journey, as well as the importance of the actual act of writing about the return in literature by migrants.

Return through memory "perhaps constitutes the most traditional type of imaginative return, often taking the form of a nostalgic yearning for an earlier time or place" (Ireland 24). Closely paralleling the sentimental connection to an imaginary homeland felt by many immigrants, this involves a Proustian attempt to return to one's childhood through idealized remembering and meditation on an idyllic country of origin. This country does not and, because of the idealizing force of nostalgia, perhaps never did exist. Oftentimes, the countries from which the writers of these texts come are too dangerous for political or other reasons to allow a physical return; it is only through imagination that return is possible. Because they are products of the experience of exile, these texts are often therapeutic and help to assuage the feelings of separation and mourning felt by the migrant. These narratives also have the double purpose of making permanent the personal memories of the author-narrator and the collective memories of the migrant group to which they belong. According to Ireland, this type of return, however, must remain in the realm of the imaginary and does relatively little to heal the physical and emotional rift between the two halves of the migrant's identity. It is an act of mourning for a lost past and only rarely, as in Latif-Ghattas's *Nicolas le fils du Nil*, an act of recovery.

Those migrants capable of making a physical return to their homeland are faced with the reality that they no longer are a part of that country as once they were, as well as with the changes that have occurred since their emigration. As Ireland points out, “[M]any protagonists in the Québécois corpus make the journey back to their native land, only to discover that homecoming is far more problematic than they had imagined” (29). Although they expect to once again see the country of their past as it was before leaving, this expectation is without fail disappointed: even if the country itself has not changed, their memories of it have recast it in an idealized form; and if it has changed, they no longer recognize it as their own country. While some characters in literature are able to complete the migrant’s common dream of leaving their home country to gain wealth and then fully return to continue a life put on hold, most migrant characters in literature, like most real migrants, rarely are able to do this. The return is instead brief, and after it they must go back to their adopted countries. This underscores the previously perceived disjuncture between the migrant’s image of himself as part of his original country instead of that of his adopted country and the reality that he is now more fully a member of his adopted society. While actual return hastens this realization, it does little to enable the migrant to reconcile both parts of his identity and accept his current situation as transcultural.

The process of reconciliation of identity also involves a form of return, but in a metaphorical rather than physical sense, as conceived by D’Alfonso: “Returning. Not looking back. But as one turns the soil. An act of questioning” (qtd. in Ireland 35). This questioning in view of recovery is largely the purpose of narratives of return, as the migrant author is able to exorcize textually the suffering and sense of exclusion he feels

as a migrant. Because the question of writing return is itself often present in narratives of return, frequently due to the fact that the narrator of the text is a writer, the autobiographical aspect of this form of literature is only superficially hidden, if at all.

Although Ireland stops short of explicitly referring to *Kimchi* as a narrative of return, her inclusion of it within a chapter on that type of narrative implies that she considers it to be as such. In the present chapter, I am not questioning Ireland's argument that the text shares many similarities with more traditional narratives of return, in particular the emphasis placed on the act of writing. Nor do I challenge her assertion that

[t]he intensity of [Kim's] sense of homelessness, which leads him to go back to Japan, is reflected in the insistent repetition of expressions invoking a return to origins and the desire to "marcher à reculons vers ma naissance" (walk backward to my birth) ([Chung] 21). (38)

Rather, my point of contention with Ireland's argument is that she fails to explicitly point out that Kim's trips to Japan are *not* returns, as Kim has no country to return to. It is my intention to demonstrate that, because of his lack of any meaningful connection to any country and notwithstanding his desire to realize an identity that is bound to geography, return is impossible for Kim because he lacks a singular origin.

Kimchi is the story of narrator Kim's two trips back to the land of his birth, Japan. Although he was born in Japan, Kim and his family are ethnic Koreans and thus marginal within Japanese society. His father was himself a migrant to Japan, having come after serving as an officer in the Korean army; his mother, Mitsouyo, although born in Japan like Kim, was marked by her Korean heritage and for this reason faced discrimination. To escape this and in order to find a better life, Kim's family migrated to Canada in the early 1970s when Kim was three years old, eventually settling in Québec, where Kim

grows up. After a melancholic adolescence in which he in turn faced discrimination because of his ethnicity, Kim goes abroad to study at a Japanese university in his twenties, during which time he briefly visits Korea, the land of his ancestors. The narrative of this experience constitutes a major section of the book. Thirteen years after returning to Canada, he again goes to Japan as a cultural attaché for the Canadian government. This second journey constitutes another major section of the narrative. These sojourns in Japan and Korea provide him with opportunities to search for his place in the world. Throughout the novel, Kim's approach to the question of belonging evolves: whereas he initially believes that a physical return to the land of his birth can clarify his origin and identity, he later rejects this because his identity is too complex to be simply explained through a connection to geography. He ultimately realizes that he is dependent neither upon his Korean ethnicity nor his Japanese birthplace, but instead the community he creates around himself at any given moment.

Chung's text does share many characteristics with others cited by Ireland, including the voyage back to a country previously inhabited during the *parcours migratoire*, a search for origins in order to better understand one's identity and current situation and the continuing questioning of identity that is the result of such a misguided journey. While correct in her analysis of the narrative of return as a common form of migrant literature and in the particular typology that she establishes, characterizing *Kimchi* as a narrative of return is fundamentally incorrect.

While it clearly fits within the framework of migrant literature due to the author-narrator's history of migration and the underlying theme of identity, Kim's trips to Japan are not a return to a land of ethnic and ancestral origins, but merely a return to Japan, the

country of his birth. The narrator makes little mention of his childhood memories or of any other connection to Japan. Indeed, his ancestry only reaches back to Japan two generations previous to his birth on his mother's side, and his father came to Japan for political reasons after the division of Korea. Further, because of the discrimination faced by ethnic Koreans in Japan—discrimination evidenced by his mother's difficulty finding significant employment in that country due to her ethnicity (73)—his family existed in a permanent state of exile in Japan, even if rooted to it by the birth of children.

The narrator shares his beliefs related to the question of where he belongs in the chapter "Kimchi," the first few pages of which are an extended discussion of his response to the question "À quelle identité culturelle te sens-tu appartenir et pourquoi?" (63). Prior to going to Japan on exchange he himself has no clear-cut response, but he nevertheless discounts Japan as a possibility since "on me reprocherait de ne pas connaître ce pays plus qu'un Occidental, bien que j'y sois né et que le japonais ait été ma langue maternelle et usuelle jusqu'au jour où mes parents ont décidé d'émigrer au Canada" (63). Although he does consider "Korean" to be an acceptable label (although not necessarily either satisfactory or the only possible one), he understands that this can only be justified to a certain extent: "je n'ai mis les pieds dans mon pays ancestral qu'une seule fois et je suis bien le premier à être gêné de ne pas savoir lire le *hangul* [the indigenous writing system for the Korean language]" (64).

Seiler's argument that the immigrant's return to his first country is necessary for him to resolve his identity as a migrant does however hold true for this text, although one must add that Kim had not clearly attached great significance to his first trip to Japan. While it was a return to the country of his birth, it was not "The Return" for him; this

would come only with the short excursion he made to Korea while studying in Japan. Instead of renewing a lost connection to the land in which he was born and thus in some way healing his sense of exile, he realizes that he does not and never did belong in Japan, but that his ancestral homeland is Korea, a country he had not yet seen and whose language he does not speak. His time in Japan was, however, instrumental in this realization: “J’ai compris que j’étais coréen le jour où j’ai découvert que je ne pouvais pas me passer de kimchi [...] C’est au Japon que je me suis aperçu que je ne pouvais pas me passer de kimchi” (63-4). This is not a surprise to him, for he describes Japan upon his first arrival in 1985 as “le pays qui allait être le mien” (39-40): by using the *future proche*, he signals that prior to this he had little attachment to this place, his birth there notwithstanding; it is through the experiences he would acquire during the course of this voyage that such a connection would come into being.

His brief, two-day sojourn to Korea can be argued to constitute a return to his ancestral land, but the Korean language is an impenetrable wall for him. While he is able to find a cassette of the Korean folk song “Arirang” without being able to read Korean and without asking for help (67), he is still unable to feel a part of Korean society. Though he feels “pour la première fois en terre fraternelle” (66), he is still alone, mute because of his inability to speak Korean. Even in his ancestral homeland, he remains outside of society, noticeably marginal, both physically and metaphorically:

Dans la rue, je titubais de bonheur et, après avoir acheté une canette de bière dans un magasin, je suis allé m’installer sur un bloc de parpaing sur la grande plaza devant l’édifice de l’hôtel *Koreana*. Des gens me reluquaient cavalièrement au passage, moi et ma canette de bière, sans se douter qu’un mur nous séparait, celui du langage [...] Combien d’heures

suis-je resté là, comme une statue solitaire, et cependant saoul d'amour pour la grande nuit étoilée de Séoul? (67)

The joy he feels while consuming kimchi and listening to “Arirang” while drunk in Seoul is undeniable. Instead of deriving from it any kind of reconciliation of his schizophrenic immigrant identity, a solution to the identity crisis driving him to question where he belongs, he finds only a false and ephemeral resolution to his anguish. His is a giddy (because childish) joy; he will, upon leaving Korea, deal with the fact that, while he did feel at home in that country, his true home is elsewhere.

His voyage to Korea does bring him to the realization that he is ethnically and culturally Korean . However, Kim rejects the notion that this Korean identity is sufficient to provide a sense of belonging. Although the material realities of culture, tangible or otherwise, offer the individual a centering point because they allow him a way to carry his homeland with him, they must be bolstered by a community that he belongs to. Further, cultural artifacts can be appropriated by members of other cultures and thus lose their symbolic meaning as distinctive marks of a particular ethnic or cultural group.

An example of this appropriation occurs in regard to kimchi itself, the “symbole national de la cuisine coréenne [qui] fait partie de nos cellules et notre sang, de notre identité à nous, la diaspora coréenne éparpillée à travers le monde” (64). An episode that Kim relates about his mother illustrates this. During her adolescence in Japan, his mother Mitsouyo was asked by an old Japanese woman to sell her kimchi. She is at first taken aback and hesitates to respond, thinking she was being insulted. Then, realizing that the woman was sincere, and that she had grown up in Korea because her father was a member of the colonial force, she consented for economic reasons. The fact that the

woman ignored “l’occupation, les cruautés de la guerre, la hiérarchie entre Coréens et Japonais” (69) does not matter to Mitsouyo, who is driven to fulfill this woman’s desire by her own dire poverty. Later, being asked again, she once more hesitates; the old woman, having brought the kimchi home, had been disappointed to find that her daughter-in-law had washed it because of its odor and because “[e]lle a cru qu’il fallait servir le kimchi comme les tsukemono japonais, qui n’ont presque pas de goût parce qu’on les lave dans l’eau salée” (75). By rendering it more palatable to Japanese tastes, the daughter thus destroyed the very essence of kimchi and abnegated its Korean identity. In addition, the fact that not only a cultural outsider but someone directly related to the oppression of the Korean population craves kimchi deprives it of its role as a marker of specifically Korean identity.

Chung’s inclusion of this episode, which is not directly related to the primary narrative of Kim’s travel to Japan, is odd. Although it is Chung’s style to reveal truths about his characters indirectly by showing episodes that happened to them in the past instead of telling about their personalities explicitly, Mitsouyo is never portrayed as a character involved in the primary plot. This episode thus is more revelatory of Kim’s personality and his obsession with kimchi as a symbol of his Korean identity. While he did not experience it directly, this episode profoundly affects him. Nevertheless, this episode also reveals the unspecific nature of material products of culture. Although, like kimchi, they are products of specific cultural circumstances, they only carry symbolic value as representations of culture inasmuch as the subject imbues them with such. They are signifiers of a culture and not the culture itself.

Although Kim notes that “[p]artout, à travers les petites rues obscures et odorantes de Séoul, me parvenait l’odeur du kimchi, telle une invitation familière” (67), the obsession he repeatedly demonstrates with the material aspects of Korean culture shows that it is only these that he clings to, rather than the prospect of living among his ethnic brothers and sisters. He is thus more interested in symbols of his ethnic origin than attaining direct knowledge of this (lost and forgotten) origin. This comes as a near-total change from what the reader expects; the first chapter, “Chinatown,” focuses on Kim’s fascination with the Chinatowns of the world and his feeling of finding in them a form of homeland among exiles: “Je ne savais pas que je m’accrochais à chaque visage asiatique rencontré au passage comme à une parcelle d’un paradis et d’une patrie perdus que je tenterais de recoller comme les morceaux d’une mosaïque” (20). He realizes, however, that he was mistaken in thinking this, ultimately rejecting the idea that a homeland can even exist, much less the simulacra of a homeland that is Chinatown: “Chinatown, cela veut dire à la fois l’exil et l’illusion de la patrie. Comme si la patrie, cela existait vraiment” (238).

While he had previously believed he could find a sense of community by simply being surrounded by other Asians, as in a Chinatown, he realizes that that is not sufficient, returning instead to the country of his birth. When a sense of belonging continues to elude him, he reaches back further, going to the country of his ancestry. In Korea, he becomes surer of his cultural identity, but he does not find a sense of real community. It is the search for a community with which he can connect on a personal level, “un ensemble de coeurs humains qui recherchent et ressentent la même chose,”

rather than the pursuit of the artificial constructs of race or national and geographic claims that will constitute the rest of *Kimchi*.

One determining factor of whether or not a community is viable is language. A community in which the different members are unable to communicate will not survive. The question of language is intimately linked with identity, as language and the ways of thinking that it fosters are culturally determined. Although a shared language is necessary for any fruitful exchange between members of a community, that is not to say that each individual's relationship to the common language will be the same. As discussed in the next chapter, the issue of language is very important for Kim, for whom the French language, a language learned only after migrating and which has no relationship to either the country of his birth or his ethnicity, is the only medium through which he is able to fully realize his identity.

CHAPTER TWO

The Language of Identity

Language and identity are strongly connected. In Québec especially, where the most important labels identifying the subject are “Francophone,” “Anglophone” or “Allophone”—labels which are defined on the basis of one’s native language—one must not underestimate the importance of the question of language, even beyond the official languages of French and English. Newly-arrived immigrants to Québec, Canada and elsewhere in the world add their voices to the linguistic discourse within the framework of literature.

Language plays a large role in the cultural confusion and integration of migrants, and this theme is reflected in the literary production of migrant writers. These writers are often described as writing in their maternal languages while using the words of their adopted language. What is clear is that migrant writers must depend on their own cultural points of view, which are always connected to the language in which they were raised, be it Chinese, Yiddish, Italian or another. It is often the case that migrant writers use words and concepts borrowed from their maternal language and culture in order to better express their lived realities.

In French, representing on the page the words of other European languages is rarely a problem due to the shared Latin alphabet and the close relationship that these languages share with French. Italian, Spanish and even English words are easily decipherable by the reasonably educated Francophone, who is able to pronounce them if needed. More “exotic” languages like Chinese, Farsi and Japanese pose a greater

problem to the author who would include them in his text as their systems of writing are so different from the Latin alphabet used in French. It is thus necessary to find a way to transliterate these words in such a way that they are accessible for the reader, and this challenge is further heightened by the task of communicating the meanings of these words. Because of the very nature of this linguistic choice—after all, the writer chooses to use non-French words because he feels limited by the language of Molière—it is a simultaneous task of transliteration and translation that he undertakes. While this is challenging for the author, it is also liberating since he can freely choose his own system of transliteration, as well as his own conception of the word to define. The reader who is unfamiliar with the author's native language is unaware of the errors committed by the author in the process of translation and transliteration, and the errors do not distract from the literary merit of the text.

Nevertheless, such errors may draw criticism to the author committing them. The Chinese-American author Amy Tan was criticized because of the incorrect transliterations and misleading translations of the Chinese used in *The Joy Luck Club*. However, in the case of *Kimchi* errors are clearly intentional. While several official systems of transliteration exist for Japanese, Ook Chung does not use them. He instead invents his own system which does not agree with the others and which, additionally, is not always consistent. At points, his choices of transliteration are contradictory—not only for the words he has already transliterated in one way and then represents in another, but also within his own idiosyncratic system.

Before furthering this discussion, it is essential to define what is meant by the three related concepts of transliteration, translation and transcription. Transliteration is

defined as a method of transposing, letter by letter, the sounds of one writing system into those of another. Transcription involves an approximation of the sounds of the first language into sounds of the second. Because transliteration preserves subtle orthographic differences from the original language it is oriented to the written word; transcription, on the other hand, relies on how the word sounds to a speaker of the second language. Several systems of transliteration (Figure 1) exist to represent the Japanese language in Latin characters, including the Hepburn system (invented by an American missionary), Kunrei-shiki (the version currently taught to Japanese students to write their own language in Latin characters) and the Nihon-shiki, of which Kunrei-shiki is a modified version. The differences between the three systems are minor, but the Nihon-shiki allows the user to transliterate all Japanese words without ambiguity in order to reproduce the correct Japanese orthography. The Hepburn system, used mostly for teaching Japanese to foreigners, includes more aspects of transcription.

Transcription is an approximation, while transliteration is an exact presentation without loss of any phonetic or orthographic nuance present in the first language. Nonetheless the two terms are often confused and used without distinction. In addition, translation is fundamentally a form of transcription because it is necessary to present in an inexact way the words and concepts of another language. This is never possible without a loss of nuance. Throughout *Kimchi*, all three processes are present, but the way in which Ook Chung uses them differs from that which other “ethnic” writers use in their work.

In *Kimchi*, the three processes are used in the guise of an apparently innocent reconciliation of two languages and an opening aiming to include a larger public. The

real intention however is not innocent, but a means of rejecting the domination and reification of the represented language, Japanese. During the processes of transliteration and transcription, it is necessary to implicitly accept the primacy of one of the two languages. The innate primacy given to one language in the processes described above is determined by the public receiving them, as illustrated by the differences between the Hepburn system (created for Western students of Japanese) and the Kunrei-/Nihon-shiki (created in Japan for the Japanese). By rejecting traditional transliterations of Japanese words in *Kimchi*, Chung also rejects the domination of one language over another, as well as the idea that he must favor one of them. He accepts neither an Occidental nor an Oriental identity, and instead formulates a new, more personal relationship with the two languages. Instead of accepting one language's reality and an identity imposed upon him by outside forces, he insists on his own individual identity and his own conception of the wor[ld], a conception which evolves through the text. Understandably, this fact is not clear for the majority of readers who innocently accept those transliterations. Nevertheless, Chung leaves clues within the text which point to this subversion.

Not all Japanese words in *Kimchi* appear in his own transliteration system. Several systems coexist within the text, including the three mentioned above. Some words are even represented by different transliterations on neighboring pages. Chung does not impose his weltanschauung on everything, but only on those words which have a particular, personal significance for him. The names of characters are always transliterated in the same way at every occurrence; the same is true for Japanese words already known in French, like "Butoh", the Japanese dance. These words are not all represented by a single system, but instead appear in their common forms. To rewrite a

word differently from a form that is already accepted in French is to misspell; to create a new transliteration for a person's name is to deny that person agency and to reify him. Chung does not change or subject these words to his system, because to do so would be committing the same oppression he is attempting to subvert. It is instead the Japanese words unknown to the Francophone reader that Chung transliterates himself, those words which he must mediate for the reader.

Chung expects that the reader of *Kimchi* will know nothing about either the Japanese language or culture and that he will approach the text not only as a "migrant" (and therefore foreign) text, but also as an Oriental text (the most exotic thing in the world for the Western reader). As Jeffrey Partridge shows in his study of Asian-American literature, writing by authors of Asian origin is always seen through the lens of the author's ethnicity. The Asian, the Oriental who is a permanent alien, can be nothing but an outsider to Western society and the literature produced by Orientals is necessarily viewed as "inscrutably foreign, exotic" (Partridge 25). Asian-North American literature is Asian first, literature second and finally, as an afterthought, North American. Aware of the reader's expectations, Chung fills *Kimchi* with Japanese words in order to give it an exotic allure which will satisfy the public's appetite. He describes the ritual greetings spoken when leaving and returning home; he includes the "So dèsu ne" that punctuates Japanese conversations; he mentions the "bonenkai" and "o-bon," major Japanese festivals. This all serves to create a more Japanese and exotic atmosphere which highlights the specificities of this culture. In so doing, he is able to describe his life in Japan in a way which would be more difficult and would lack authenticity were he

limited to French. In the above cases, omitting these words would be to ignore cultural difference between Japan and Québec, which would be a serious error.

He nonetheless also engages in a gratuitous usage of Japanese in order to make reference to objects for which words exist in French, like “biru nama” (itself an ungrammatical construction) instead of “bière à la pression”; “kenkyuushitsu” instead of “salle d’études”; “hanabi” instead of “feu d’artifice.” There is nothing distinguishing the meanings of these Japanese words from their French equivalents. That he chooses to use Japanese for such banal objects reveals that he uses the Japanese terms to please the reader. Chung offers the translations of the Japanese words most commonly in footnotes, which interrupts the rhythm of reading and highlights the exoticism of the word. The ordinary reader, finding that the word refers to a banal object, imagines that it perhaps has a particular cultural significance and continues his reading without giving it much thought. The advised reader, however, realizes that the Japanese words were not necessary to describe this concept and begins to wonder why Chung would prefer this foreign word if not to give his text an Oriental air.

With this preference, Chung leaves linguistic clues that show he consciously chooses these translations and transliterations. These clues also reveal the major goal of his text, which is the exploration of identity, in particular cultural identity. This subject is perhaps more important for Ook Chung than for other writers, including other so-called “migrant” writers, due to his migration history and resultant confused cultural identity, which are shared by the narrator of *Kimchi*. Chung speaks Japanese, which he has studied formally even though it is his first language. It is evident that, in treating a subject which he knows well and representing a language whose common transliteration

systems he would know, he would have chosen the words or transliterations used intentionally.

Notwithstanding the strong similarities between the author and narrator, it is necessary to distinguish one from another. This distinction is clearest in the presentation of the translations: those given in footnotes are those of the author, while the translations appearing in the body of the text are those of the narrator. That the author's notes are included creates a new dynamic in the reader-text relationship as a new presence, that of the author, explicitly exposes itself. The author, believing that the narrator's words do not suffice, includes a supplement so that the reader can understand. This creates an affective distance between the author and the narrator, his own creation, which lasts as long as the footnotes reappear. This distance grows and shrinks as a function of the frequency of the notations. In the beginning, as the footnotes are frequent (a dozen in the first thirty pages), the author constantly makes his presence known; towards the end, this distance is reduced, a fact reflected in the low number of notes (fourteen in the last half of the 242-page text). At the same time, the nature of the translations changes in the latter half: there is no longer a gratuitous overuse of Japanese, but only Japanese words that do not have an exact equivalent in French appear.

The transliterations fundamentally change also, as evidenced by the word *akarenbô* ("truant, personne violente de mauvaise vie" (183).) (Figure Two) The transliterations of the word, presented in the text itself by the narrator (and not by the author in a footnote), change according to his familiarity and level of comfort with the word and the Japanese language at the period described. In the beginning of the book, he does not know it, having only heard the word; he thus ignores the long vowel of the last

syllable and represents the moraic nasal with “`ñ,” giving the transliteration *akareñbo*. The second form of *akareñbô* is a transition: he understands that there is a long vowel, but keeps the “ñ.” At the end, he drops the tilde; the final version, *akarenbô*, while identical to the “official” transliteration, shows that he is now at ease with the word and has mastered its pronunciation. The transformation from *akareñbô* to *akarenbô* is the most significant. While the second better reflects the pronunciation of the moraic nasal, the use of “ñ” renders it exotic—it is clear at first glance that it is not a French word. He thus ultimately rejects the exoticism of this representation, which renders this word an outside object, and appropriates it for himself: represented by characters that are properly French, this word can now join the others in his vocabulary without causing him unease.

Paradoxically, it is the francisation of the transcriptions that marks their entry into the personal reality of the narrator—a case of literary form and function working together. While the choice of transliterations and translations were ultimately those of Chung, they are presented as those of Kim, since *Kimchi* is an autofictional text recounting Kim’s search for identity and belonging in the land of his birth. As Kim becomes more comfortable with the Japanese language and its role in his identity, its words and sounds gradually merge with those of French. This represents a resolution of the conflict between the two parts of Kim’s identity. His uneasy relationship with an Asian identity that he perceives himself as entitled to but unable to claim and the Occidental identity that, while adopted and to him unnatural, determines who he is and his perception of reality are able to coexist peaceably. In leaving for Japan, Kim goes in search of the culture he thinks he belongs to, believing he will find an easy answer to the question of what his cultural identity is. He discovers that he does not belong to one

single culture and that clear ethnic labels do not suffice to describe his identity. Instead, he is “un Canadien-né-au-Japon-de-parents-coréens-écrivain-en-français” (220). The French language alone, albeit with adaptations to make it better suited to represent his lived reality, is for Kim the homeland of which Van Gogh speaks, where “l’on se sent chez soi.”

For Chung the author and Kim the character, the role that language plays in the determination of identity cannot be understated. But why should it be French—which is for both Chung and Kim an adopted language—that is Kim’s refuge, the one language that is his own? His childhood home was, by his own admission,

une véritable macédoine de langues, un fouillis linguistique tel qu’un visiteur s’y perdrait [... D]ans mes conversations avec mes parents, je suis incapable de commencer et de finir une phrase dans la même langue; au lieu de quoi, il ne sort de ma bouche que des brochettes d’expressions tronquées en japonais, coréen, anglais, toutes confondues. (64)

It is remarkable that French does not appear in that list, giving the impression that it was not spoken. Given that his family arrived in Québec during the early seventies, before the 1974 passage of Law 101 making French the official language of all business in the province, it is possible that his family would have been able to survive not speaking French, as English was still the dominant language of business and government in the province. It is clear, however, that Kim was educated in French-language schools since he refers to his classmates as “Québécois” (and thus French-speaking) as opposed to anglophone “Canadiens.” It is perhaps for this reason and this reason alone that the French language is the one with which he is most comfortable.

When Kim arrives in Japan, the reader is uncertain to what extent he speaks Japanese. While he refers to it as “ma propre langue maternelle,” it is also “[sa] langue oubliée” to which he “[est] devenu étranger.” (22). That his Japanese is not of a relatively advanced proficiency, as would be expected of someone raised in a household where primarily that language was spoken, is evidenced by the fact that, at the presentations given by the graduate students of French at his Japanese university, he was unable to take “grand profit de ces séminaires donnés en japonais, entrelardés quelquefois de citations en français” (45). It is significant that his first group of friends in Japan—that is to say, his first community there—is composed entirely of Francophones. For this reason, there is uncertainty as to what language they speak together, although Kim does occasionally signal that certain remarks are made in Japanese, most frequently by transcribing them as they were delivered. For his Japanese friends, Kim is a sort of curiosity because he is a native French-speaker; it is for this reason that he is so readily adopted by them and given such attention, which he relishes:

Plusieurs d’entre eux parlaient un excellent français, avec un accent parisien, et semblaient ravis d’échanger dans cette langue. Je jouissais secrètement de l’attention qu’on me portait et qui me donnait le sentiment d’être un “invité d’honneur.” (46)

Coming into being for reasons of a shared language, this community at first has little justification for existing, but significant personal connections later develop, specifically between Kim and Kyoko and Hiroé, two female friends with whom he begins romantic relationships.

The importance of language and its relationship to identity is further treated when Mikami, the nurse who treats Kim’s pneumothorax, hires Kim to give her English

lessons. She herself has no need for English language lessons, since she already speaks the language nearly fluently. Rather, she attempts to use these lessons as a ruse to pull her daughter, Amy, out of her condition as a *hikokomori*—a recluse. Amy refuses to go to school because of her Eurasian ethnicity. English lessons would bring her closer to her own ethnic identity, as her father is American. In her, Kim sees a mirror image of himself, harassed as a child because of the obvious difference between himself and his classmates. Unlike Kim, however, she does accept that she is indeed different from her classmates, even developing a hatred for white people: “Elle disait à sa mere qu’elle n’aimait pas les visages aux grands yeux bleus et aux cheveux noirs, qu’elle se considérait comme une petite Japonaise et rien de plus” (135). She refuses to take part in the English lessons.

Amy’s refusal to speak English is rooted in her refusal to accept an identity distinct from that of her classmates. To admit to speaking English would be to accept that she is different. It is for the same reasons that Kim’s inability to speak Korean and his intermediate skill in Japanese pain him: not speaking Korean, he is unable to fully claim Korean as his cultural identity because of the “mur de langue” that separates him from other ethnic Koreans. Not speaking Japanese fluently, however, makes him unable to communicate fully with his daughter: “Je maîtrise mieux le japonais qu’il y a dix ans, mais n’importe quel gamin de cinq ans s’en tire plus vite et plus naturellement que moi” (245-6). Language as a mark of identity and community belonging is thus an obsession for Kim. Not mastering these two languages, he feels less complete.

As a writer, Kim is searching for a remedy for the sense of loss he feels because he does not speak the languages of his Japanese childhood or of his Korean ancestors and

a remedy for the loss of identity that is simultaneously the cause and effect of this loss.

The choice of language to write in thus takes on greater significance for him: in the context of Québec, a province in which most immigrants from non-Francophone countries learn English before French, choosing to write in French instead of English is a political decision as much as a declaration of Francophone identity. It is also a more authentic expression of Kim's interior reality, given his bilingualism in English and French. Nonetheless, he is unable to fully express himself in the language of Molière without modifications to better represent his personal reality; through the creation of a hybrid French incorporating English, Korean and Japanese words, he is best able to search for a refuge from his identity crisis and to reconcile the different parts of his identity through writing.

CHAPTER THREE

Writing [and] Refuge

Since migrant writing is defined by the writer's own status as a migrant as much as by the themes of cultural identity and exile treated within the works, it is, with few exceptions, difficult for such writers to be perceived by the reading public as anything but migrant—and therefore niche—writers; they are thus separate from the shared literary heritage of the adopted country. Further, because a large proportion of these writers only begin writing after migration and subsequently treat subjects related to the *parcours migratoire*, they are often characterized as writing in direct response to the suffering they have experienced during this process. Writing for migrant writers is often a means of exorcising the sense of anguish and exile they feel as members of minority communities living away from their countries of origin. It is valuable in that it offers them a way of creating a refuge from the outside world, a refuge in which they are able to imagine a home for themselves that is neither part of their original or adopted societies and in which they are able to express themselves freely. Within this imaginary space, they are able to negotiate their new cultural identity. Although an ethnic community may exist for the writer in the adopted country, the process of discovering and then accepting the new identity is intensely personal and can only occur on one's own terms. It is for this reason that migrants as well as non-migrants turn to writing as a means of exploring identity.

The choice of writing is not entirely premeditated, however. Although some migrants practiced the profession of writing before migrating, this is not common. The majority of migrant writers in Québec were trained in and practiced another profession, and only discovered their talent for creating literature after they left their countries of

origin. This is evidenced by the bibliographies of many migrant writers, the first entries to which only appear after leaving their home countries. They originally viewed writing as a diversion, an escape from the pressures of their lived realities, not as a career; instead of literary training, talent and chance dictated their eventual success as writers.

The narrator of *Kimchi* is no exception.² Although academically trained in French literature, Kim denies having ever had the intention of becoming a professional writer and states that he only began writing to express the suffering and solitude he felt as a visible minority in predominately white Montréal. As he does not believe that his heart “est assez vaste pour abriter sous son manteau la condition humaine dans son entièreté” (158), he rejects the label of “écrivain véritable.” Citing Canadian literary critic Suzanne Robert within the text, he defines himself as an accidental writer:

On désignerait ainsi, comme le terme l'indique, ceux qui à la fois ont commencé à écrire par accident et cesseront probablement de le faire de la même façon. L'écriture constituerait ici une sorte d' « erreur de jeunesse », de stade précédant la naissance véritable de l'être; on mettrait dans cette catégorie tous les écrivains adolescents, ainsi que les plus attardés que l'âge mûr n'a pas guéris du malheur d'être né. L'écriture serait pour eux une sorte de déversoir émotif, de salut psychologique, et peut-être aussi spirituel, où, accidentellement d'abord, puis de plus en plus régulièrement, ils enfermeraient chagrins, idéaux et désirs. (159, italics in original)

² The same can be said for Ook Chung himself. Because of the similarities between Chung and Kim, the extent to which Kim's discussion of his relationship to writing reflects Chung's own situation is a question ripe for discussion. For the purposes of the present work, however, I explicitly avoid any discussion of Chung's life, engaging only with the text and its effect on the reader. References to Chung are used solely in relation to his role as author.

In this definition, writing is only a means of transition for the writer: it is a way of passing from one state of being to another in order to finally experience “la naissance véritable de l’être.” Writing offers Kim a way of expressing his emotions in order to better live his current life. This definition fits migrant writers as well as it does accidental writers. Indeed, most migrant writers can be qualified as accidental writers, since they come to writing because of the trauma resulting from the experience of migration and the difficulties related to integration into the adopted society.

Although Kim reveals that he first became interested in literature as a child and attempted to write jejune, melodramatic poems, it is not until he reaches the lowest depths of his abjection that he believes he becomes a real writer.

After his first trip to Japan, Kim publishes his first novel. A chapter in which he reflects on his relationship to writing begins the third part of the *Kimchi*, during which he also recounts his second trip to Japan. It is within this chapter that Kim identifies an episode from his childhood as the “accident” that led to his becoming a writer. As a schoolboy, he would not go to class to avoid the bullying he would receive from classmates due to his evidently foreign appearance. He was unable to tell his parents of the abuse he suffered at school because they would neither understand nor believe him and instead accuse him of attempting to “[se] dérober de [ses] obligations” (160). This treatment both by family and his classmates eventually leads Kim to undergo what seems to be a nervous breakdown: returning from school, he would need to perform certain rituals, remain immobile in a state that was “plutôt une semi-catatonie... [comme une] statue d’angoisse craignant de susciter par le moindre mouvement des vagues mentales” (161). One day, searching for a way to justify his return home after a day spent in

shopping centers and cafés reading books instead of at school, he comes upon the idea of jumping into a pool of water in order to say that he fell and needed to change. Although first thinking that this was a perfect plan, upon doing it, he realizes “tout ce que [sa] situation avait de misérable”; through this “baptême d’abjection” during which “quelque chose est mort en [lui],” he becomes conscious of the hole that exists in himself which he will later attempt to fill with writing (163).

Chung’s depiction of Kim’s “accident” reveals much about Kim’s character. He is despondent and self-pitying, creating his own destiny. This is reflected throughout the text, with representations of Kim sabotaging his relationships with other characters and presenting himself as a stumbling block to his own happiness. The reader questions the extent Kim plays a role in his own suffering and, in turn, grows less sympathetic towards him. Further, it is debatable to what extent this episode actually does constitute a beginning of writing for him. While he pinpoints this incident as the point where he realizes that he is a writer because he is faced with an inexplicable need to write, he had already faced the same urge previously. It is only Kim’s realization of the misery of his situation that marks this event as significant. Instead of using this realization as an opportunity to improve his condition, he chooses to sink further into his anguish, allowing even his physical appearance to become repulsive. Kim writes

J’avais contracté le syndrome de Howard Hugues [sic]: je refusais de me faire couper les ongles et mes cheveux étaient devenus aussi longs que ceux d’une fille. Et j’ai perdu tous mes anciens amis comme on perd ses cheveux, plus vite qu’un cancer... (161)

Assuming the role of writer, then, becomes for Kim a way to justify and even wallow in his depression without feeling the need to change his condition; he is the victim of his own choices.

Aside from this “origine de l’écriture,” writing plays an important role throughout his life, beyond his profession as a writer. His parents’ marriage is intimately connected to writing and letters in particular. It is because of an article read by his mother and supposedly written by his father that the two met, exchanged love letters and then married. Later, Kim himself learns of his true paternal origin through a letter written to him by his biological father. These two situations illustrate two diametrically opposed aspects of writing which define the narrator’s complicated relationship to it. On the one hand, writing provides a sense of fulfillment and truth; on the other, it falsifies reality as we subsequently discover.

The article which Kim’s mother Mitsouyo had read described the acts of the man who would become her husband and who would raise Kim, a former officer in the Korean military³. The article was not in fact written by him. It was instead his cellmate, Kim Chi-Hee, who took it upon himself to commit to paper the stories the officer told him, as the officer himself had a “nature impatiente et plutôt encline à l’action” (205). Chi-Hee thus becomes the officer’s scribe, transcribing the stories told to him while “enjoliv[ant] son histoire d’une aura de légende.” The appearance of these stories in *Bungei-Shunju*, a literary magazine, and their subsequent success proved to the article’s

³ Because of the complicated relationship that this character has with Kim and the fact that no name is given for him in the novel, for the purposes of this thesis he will be referred to as “the officer.”

true writer that “les mots pouvaient être une arme toute-puissante” and resulted in a “flot de lettres d’admiratrices” (206), among them letters sent by Mitsouyo. The officer, unable to respond to these letters himself because of his inability to write well, once again engages his cellmate, although it is unclear whether or not the officer in fact dictates the contents of these responses or instead allows him to write what he pleases. Touched by Mitsouyo’s letters, the cellmate becomes envious of the officer, but nonetheless continues as his scribe, all the while conscious of the part he plays in the creation of his own jealousy.

Mitsouyo falls in love with the officer because of these letters. Beyond the content of the letters, she is impressed by the handwriting, the beauty of which she admits is “la première chose qui l’a impressionnée” (35). When she discovers after marrying him that it was his cellmate who wrote the letters, she is offended not only because her husband lied to her, but also because she is uncertain whether or not he ever felt as strongly for her as she did for him. Later, provoked by her husband’s eventual infidelity, Mitsouyo sends anonymous letters to the cellmate, Kim Chi-Hee, whom she has met and whom the officer had abandoned in order to meet her when both prisoners were released. Because of Mitsouyo’s letters, she and Kim Chi-Hee later have an affair, which results in the birth of Kim, the narrator.

The confusion related to Kim’s paternity thus results directly from writing. The happiness and marital bliss promised in the letters between the officer and Mitsouyo proves to be a sham. During his second trip to Japan, Kim comes to understand this after Aerin, the officer’s daughter with his mistress, gives him two letters written by Kim Chi-Hee. Upon reading the first, written to Aerin, Kim realizes that all he had known about

himself as a child—who his father was, his date of birth, even his name—was false. He is, for all intents and purposes, alone and without an identity because he must now question his entire past. Writing, which had once seemed to promise a home for him, proves to offer him no more of a sense of belonging than does the real world.

Disillusioned by this, he is unable to read the second letter for several months. While the first letter revealing his paternity creates confusion and provokes an identity crisis, it does provide him with a sense of clear if fragile origin. Reflecting on his own search for identity and perhaps anticipating that his offspring would suffer the same *malaise existentielle*, Kim Chi-Hee addresses his son Kim's questions about how best to find an identity in the world given his lack of connection to a single geographic place in the second letter. More important, however, is the advice given to him by Chi-Hee related to the (in)ability of writing to create a home.

Chi-Hee writes that “les mots sont éternellement vivants, contrairement aux hommes” (235), but also that writing comes from a sense of unfulfilment on the part of the author, a sense which Chi-Hee describes as

comme le goût du kimchi pour les Coréens: on aurait beau [leur] présenter les meilleurs plats du monde entier, sans kimchi il manquera toujours quelque chose, mais c'est ce manque même, cette sensation d'*unfulfilment* et d'appétit aiguillonné, qui donne son identité et sa saveur inoubliable au kimchi. (237, italics in original)

Nonetheless, this unfulfilment cannot be appeased through words alone and dooms the writer to a solitary existence:

L'écrivain est comme un prisonnier dans une cellule glacée. [...] L'écrivain est celui qui toujours refusera de glisser cette main solitaire et vigilante sous le drap douillet. Son corps aura beau appeler le sommeil pesant, il est celui

qui se lève en pleine nuit, écartant la couverture, pour que le reste du corps aille rejoindre cette main glacée qui griffonnera des phrases toute la nuit dans le clair-obscur de la lune. Le sommeil boudeur ne viendra qu'à l'aube, s'il se décide à revenir. Mais l'homme qui écrit ainsi n'a pas de choix. Il accepte cet état permanent d'*unfulfilment* et cette insomnie qui est sa nourriture. (237, italics in original)

Rather than a search for origin through contact with a biological family or the creation of an imaginary home through writing, Chi-Hee instead suggests a search for community among the “fraternité élargie” he will find across the world—the diaspora, the exile, the marginal characters. Chi-Hee sees this brotherhood in more than nationalist terms: “le mot ‘diaspora’ revêt pour moi un sens plus généreux que celui de la simple connotation ethnique. [...] Tes pères, tes mères, tes frères et soeurs, ils sont éparpillés dans le monde entier. Tu sauras bien les reconnaître sans avoir à demander d’où ils viennent, qui ils sont” (236). Community is not to be found only among people similar to oneself in ethnicity or geography; it is possible to find a sense of belonging anywhere and with anyone. What is important, however, is that this sense of belonging must come from the outside, brought about by contact with other individuals sharing a similar worldview; it is impossible to exercise this sense of unfulfilment on one’s own through writing.

The impossibility of refuge and respite from feelings of exile in writing as expounded by Chi-Hee reiterates what Kim himself had already understood upon the publication of his own book, without however seeing the possibility of creation of an actual community unconnected to either writing or biological ties; the refuge that both he and Chi-Hee attempt to establish through writing is shown at the end to be for naught, like any search for an illusory home and origin as a remedy for his identity crisis. As Kim

Chi-Hee writes in the letter to Kim: “La recherche des racines comme panacée est une illusion. Chéris ton déracinement” (236).

Kim takes the message written to him by Chi-Hee to heart. This is reflected in the optimistic tone of the book following his reading of the letter, a tone which stands in stark contrast with the otherwise somber tone which precedes. Having gone to Paris in search of Hiroé, he rises out of the catacombs, a realm of death and darkness, and heads to the city’s Chinatown reborn and with a new vision of identity informed by his father’s advice. There he notices for the first time the connections between people who he would not have otherwise thought belong together:

[Je] me suis retourné à la voix d’une fillette, que j’ai prise d’abord pour une Blanche, et qui s’écriait “Papa! Papa!” en courant vers son père, un Chinois, tandis qu’une femme blanche, qui devait être la mère, les rejoignait. Je suis entré dans une boutique de vidéo: il y avait un grand téléviseur et sur l’écran une jolie Caucasienne blonde chantait en chinois, ou peut-être en vietnamien. [...] En me dirigeant vers la station de métro, je passe devant la vitrine d’un café où je vois une jolie Asiatique assise seule à une table. Elle avait les cheveux blonds. (239-40)

It is a transcultural vision in which all have the potential of forming a community.

Seeing this and later meeting his own daughter, he comes to the realization that he no longer needs to write:

Les mots sont les fantômes qu’on n’a pas eus, qu’on aurait souhaité avoir... Mais dès que les vrais enfants nous reviennent, il n’y a plus de raison d’écrire. On se contente de vivre et d’aimer, on se contente d’être heureux. Et moi, je suis prêt pour le bonheur... (246)

Although he first saw writing as a refuge, this illusion is eventually destroyed by writing itself. Having published a book, Kim realizes that this does little to “panser [ses] blessures” (156), but instead leaves him once again “plus seul qu[‘il n’]a jamais été”—

even more alone than when he had not written (158), because the book is no longer a part of him. He and the written expression of his suffering are no longer connected except as “frères ennemis” (158). What was once a refuge for him has now become an object that taunts him and reminds him of the exile he feels in his life. Writing, which was previously a way to “voyager en imagination en des pays fraternels” (21) no longer satisfies him. Now he rejects writing in order to live in the real world, building a community around him in order to push away his loneliness.

CHAPTER FOUR
Forms and Formations
of
Community

Ethnicity and writing, the two elements Kim first pursues in his attempt to ease his longing and search for identity, ultimately prove to offer only false hope. As an ethnically Korean immigrant from Japan living in Canada, he is an outsider to all three of these countries and not fully accepted by any of these societies, notwithstanding his eagerness to integrate into all of them. Unable to find a sense of place within these greater units, he turns to writing, an individual and internal process in order to create an identity of his own and on his own terms. Instead of soothing his suffering, however, writing only makes it more apparent without exorcising it. Reading the letter in which his biological father, Kim Chi-Hee, describes his own fruitless search for identity, Kim realizes that community must be defined not in terms of vague and intangible ethnic relations with an imaginary geographic homeland, but instead by an affinity based on material truths and direct connections felt between its members based on mutual understanding and shared ideals.

Kim Chi-Hee's admonition to Kim to focus on seeking out other individuals who feel the same way as he does in his "déracinement" (235-6) closely resembles an element of Benedict Anderson's discussion in *Imagined Communities*. According to Anderson, the labels of ethnicity and of nation are social constructs created in order to establish the primacy of a fictional unity—the Nation—composed of subjects rather than individuals. They are thus imagined, socially constructed communities, instead of real communities

born of actual connections between individuals. This mechanism led to the creation of the modern nation-state and the sense of connectedness that justifies nationalism and the conflicts that result. Although there exists no personal connection between all of the citizens of a nation, that a sense of affinity exists is a result of a concentrated effort on the part of the hegemonic power to create a national culture out of previously disparate regional elements. Anderson defines the nation as

an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. [...]

The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. [...]

Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.

(6-7, italics in original)

Part of the resultant ideology of nationalism is the belief in the idea of homeland as something to be cherished and protected because of a sacred bond connecting the subject to the particular geographic space in which he finds himself, whether or not the subject's ancestry is at all attached to that place. Homeland is thus, along with ethnic and national labels, a false beacon of identity, disconnected as it is from any personal reality not imposed by an outside force.

This is precisely the position in which Kim previously lived, albeit in reverse: living in Canada, a country with which he feels no apparent affinity whatsoever, he longs for a homeland composed of people who look like him and who do not exclude him based on the color of his skin. Although Korea is the most apparent choice of country that he could call his homeland, he remains on the periphery looking in because he does not speak the language or particularly understand the culture. Japan, the only other country he has a connection to, could not be considered his homeland because of his family's relatively short existence in that country and his own sense of being a foreigner at best. A geographic homeland is for Kim an empty sign: eternally displaced with no roots attaching him *a priori* to any particular place, his sense of belonging must derive from the attachments of community between him and other individuals.

Rejecting the imagined community of ethnicity and language (represented in this case by writing), Kim instead searches for a real community. Much as Anderson does not fully define what makes a community "real" instead of imagined in his work, the elements that define and create the "ensemble de coeurs humains qui recherchent et ressentent la même chose" sought after by Kim are not explicitly mentioned in *Kimchi*. Although one might consider family to be a real community, that is not the case in Chung's novel. Many depictions of family in the novel portray the bonds of paternity as accidents of chance. Further, depictions of cohesive families are all but nonexistent in the novel: Kim's own family and upbringing were founded on lies, he remains unaware of his own daughter's existence for 13 years, and other characters only mention their families in passing, usually to highlight the differences that separate them from their family members. For Kim, the only form of family that can provide a true sense of

belonging and provide more answers than questions about one's identity, if not origins, is that which one chooses and creates for oneself; justified not by coincidence of birth but instead by a shared approach to and understanding of the world. The knowledge of one's origins and the sense of belonging that they can provide is an illusion—as with Kim, what one believes to know for a fact is all too often a lie and can impede a search for truth.

This is not to say, however, that it is impossible to find community within one's own biological family, nor that the knowledge of one's origins is detrimental to the search for identity: indeed, the opposite is shown in *Kimchi*. While Kim makes little mention of either his siblings or the officer who raised him and who he believed throughout his life to be his father, he describes his mother often and positively. Both coming of age in a country whose society largely disdains them, she and Kim are bound by their shared childhood experiences of being outsiders. So too do they both mediate the suffering they endure through the escape offered by literature. As Mitsouyo is depicted sympathetically, the reader is under the impression that Kim forgives his mother's adultery because of the harsh treatment she received from her husband. When he discovers the identity of his true biological father, Kim understands the distance he has always felt between himself and the man who raised him. The knowledge of his biological origin, however, comes too late: no longer searching for an identity based in ethnicity in order to establish belonging, Chi-Hee's words advising him to abandon “la recherche des raciness [qui] est une illusion” and to cherish his uprooting and condition of exile (236) come as a reiteration of what Kim is already beginning to discover. This letter from a father he has never known, clarifying the course necessary for him to follow

in order to escape the sense of solitude that has haunted him throughout his youth, is for Kim to prove that he and his father, separated by language, time and space, nonetheless share more of an affinity and are more of a family than him and the officer.

Finding community within one's biological family is an exception in *Kimchi*, however; far more common are communities discovered and created as an adult, that is to say, those that the individual must find and strengthen independently. It is rare that one finds individuals with whom one instantly feels a connection that later develops into "un ensemble de coeurs humains qui recherchent et ressentent la même chose." Real communities must be gradually created and fortified through fruitful and repeated contact. In *Kimchi*, three primary forms of contact lead to the formation of community. Although eating, drinking and sex are all connected, they are all treated distinctly and with their own particular significances.

Eating and meals

The sharing of meals is an important element of the foundation of communities in all cultures. It is the time when the members of a group come together to share news and stories, strengthening the bonds between individuals. This importance is further emphasized by celebratory banquets, the meals that commemorate the shared history (as for holidays) or the new creation of communities (as for marriages). Although meals shared between fewer people are more common than these festive occasions, they are no less significant as smaller groups lend themselves to greater intimacy and closer relations between people. Similarly, a meal eaten alone often signifies one's solitude.

The theme of meals appears throughout *Kimchi*, each time in relation to questions of community and belonging. Meals most often signify the formation or fortification of a

community, although the representations of meals also evidence its collapse. Kim's loneliness upon first arriving in Japan is made clear by his decision to spend his first night alone, "[se] content[ant] d'aller acheter quelques menus victuailles dans le *combiné* du coin avant de prendre le chemin de retour" instead of taking advantage of the amenities of his neighborhood (41). By contrast, it is over a meal that Kim first meets Kyoko Sakai in Japan, a fellow scholar of French literature who had been in Québec for research and with whom Kim had previously become acquainted there when she asked to borrow an article from him. Kim had expected Kyoko to be uninterested in meeting him when she had returned home to Japan. Contrary to his expectations, this first meal with Kyoko leads Kim to grow attached to her, although the attachment is nonetheless one-sided in its intensity. In Kyoko, Kim sees his first opportunity to connect to someone in Japan, albeit an acquaintance from his home.

The importance of meals as markers of acceptance into a community is shown more clearly in Kim's dealings with Mikami, his nurse, and her Eurasian daughter Amy. Although Amy is initially reluctant to meet Kim and generally wary of people to the point that she refuses to attend school, Amy allows Kim to join her and her mother for dinner and even insists on playing a game with him. This is in contrast to her habitual behavior of having "crises de jalousie lorsque Mikami tentait d'inviter de proches amis à la maison, voyant en eux des rivaux dans l'affection de sa mère" (144). Although Amy remains distant and eats in a different room, Kim nonetheless interprets this gesture as showing that he now belongs to this family: "C'était à mon tour de jouer maintenant, de jouer à des 'jeux de famille'. Je jouais à pensais que ces bruits, ces odeurs, cette intimité désormais familière m'appartenaient, comme une famille instantanée" (147).

The familiarity and acceptance that he believes he has found in this community, however, are an illusion. When Kim later arrives drunk at Mikami's apartment to confess his feelings for her and to offer to take care of Amy while Mikami is at work, he is rebuffed: his presence in this environment is unwelcome and the English lessons are cancelled, ending his contact with them and once again leaving him without a sense of belonging. The end of this relationship once again signals Kim's inability to connect with others in a meaningful way. Although he longs for a sense of belonging and family, even volunteering to "s'occuper [d'Amy], lui apprendre des choses" (150) as a father would do, he does not consider the feelings of others, which often results in him overstepping boundaries and sabotaging relationships. It is significant that Kim's interruption occurs while Amy and Mikami are eating dinner, one of the few moments of intimacy they are able to enjoy and which Amy cherishes (149)—an intimacy in which Kim is unable to share.

It is not the act of sharing a meal alone that provides a sense of belonging, but also particular foods. In *Kimchi*, for no dish is this more the case than that from which the novel takes its name. Kim describes it as "plus qu'un condiment, c'est le symbole national de la cuisine coréenne, cela fait partie de nos cellules et de notre sang, de notre identité à nous, la diaspora coréenne éparpillée à travers le monde" (64). Kim associates his Koreanness primarily with his love of this dish. Even as a child it had great significance, as when he confused "l'expression kimchi avec le mot japonais 'chi', qui veut dire sang, peut-être à cause de la riche et onctueuse couleur rouge de la sauce chili, comme si la salade s'était mise à saigner" (64). Although Kim sees it is a symbol of Korean identity, he also remarks certain negative associations that distinguish them from

other groups. Its odor in particular marks Korean migrants as outsiders and targets for harassment:

Je me souviens que durant les jeux Olympiques de Séoul un athlète américain—un de ces beachboys à la crinière blonde—s’était plaint de cette odeur de kimchi, disant que l’haléine des piétons de la ville empestait. Au Canada, j’ai une amie coréenne qui, après avoir épousé un Occidental, a complètement cessé de manger du kimchi pour ne pas incommoder son mari dont le palais et l’odorat n’avaient jamais pu s’y habituer. (65)

Kimchi is nonetheless an inescapable part of Kim’s identity, so much so that he develops cravings when deprived of it. For Kim, it is centering and offers a sense of comfort, if not belonging.

It is significant that Kim’s biological father’s name—Kim Chi-Hee—shares its first two syllables with the Korean national dish: like the letter written to him by his biological father, kimchi helps Kim remember his origins, even if he is never able to fully know them. His inability to identify himself as fully Korean is shown metaphorically by the nightmares he suffers after ingesting too much kimchi (65, 234); forcing upon himself an identity that is unnatural literally becomes *chose indigeste*. In his letter, Chi-Hee discourages his son from doing precisely that, since doing so diminishes the uniqueness of his particular identity as an exile:

Les Japonais ont une expression qui, chaque fois que je l’entends, se confond toujours dans mon esprit avec celle de kimchi: “kimochi”, qui veut dire “sensation” ou “humeur”, souvent avec une connotation jouissive (au sens sexuel). Mais comme dans les religions tantriques, la jouissance n’est atteinte qu’après une longue abstinence. (237)

Kim however disregards this suggestion and subsequently consumes kimchi, resulting in a nightmare in which his father's words are reiterated to warn him against a misguided attempt at laying claim to an identity that is not his own: "j'étais devenu un terroriste qui demandait une rançon d'un million de pots de kimchi au sommet de l'Hôtel de ville de Tokyo; ensuite j'étais emprisonné sous un amoncellement de gravats, à la suite d'une explosion" (243). In this nightmare the ransom of kimchi symbolizes his overzealous attempt to assert his Korean identity and leads to the destruction of not only the other aspects of his identity but also of himself.

Alcohol and drinking

Like meals, sharing alcohol also creates a sense of community, but the additional dimension of the intoxicating effects of alcohol make it more potent as a means of creating community because of the vulnerability it produces. Further, in *Kimchi*, it is often alcohol that sets in motion the communities formed around meals, allowing them to reach greater levels of intimacy. In *Kimchi*, the phrase "*in vino veritas*" holds particularly true, as it is at moments of drunkenness that Kim discovers (and creates) truths about his identity and sense of belonging.

It is over *sake* and beer that Kim first meets and becomes accepted into the community of students of French literature lead by Kobayashi, his advisor. Although they first take an interest in Kim because he is a native French speaker and a scholar of literature like them, it is only when "ils se réunissaient dans le restaurant-bar pour s'enivrer, parler de suicide, de désillusion et de désenchantement" (44) that he is fully accepted into their circle. Drunk, he makes a particularly strong connection with Hiroé, who later becomes the object of his affection. It is at this point that they confess to each

other their feelings of loneliness and suicidal urges; Hiroé even suggesting they commit suicide together (48). It is because of this gesture, delivered by Hiroé only because of her drunkenness, that Kim falls in love with her.

It is the drunken Hiroé that Kim falls in love with and with whom he feels an affinity towards; sober, Kim is unable to find in her the same naïveté and thus does not share the same connection:

Je me sentais légèrement honteux de trahir des signes d'ivresse devant une Hiroé sobre, en parfaite possession d'elle-même [...] Avant de la quitter, je la serrai maladroitement, conscient du décalage entre nos dispositions d'esprit. J'avais l'impression que quelque chose se détériorait à une allure vertigineuse. [...] Hiroé avait raconté que la dernière fois que nous étions ivres, elle était rentrée chez elle, avait jeté son foulard sur le sol de l'entrée, son manteau dans le salon, et s'était endormie habillée dans son lit. [...] C'était cette Hiroé-là que j'affectionnais. Jamais elle ne me semblait si envoûtante que lorsque nous communions dans l'ivresse, cette ivresse qui me libérait de mes inhibitions et nous encerlait dans l'intimité de son sortilège; la beauté d'Hiroé m'était devenue presque indissociable de l'ivresse et je lui dis, en la quittant, "J'avais envie d'être saoul avec toi". (83-4)

While Kim does not feel the same attraction to Hiroé when she is sober as when she is drunk, the opposite is not true. While Hiroé is less open about her suicidal impulses when sober, she nevertheless displays affection towards Kim, at every meeting taking his arm as they walk, preparing Christmas dinner for Kim and telling him that "c'était la première fois qu'elle cuisinait pour un homme et qu'elle n'avait jamais passé un aussi bon Noël" (100).

It is not Hiroé's feelings towards Kim that become more apparent under the influence of alcohol, but only Kim's perception of Hiroé. He is obsessed with the image

of Hiroé intoxicated, writing that after sharing wine over Christmas dinner with her “je retrouvais la Hiroé que j’aimais au plus profond de mon être, telle qu’en intimité de l’ivresse elle se révélait à moi” (99). Alcohol and Hiroé in fact become nearly interchangeable for Kim, who posits that she could save him from the sense of loneliness that he feels and attempts to relieve through drinking:

Était-il possible que toute mes journées ruinées par un mode de vie déséquilibrée—rendez-vous et classes manqués, mes dépenses et les séquelles physiques liées à ce que je devais bien appeler depuis quelque mois mon alcoolisme, mes crises existentielles—auraient pu être sauvées par la présence de ce simple toucher? (101)

Alcohol is for Kim a way to escape his suffering and arrive at a vision (albeit brief) of truth and comfort. Bernier notes that it is in alcohol that Kim is able to reconcile fire and water, symbols that mark his life and refer to his identity and origins (209), notably the fire that destroys his birth certificate and thus deprives him of a “réalité légale” (12) and the transpacific voyage that brings him to his adopted country in a boat named *Hikawa* (River of Fire) (13). It is significant that Kim refers to this clash of elemental opposites again during the conclusion of the novel, but this time optimistically, showing that he has resolved the apparent contradictions of his origins: “Dans mon prénom, il y a le symbole chinois du feu, mais il y a aussi, dans son épellation occidentale, la lettre ‘o’, qui rime avec eau... O comme ‘Orient’, comme ‘Occident’” (246).

Sex and procreation

Although the family unit as such is not seen as necessarily leading to community in *Kimchi*, Kim nonetheless views in the bonds of paternity a certain value for a sense of

belonging. As a means to such, sex is an important dimension of one's identity. This is shown most clearly by Kim's feelings of inadequacy and immaturity due to his lack of sexual experience:

Dans mon cas, il y avait un étrange décalage entre mon corps et ma pensée: n'ayant eu que très peu d'expériences sexuelles, mon corps arriéré réagissait encore à la manière d'un adolescent pubère avide de jeter sa gourme, sans que ma partie émotionnelle y soit engagée. [...] C]'était presque devenu un principe chez moi de rattraper le retard de mon éducation sexuelle. (58)

Although Kim would commodify the sexual act and engage in it without an emotional connection, such encounters do not in fact occur in the novel. Instead, sexual contact is for Kim always linked to an emotional connection and a clearer vision of community and belonging.

Even when he searches for commodified, emotionally-detached sex at a "soapland" (a type of quasi-legal Japanese brothel in which the client officially pays to be washed by a woman, but is in fact offered sexual contact), Kim inadvertently develops an emotional relationship with the prostitute. It is doubtful, however, that Kim is looking for a purely physical experience. Even the encounter with the prostitute is related to a deeper knowledge of his origins:

[P]our mon premier essai, j'avais été attiré par le symbole du yin et du yang qui apparaissait sur le drapeau sud-coréen décorant l'entrée, telle une lune divisée en deux couleurs. Lorsque j'eus l'audace d'ouvrir la porte, j'eus le soulagement de constater qu'il n'y avait personne pour se jeter sur moi et me forcer à payer ceci, payer cela. Au contraire, me parvenait une musique familière, *Arirang*, mêlée à l'odeur de santal émanant des murs. (186)

He finds himself comforted entering this particular brothel because of the décor that reminds him of his origins, listening to the same Korean folk song that he managed to find for himself in Seoul and which constantly reappears in *Kimchi* as a mark of Kim's Korean identity. The oedipal subtext of this scene—going into a brothel marked by a Korean flag, an apparent attempt to reach his origins through sex—is palpable. It has been foreshadowed in a previous chapter in which two minor characters discuss incest, defining it as

l'ignorance de ses origines: Oedipe commet l'inceste
précisément parce qu'il ignore qu'il est le fils de sa mère.
[...] L'inceste se répète *justement* parce qu'il y a
méconnaissance. Lorsqu'il y a enfin illumination, la boucle
se défait, et tout devient transparent comme dans le satori.
On lit à travers dix mille ans d'histoire comme on lirait à
travers une feuille de Cellophane. (176)

This sexual contact between Kim and the prostitute does indeed shed light on his origins. In a *deus ex machina*-like turn of events that beggars belief, the prostitute who Kim meets with, Aerin, is the daughter of the man who raised him and his mistress. Afraid that he has unwittingly committed incest by having sex with his stepsister, he learns the truth of his paternity from Aerin when she explains that, while she is the illegitimate daughter of the officer and his mistress, Kim himself was fathered not by the officer, but by his former cellmate, Chi-Hee, who would go on to raise her. The revelation of his genealogy proves to be the illumination that resolves the novel's plot, allowing him to achieve a more solid understanding of his past. This enables him to progress and find a sense of belonging in the present.

Kim ultimately finds this in Yuki, the daughter resulting from his relationship with Hiroé and whose existence he was unaware of for thirteen years. He describes the

day of his first meeting with her as “parfait [...] Il y a des journées comme cela dans une vie où pas un geste n’est gaspillé” (15), “véritablement une renaissance” (12). In getting to know his daughter, he is able to find not only a sense of belonging in the present and future, but also a return to the past. This point is made clear not only because she is a tangible link to Hiroé, his past lover, but also because it is only with Yuki that he first returns to the site of his birth:

[Yokohama] se trouve juste à une heure de train de Tokyo et, pourtant, durant toute l’année où j’ai vécu dans la capitale, j’avais l’impression que Yokohama était à mille lieues de là et voici que subitement, en moins d’une heure, je me trouve dangereusement au seuil du mystère de mon origine. (15)

Meeting Yuki allows him to physically and mentally complete the immigrant cycle identified by Seiler. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, Kim is able to break the cycle of lost origins and the sense of solitude he suffered during his life, created by the mystery surrounding his birth and the fact that he did not know his birth father. Although both Chi-Hee and Kim are shown pacing along train tracks, at the end of the prologue (15) and epilogue (247) respectively, there is a difference: while Chi-Hee paces futilely, awaiting the officer’s return from meeting Mitsouyo, Kim does it because he anxiously awaits a new beginning.

CONCLUSION

On the Unity of Individuality

in the

Postmodern World

Although Kim initially searches for a sense of identity through an identification with a racial and ethnic label, he is unable to essentialize himself to such an extent that a single label would suffice. His is a postmodern identity, fractured, multidimensional, impossible to describe simply. He is not Asian nor North American; he is both. While this fact seems to escape his comprehension for the majority of the novel, it is apparent to the other characters, one of whom describes him as “un-Canadien-né-au-Japon-de-parents-coréens-écrivain-en-français” (220), a label which perhaps captures his identity as succinctly as is possible. Instead of a single, dominant culture informing his sense of self, Kim is a *métis*. The product of three different cultures, he is at once an outsider to all and a link between all of them.

The theme of *métissage* reoccurs throughout *Kimchi*, although it is only treated in depth after his relationship with Hiroé fails, and with it the prospect of finding a sense of belonging through romantic love. In the chapter entitled “Pneumothorax,” Kim visits a psychic before leaving for Japan the first time, and he is sent away when she detects a strong force emanating from his chest. Soon after, he becomes incapacitated and is diagnosed with pneumothorax, a potentially dangerous pocket of air trapped in the thorax which appears in the X-ray as “un caillou blanc ou une minuscule main d’enfant” (119). It is this image of the pocket of air as a child that Kim retains, calling it

un foetus gelé en moi [...] le foetus de l'écolier que j'avais été, à l'époque où je subissais les brimades de mes condisciples, à l'époque où quelque chose était mort en moi. Le foetus s'était raccroché aux parois de sa cage thoracique et s'était développé tant bien que mal, luttant pour gagner quelques centimètres, pour affirmer son droit de vivre. (117)

Instead of fearing this presence inside of himself, Kim accepts it and even welcomes it, feeling it still inside him even after being removed:

[L]es médecins avaient beau avoir chassé ce squatter hors de l'habitable de mon corps, son fantôme n'en continuait pas moins de me hanter, telle une marâtre taraudée par le remords et le fantôme vengeur de son enfant. Je sentais que mon destin était indissolublement lié au sien. [...] Un jour, le foetus reviendrait reprendre possession de moi, sans colère, tout naturellement. (121)

Kim's struggle with pneumothorax is a metaphor not only for his childhood suffering, but also for his ethnic identity at its root, an identity which marked him as the target for his classmates' bullying. Although this caused him great suffering, it is an inextricable part of his personality that cannot be destroyed.

Because of the possibility of the return of his pneumothorax, Kim is advised to be periodically reexamined. It is at one of these exams that he meets Mikami, the nurse who hires him to teach her daughter English in an attempt to reintegrate her into society. In Amy, Kim sees a mirror image of himself: a Eurasian *métis*, she refuses to attend school because of the constant harassment she receives from her classmates. It is over the course of her lessons and through the community that develops because of them that Kim no longer suffers from his own *métis* identity, as symbolized by his last pulmonary exam in which he is found to be free of pneumothorax (148).

As mentioned earlier, one of the most resolutely optimistic scenes of the novel occurs when Kim visits the Chinatown of Paris. Here, he is surrounded by examples of *métissage*:

[J]e me suis retourné à la voix d'une fillette, que j'ai prise tout d'abord pour une Blanche, et qui s'écriait "Papa! Papa!" en courant vers son père, un Chinois, tandis qu'une femme blanche, qui devait être la mère, les rejoignait. Je suis entré dans une boutique de vidéo: il y avait un grand téléviseur et sur l'écran une jolie Caucasienne blonde chantait en chinois, ou peut-être en vietnamien. [...] En me dirigeant vers la station de métro, je passe devant la vitrine d'un café où je vois une jolie Asiatique assise seule à une table. Elle avait les cheveux blonds. (239-40)

This scene comes soon after Kim reads the letter written to him by Chi-Hee and he ascends from the Catacombs, land of the dead, to rejoin the living, a changed man. Kim's response to this scene illustrates that he has taken to heart his father's words. These individuals, marked by the Occident and the Orient, seem to coexist peacefully, not limited by their birth but instead bound together by their "coeurs qui recherchent et ressentent la même chose" (238).

The complete change in Kim's approach to identity, which *Kimchi* records, is best exemplified by the change in his conception of Chinatowns. At first they offered him a sense of homecoming and comfort by providing a space in which he was no longer a minority: "les Chinatown du monde entier ont été [son] fil d'Ariane" (19). He subsequently realizes that he is mistaken and that they are instead spaces of desolation, simulacra of a fictional origin: "*Chinatown*, cela veut dire à la fois l'exil et l'illusion de la patrie. Comme si la patrie, cela existait vraiment. [...] Il y a autant de différences entre Chinatown et la Chine que la cuisine qu'on y sert" (238-9). While Kim ultimately rejects

ethnicity as the primary defining factor of identity, he nonetheless accepts that one's origins and cultural background do indeed inform one's sense of self, albeit in a secondary way. Like his fondness for kimchi and "Arirang," the material reminders of one's origins offer comfort and reassurance in otherwise unfamiliar situations, but they cannot provide the well-being that an authentic sense of community does.

Kimchi has been pigeonholed as "littérature migrante," implying that it is meant for a population in exile instead of for the general public. But the validity of its approach to identity is not limited to migrants, but is equally valid for the general population. Indeed, such terms as "migrant" and "native" are rapidly becoming antiquated: in the current world in which mobility between countries is largely unhampered and more than 200 million people are characterized as migrants, few countries can claim to escape the effects of migration. As these migrants adapt and integrate to the societies of their adopted countries, these societies adapt to them just as much, assimilating the cultural practices of their new residents.

Because of globalization, culture is changing more quickly than ever: heretofore insular, traditional cultures are quickly being reshaped and transformed to take into account outside influences, creating something different (if not greater) than the individual components. This process of transculturation is evident in nearly all aspects of modern culture. Instead of the dilution or even pollution of a fictional "pure" culture, this should be seen as a positive development which increases the richness of the global heritage, demonstrating human ingenuity and creating understanding. As *Kimchi* illustrates, a search for pure origins in an imagined past will always provoke more questions than it produces answers. Given the transcultural nature of modern global

culture, the creation of community around oneself, not taking into consideration the past of its members but instead their present condition, is now the only kind of community that is both feasible and desirable.

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**Appendix One
Figures**

Kana	Hepburn	Kunrei-shiki	Nihon-shiki
し	shi	si	si
じ	ji	zi	zi
ぢ	ji	zi	di
づ	zu	zu	du
ふ	fu	hu	hu
ち	chi	ti	ti
つ	tsu	tu	tu
しゃ	sha	sya	sya
しゅ	shu	syu	syu
しょ	sho	syo	syo
じゃ	ja	zya	zya
じゅ	ju	zyu	zyu
じょ	jo	zyo	zyo
ぢゃ	ja	zya	dya
ぢゅ	ju	zyu	dyu
ぢょ	jo	zyo	dyo
を	o	wo	wo

Figure 1: Differences between transliteration systems.

Japanese (kana)

あばれんぼう

Syllabic transliteration/ Hepburn and kunrei-shiki

A-BA-RE-N-BO-U/abarenbô

Ook Chung's transliterations (pages)

1. Abareñbo (44, 46, 78, 81)

2. Abareñbô (111)

3. Abarenbô (77—nom du chapitre, 183)

Figure 2: Abarenbô and transliterations.