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[See table of contents](#)

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# Deracialization in Ying Chen's Later Series of Novels: A Reading of *Querelle d'un squelette avec son double*

ALAIN RÉGNIER

## Towards a Universal Literary Space

YING CHEN IS AMONG the more highly recognized authors publishing in Quebec today within the field of what has come to be termed *écriture migrante*, or migrant writing. At the same time, she also numbers among the very few authors of East Asian origin currently working out of this same area. This factor has had a decided effect on how her writing has been received critically, as there is no equivalent in Quebec to the field of Asian Canadian (or North American) literary studies, which has existed for some time now in English-speaking Canada and is relatively well established. More often, the criticism that does exist on authors of East Asian origin tends, as noted, to occur within the larger context of *écriture migrante*, involving work on writers from a wide range of non-majority cultural backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> Given that Chen began her career as a Québécois author, up until the mid-2000s, the greater part of the critical attention she attracted was from Quebec, although she also received a significant amount of recognition internationally — from the United States and Europe — early on as well (her third novel, *L'ingratitude* [1995], was short-listed for the Femina).<sup>2</sup> This has recently changed, with critical attention now stemming from international sources for the most part, even if interest in Quebec and French-speaking Canada has also continued during this time. Although Chen has become increasingly visible on the international scene, she has remained somewhat under-studied in English-speaking Canada, with only sixteen works of criticism having appeared in anglophone Canadian publications, and with ten of these sixteen pieces still being written in French. Despite her international standing, Chen has been read persistently from within the Quebec *écriture migrante* context, even by critics from outside of Canada, from the earliest studies on her work up to the present. However, as she made her

more prominent entry onto the international stage in the mid-2000s, she began to be identified by critics as a Chinese and Chinese Canadian writer as well, something that was much less frequent at the outset when she was being read mainly as a Québécois author. In this overall sense, Chen's start as a Quebec migrant writer has remained with her despite her well-known efforts to distance herself from what she takes to be this limiting classification. Currently, most of the criticism on Chen is coming from outside of Quebec and Canada.

Although critical attention has been constant since the beginning, Chen's sudden change in writing style, discussed at greater length below, has created an unusual shift in which of her novels actually gets studied. Up until the late 2000s, works on Chen's first three novels alone (published between 1992 and 1995) vastly outnumbered those that included a discussion of her later novels in some way (there were more than twice as many, in fact). Although her later, more experimental novels (beginning with *Immobile*, published in 1998) were thus sometimes read in combination with her earlier novels, studies on works belonging to her later series of novels on their own were almost nonexistent. In the last ten years or so, however, a marked reversal has occurred and interest in Chen's first three novels has fallen off entirely, although they continue to be read at times in combination with the now more popular later novels. In May 2019, a study of Chen's haiku collection *Impressions d'été* (2008) or of *Blessures* (2016), Chen's first novel to be published following the conclusion of her later series, had yet to appear. In keeping with her positioning in relation to the area of écriture migrante, issues pertaining to the typical themes of exile, displacement, and memory have been an ever-present concern in the criticism on Chen from the beginning. Interest in identity and subject formation has been a constant in the criticism from the outset as well, whether in relation to the first three, more realistically oriented novels, or the later novels, which are more abstract and metaphoric in nature. Somewhat less frequent but just as consistent have been feminist readings of Chen, with a main focus on motherhood and family relations. Not surprisingly, since the end of the 1990s and the publication of *Immobile* (and, not long before this, *L'ingratitude*, which can be seen as a transitional work stylistically), discussions on Chen's use of form have also been quite prevalent, though not always in relation to her effort to deracialize her work through a more universalist mode of writing.

Chen is now in fact widely known for her decision to turn away from what, in both Quebec and English-speaking Canada, has problematically become the minor literary tradition of ethnic writing, a manner of literary production that tends to participate in and thus perpetuate the dominant culture's logic of racial and ethnic differentiation that most authors in the field are actually looking to overcome. This risk of ghettoization was indeed discerned early on. Commenting on the reception of *La Québécoise* (1983), which has in a way become the paradigmatic text of the *écriture migrante* corpus in Quebec, Régine Robin notes how her own novel has usually been classified as a work of ethnic fiction ("roman 'ethnique')": "Ce que cette catégorie mal à propos signifie dans la circulation du discours social québécois actuel, c'est que, comme nombre d'autres, il s'agit d'un roman écrit par un écrivain qui n'est pas né au Québec, qui vient donc d'ailleurs, qui, tout en écrivant en français, a peut-être laissé derrière lui une autre langue, maternelle, vernaculaire ou autre encore. Un écrivain qui a donc un autre pays d'origine et qui a eu à se battre avec lui-même pour s'adapter à ce nouveau pays" ("De nouveaux jardins" 207-08). She goes on to explain how difficult, and even impossible, it is for the immigrant writer to integrate into Quebec majority culture at the end of the twentieth century (208). Writing more recently, Robin claims that the promise of integration into the national literature which seemed to be held out initially in the 1980s by the designation *écriture migrante* as a term of institutional recognition has not been fulfilled: "Mais nous n'avons pas assisté à cette procédure. On 'nous' a bel et bien mis à part, même si l'institution littéraire nous a fait une place en nous publiant." As she observes, migrant writers continue to be glaringly absent and marginalized in the histories of Quebec's literature (*Nous autres* 294-95).<sup>3</sup>

This situation, though far from new, has continued to chafe at Chen. In her book of essays *Quatre mille marches*, she writes of how, when categorized as an

écrivain néo-québécois, j'ai le sentiment de devenir non seulement plus que jamais chinoise, mais encore une porte-parole de la culture chinoise. Pour le public, je pense en chinois, je me traduis du chinois, mes personnages incarnent avant tout la tradition chinoise, mes romans évoquent les cauchemars communistes. J'ai en vain tenté de me greffer un esprit d'éternel errant, de me créer un destin d'heureuse orpheline. . . . Or, avec une gentillesse impas-

sable, on finit toujours par me rappeler à l'ordre, ou bien en me clouant dans la terre où je vis [as a Chinese immigrant] . . . ou bien en me renvoyant à la terre que j'ai quittée. (47-48)

As a result, Chen has seen the need to move away from the constraints of ethnic literary discourse, choosing to distance herself from questions not only of Chineseness but of race and ethnicity in general. The negative side to her work's reception in Quebec has led her to spurn the notions of national and cultural origins. For Chen, cultures are founded in hybridity and to her the idea of cultural origins is a fiction (26, 8-9). Likewise, the nationalist mindset is met with suspicion: "Le nationalisme me semble invincible en tant que sentiment humain. Mais il ne devrait pas être pris pour un principe, une noble cause. Un nationalisme, quand il est petit, a peut-être mille raisons et mérite mille fois la compassion; mais dès qu'il devient grand . . . son pouvoir peut être destructeur" (20).

Focusing on the individual, for Chen, has thus been a way of responding to the pressures of collective thinking. "Mon véritable foyer est là où je deviens ce que je veux être" (13), she writes in *Quatre mille marches*. An origin, if it exists, is in her view to be found in the self, though this emphasis on the self is not to be associated with the individualism of liberal society. Speaking of how she hopes as a mother to avoid being taken as the "origin" of her own child, she states, "Je préfère alors penser que, comme il nous arrive de chercher partout une clé que nous tenons pourtant dans notre main, nous ne trouverons pas nos origines, car nous sommes notre propre origine. Chacun de nous est un mince ruisseau qui se jette dans la mer où se retrouve l'humanité entière" (26). Situating one's origin in a predecessor is in this manner perceived as being detrimental. According to Chen, it is the individual who must find his or her own reason for living, even if this individual cannot entirely escape being part of something larger as well: "je ne suis pas mes ancêtres, je ne suis pas les autres. Mais je ne serais pas moi sans mes ancêtres et sans les autres" (122). The task of literature, as Chen sees it, is in this sense to promote "une vision du monde microscopique, de transformer si possible le dialogue des cultures en des dialogues entre des individus, sinon en monologues. . . . Je pense donc que le monde sera peut-être sauvé le jour où on distinguera moins entre les groupes qu'entre les individus" (50-51).

Ultimately, Chen's response to the problem of racial and ethnic

division has involved a progressive search for a deracialized space in her writing, achieved through what can be thought of as a universalist literary style and a focus on universal human experience that exceeds the limits associated with everyday racial and ethnic classifications.<sup>4</sup> In the wake of the postmodern questioning of metanarratives, the idea of the universal is quite often held as suspect these days. But in the francophone literary context that Chen is writing out of, the notion has a certain history, meaning that Chen's later turn in writing style has not met with any kind of resistance on the part of critics. Racial and ethnic minority writing in Quebec is closely associated with the discourse of transculture and transculturation, whose general objective is precisely the creation of a universal social order. Although transcultural thought has also drawn the attention of majority-culture authors and critics, it has often served as a kind implicit backdrop to discussions on migrant writing in the province. Indeed, Gilles Dupuis sees the field of *écriture migrante* and the discourse of transculture as mutually involved ("Transculturalism" 501), and he defines the term in opposition to the more static notion of interculturalism (which also happens to be the term privileged officially by the Quebec government in its dealing with cultural diversity). Unlike interculturalism, Dupuis writes, transculture

does not limit itself to two cultures facing each other, trying to work out what they assume to be their intrinsic discrepancies. Transculturalism takes place when at least two — and sometimes three or more — cultures are not only engaged in dialogue, but partake in a more profound and often contradictory process, in which enlightenment, misunderstanding, and continuous reassessment of identity are at play. The ultimate aim is to transform each other's identity through a long, arduous, and sometimes painful negotiation of Otherness. ("Transculturalism" 500)

Lamberto Tassinari, an important figure in the promotion of transcultural thought in the 1980s and 90s, refers to transculture in terms of a "nouvel humanisme" (21), which seeks to develop the idea of the universal to the fullest (24).<sup>5</sup> Appeals to the universal are also frequent in the French literary context, where Goethe's notion of a *Weltliteratur* is commonly translated as *littérature universelle*. Within this field, Dupuis writes, "l'origine de l'écrivain et son ancrage dans une réalité géographique et historique bien déterminée compte moins que les grands thèmes de l'humanité. . . . L'écrivain universel est celui qui effacerait

dans son oeuvre les traces de son origine distincte ou alors qui s'en inspirerait, mais sans insister sur cette particularité, pour traiter des grandes questions existentielles qui concernent en principe tout le monde" ("La littérature migrante" 28).

In either case (and there is undoubtedly some overlap given Quebec literature's ties to the French literary tradition), the universal is not to be seen as a monolithic formation. It is the opposite, in fact. As Rosa de Diego puts it, writing out of a European context, with a French literary perspective, "La littérature contemporaine du Québec est surtout et essentiellement universelle: elle se construit par le croisement de cultures, l'Amérique et l'Europe, elle s'ouvre à des aspects historiques, sociaux, littéraires, venus d'ailleurs. L'unité, l'homogénéité est remise en question par un mixage thématique, par un imaginaire cosmopolite" (187). The universal under these terms is shown to be grounded in materiality rather than abstraction, and thus open to change over time depending on the persons and conditions involved. It is difficult to say what Chen means precisely when she refers to the universal in her nonfiction and her interviews because she does not define it anywhere. Although she is conscious and open to the mixing of cultures, she is not an outspoken transculturalist and makes no explicit reference to transculture in her writing. She indeed appears to have arrived at her understanding of the universal by following her own individual path, which more than likely involves some debt to French literature. Still, it is the strong presence of transcultural discourse in Quebec, with its view of the universal, which may have prepared the way for the reception of Chen's work in the province.

A universal literary space could thus be defined as a space in which all readers can somehow recognize themselves, without necessarily having to see themselves in the text in exactly the same way. What characterizes the universal or transcultural space is its indeterminacy; it is never fully one thing or the other. Chen in her writing takes this sense of indeterminacy to an extreme, pushing it to the point of unrecognizability. As such, a number of details in *Immobile* and the novels that follow indicate that the works could just as easily be set in the West as in the East. The ease and comfort that the characters enjoy in the novels in particular certainly come across as a middle-class phenomenon that has its equivalent in Western society. The space that the characters occupy in Chen's novels is impossible to locate in any definite way, being furnished with a minimum of spatial markers, which have otherwise

become ubiquitous in contemporary urban culture: the university, the patisserie or bakery, the movie theatre, the grocery store, and the market each figure among the few general reference points in her fiction. Likewise, her characters, if they are described physically at all, are never portrayed racially or in any way that might signal their belonging to any single ethnic group; rather, they are depicted solely in terms of what may be thought of as universal features — mannerisms, mood, age, or other non-racial bodily traits. Even something such as hair colour is avoided in Chen's later novels, except when greying. Through this rendering of space and the removal of all racial and ethnic markers, Chen eliminates the typical signs that might serve to orient a more "sociological" reading of her fiction. The traits commonly associated with ethnic literary discourse are subverted here, and racial and ethnic identity is allowed to dissipate. As will be seen in the reading of *Querelle d'un squelette avec son double*, which follows in the second part of this article, by functioning at this more universal level, the meaning of Chen's work becomes highly metaphorical.

In a related manner, Chen makes use of fantastic literary conventions in her fiction in an effort to destabilize the racial and ethnic framework that she has been obliged to work out of. The rendering of a particular cultural reality that is characteristic of racial and ethnic minority writing must, by its very nature, draw on a mimetic form of some kind. This has led to the widespread (and now institutionalized) assumption that ethnic literature is indissociable from realist or naturalist representation, which loads the mimetic form with certain institutionalized values pertaining to the depiction of race and ethnicity. As Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn put it, the writing of ethnic authors in Canada "has often been regarded as autobiographical and thus of secondary literary status." Citing Joseph Pivato, they note how the writing has also been criticized as being "stuck in the convention of literary realism" (11). For Roy Miki, it is therefore important that authors "be vigilant not simply to mime the given narrative, genre, and filmic forms through which dominant values are aestheticized. Minority subject matter, when encoded in forms adjusted to accommodate the expectations of the social majority, can willy-nilly lead to compromise, distortion, and misrepresentation." The task of the author under such conditions is to work against taken-for-granted assumptions through formal disruption (117).<sup>6</sup> Due to nothing other than the appearance of her (recognizably

Asian) name on the cover of any of her books, Chen's reader will at first sight typically be led to expect a work of migrant writing, with all of its implied conventions. In turning to the fantastic form in *Immobile*, Chen blatantly moves away from the realism and the autobiographical that tends to define the ethnic literary genre. The fantastic allows Chen to deal with larger issues beyond the limits imposed upon her from the outside by her own racial and ethnic identity.<sup>7</sup>

It is the fantastic context that accounts for the ghost-like qualities that are sometimes assigned to Chen's unnamed narrator, with Chen herself referring to her later novels as comprising a series of "récits fantomatiques" (*La lenteur* 86). The narrator has the capacity to lead multiple, sometimes parallel, lives that shift in nature from novel to novel, being subject to reincarnation, metempsychosis, and moments of what can be called psychosomatic sympathization with her other selves. (In addition to spending all of *Espèces* [2010] as a domestic cat, for example, she develops a penchant for theatrical singing in *Immobile*, which conforms with her role as an opera singer in her earlier lifetime, and suffers from a swelling on the head in *Le champ dans la mer*, which is linked to the loose roofing tile that killed her as a girl in a prior existence [31].) If any alignment remains possible between the author and her narrator in Chen's fiction, then, it cannot occur at the level of racial or ethnic identity but rather at the level of the narrator's social commentary, with contemporary middle-class society and its more general aspects proving to be her main object of criticism. Chen's series of novels begins with *Immobile* and concludes with *La rive est loin* (2013), and each volume published after *Immobile* — six in total — can be read as an extension of the first text without necessarily needing to be read in succession. *Querelle d'un squelette avec son double*, the third novel in the series, has received little critical attention, yet it provides a clear example of how Chen's work departs from the racializing tendencies of traditional migrant writing, all the while dealing with an issue that is, in an inextricable way, central to the lived experience of both racialized and non-racialized subjects, namely, that of alterity. This topic is of undeniably pressing importance in the present-day world, severely differentiated as it is between enfranchised and disenfranchised populations. In turning to this question, Chen, it will be shown, has not entirely abandoned the problems tied to racialization but has chosen to approach them in more "universal" terms.

*Querelle d'un squelette avec son double*

Issues relating to alterity at the present time in history, according to Pierre Ouellet, are of primary importance both in political and social terms but also with regard to cultural production and the envisioning of a future world ("Le principe" 8). If the notion of alterity has become commonplace in social discourse, says Ouellet, its function in contemporary existence remains to be fully understood, mainly because it tends to be experienced at the more profound level of what he refers to as a "forme de vie" rather than at the level of what one may consciously believe about the surrounding world. Indeed, alterity, as it is lived in present-day society, is perhaps to be considered more accurately as involving "une véritable 'sensibilité,' un ensemble d'attitudes, d'affects et de comportements qu'on peut appeler une *aisthesis* et un *ethos*," a general attitude that influences not only how one perceives self and other but also how one engages with the world at large (9). Fundamental to such a view of alterity is the sense that the self is constituted in relation to the environment that it lives in. At the same time, the experience of otherness cannot be limited strictly to encounters outside the self but must be seen as occurring "inside" as well. Writing in another context, Ouellet observes, "Il n'y a pas de présence à soi pleine et entière qui permettrait de saisir dans l'immédiat l'essence de son identité: la différenciation interne à soi-même, comme dans le rapport aux autres, . . . nous oblige à prendre en compte les nombreuses strates du monde d'images et de paroles au sein duquel les identités se construisent et se déconstruisent sans relâche" (Préface 12). The fact that it is constituted through a social discourse, which is never fully one's own, introduces an "écart irréductible" into any identity, whether individual or collective (13-14).

Jean-Christophe Bailly makes a similar claim in "La scène pronomi-nale," where he considers how the self can only ever exist through the semiotic workings of the pronoun "je" (51-54). He goes on to emphasize that the "je" is always constituted not only in relation to a single "tu" but to a multiplicity of such others whose identities ultimately remain undecidable (55-57). For Bailly, an example of this experience, of what can be thought of as a sort of mutual undecidability that still manages to resist the absolute separation of self and other, occurs in condensed form in the contemplation of a portrait, either painted or photographed (57-58): "Entre soi et un autre de soi toujours à venir, comme entre soi et tous les autres, ce qui est donc filmé, c'est d'abord une variabilité infinie,

c'est la fragilité de toute position et de toute posture, et c'est l'identité de ce qui en nous a pu dire (et redit) *ego sum* et de ce qui a pu dire (et redit) 'je suis un autre'" (59). Put otherwise, the viewing of the portrait, the momentary relation it entails between two subject-objects perceived mutually in their non-fullness, points, for Bailly, to the ever-shifting and unstable nature of such relations, but it can also be taken as representing the nature of the self as well — at once self-present and other to itself.

*Querelle d'un squelette avec son double* dramatizes this situation and the experience of alterity it involves through the narrator's encounter with her double. Part of the double's disconcerting nature in the novel results from the moments when, in addition to being caught in the debris of an earthquake, she appears to be her own self, with a life in another city, where she has friends and a child resulting from an earlier relationship, as well as from passages in which she describes her search for the narrator in the latter's own city, waiting to approach her as if she were a long-lost relative — all of which is belied by the fact that everything she says is being heard inside the narrator's head, to the extent that she becomes part of the narrator. The situation transgresses against what would usually be expected of a character in a realist work through a sort of blending or confusion of states of intersubjectivity and intrasubjectivity.

Both characters will speak of the strangeness felt upon seeing the other. "J'ai eu l'impression," the double states, with respect to her first encounter with the narrator in the street, "de me trouver devant le miroir où apparaissait un fantôme, un squelette en mouvement, qui était moi mais pas tout à fait" (22-23). She will go on to say again further on, "c'était comme si je me regardais dans un miroir, . . . je ressentais à la fois amour et insatisfaction, familiarité et malaise" (36). In a similar way, the narrator will also relate how she came face to face with herself at the pâtisserie across the street from her home: "La vue de cette personne m'a inspiré un sentiment très étrange. . . . J'ai cru me voir dans un miroir. Elle semblait dotée exactement des mêmes traits physiques que moi. . . . En regardant cette personne, j'avais l'impression de regarder ma propre photo, . . . étonnée de me découvrir sous une forme aussi complète mais détachée de moi, précise et pourtant douteuse" (134-35). She continues to observe the double at the pâtisserie from the balcony of her house but stops going out, not out of a direct fear of the other but due to the unease created by the strong emotional attraction she feels

towards the double: "Je me sentais pleine d'elle. L'autre me remplissait au risque de se substituer à moi. Et j'avais horreur de cet état d'âme." She also speaks, conversely, of how "ce corps quasi identique au mien, lorsqu'il s'éloignait, m'inspirait une langueur indicible, un sentiment de manque presque douloureux. Cela ressemblait à un trou vague et infini, que l'on aperçoit la nuit dans un rêve, et qu'au lever du jour on cherche en vain à combler" (137-38). If the double's appearance as other awakens an intense curiosity in the narrator and a desire to know who she is, the narrator finds the encounter unsettling as well because she feels that her own sense of self is threatened by the other figure. As the double puts it, "Ma présence sème le doute sur l'unicité de votre personne. Tout à coup vous devenez copiable. Votre histoire n'est que répétition en série. . . . Vous êtes aussi pauvre que moi" (47). The narrator is thus confronted with her own state of non-originality, her true nature as copy, that is, that the self has no solid basis, and consequently that there may be no real way to escape the strangeness of seeing the self as other and the anxiety that this provokes.

One might argue that it is seeing the self in this way, with the instability and openness that it entails, that allows for more genuine relations with external difference. Ouellet speaks of alterity, and the relationality that it implies, in a way that signals its intrinsic involvement in human existence. The other, in his view, is never a "thing in itself" ("chose en soi"; my trans.); otherness is always, on the contrary, the result of one self's intersubjective encounter with another who is recognized as differing. "L'autre *existe*," Ouellet writes, "mais jamais *en lui-même*. Il est hors de lui, tout comme moi" ("Le lieu" 186). Self and other are thus interrelated; however, by resisting the voice that she hears ("Cet appel, comme provenant du fond de moi, mais sans être le mien" [20]), the narrator in *Querelle d'un squelette avec son double* can be seen as metaphorically shutting out the other through whom she is socially constituted, who is *inside* her somehow while being outside. And it is this effort at resistance that comprises a significant part of the novel's subject matter.

Indeed, the foregoing statements by Ouellet and Bailly are made at a rather generalized level and do not take into account the forms of hierarchy that are almost always involved in encounters with the other. As I will attempt to illustrate, *Querelle d'un squelette avec son double* as a whole can in this manner be seen as depicting a debate between priv-

ileged and unprivileged subjects, between what can be taken to be the individual of liberal society and the other of the developing world, where the former attempts to defend itself against the incursion of the latter. In accordance with Ying Chen's approach to portraying race and ethnicity, the figure of the unprivileged in *Querelle d'un squelette avec son double* is not racialized but is identified semi-metaphorically as the inhabitant of a space prone to disaster, "un endroit voué aux catastrophes" (16), where the recent earthquake may be seen as some sort of economic or environmental collapse or calamity and the river separating the two cities in the narrative — "cet abîme qui nous divise" (7) — as referring to economic disparity. What keeps the double from moving permanently to the narrator's city are the restrictions on her passport (96), or her nationality. The double ends her opening monologue by describing the space that she finds herself in as an "espace restreint, sans issue où je manque d'air, . . . ce tombeau que je n'ai pas choisi" (9). In the narrator's opening monologue, by comparison, the latter is planning a dinner party for the friends of her husband, simply named A., and the couple has moved into a new home facing a patisserie: "La journée s'annonce bonne. Pas un nuage dans le ciel. Pas un soupçon de catastrophe" (10). In her world, there is no visible sign that a disaster has occurred across the river (64). If in the novel's opening the double is buried up to her waist (7), the narrator has "[le] bonheur d'avoir les jambes libres, les jambes complètes" (12). When later the narrator receives her catered meal (128-29), the double is reduced to drinking her tears and consuming her blanket (125), what at this point constitutes her only possession.

In *Un enfant à ma porte*, the fifth novel in Chen's series, the narrator will refer back to the recent earthquake in the other city in terms that resonate with the discourse on immigration commonly encountered in dominant Western society, and elsewhere as well perhaps, along with the disdain for the other that the discourse usually involves: "Depuis la catastrophe, la ville a du mal à se rétablir et de plus en plus de gens . . . viennent vivre dans des rues de notre ville, exposent sous notre nez la misère des autres que nous ne voulons pas chez nous, nous obligent à la partager" (17-18). She states again later on, "après le tremblement de terre, nous croisons dans notre rue de plus en plus d'individus à la mine de clochards, prêts à voler les emplois à la jeunesse de notre ville, prêts à faire toutes les corvées pour presque rien, compétitifs et inquiétants, car ces gens-là n'avaient rien à perdre, tout cet envahissement inattendu qui

coûtait une fortune à notre ville dans l'effort de résoudre le problème" (53-54). In *Frames of War*, a book on the representation of military conflict and its public reception, Judith Butler introduces the idea of grievability, which acts as a sort of normative standard by which the value of life is gauged, and which effectively serves to divide the world into grievable and ungrievable populations. As she writes, war often works to set apart those "whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and [those] whose lives are considered ungrievable. . . . An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all" (38). Reflecting on the framing of reality produced by the images of war, she notes how these "[cognitive] frames are operative in [depictions of] imprisonment and torture, but also in the politics of immigration, according to which certain lives are perceived as lives while others, though apparently living, fail to assume perceptual form as such." Under these circumstances, the loss of certain populations will be taken as "eminently grievable," while that of others will not be grieved at all:

The differential distribution of grievability across populations has implications for why and when we feel politically consequential affective dispositions such as horror, guilt, righteous sadism, loss, and indifference. . . . [The resulting] differential distribution of precarity is at once a material and a perceptual issue, since those whose lives are not "regarded" as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death. (23-25)

The "grievability" of the double's life is not discerned by Chen's narrator, or it is foreclosed. She claims to have once had "une aversion instinctive et inexplicable" to the city across the river (40), and her rejection of the double's plea occurs immediately in *Querelle d'un squelette avec son double* through a sort of self-righteous rationalizing based on a principle of individualism that denies her responsibility in the situation but that just as quickly contradicts itself: "*Ce n'est pas juste. Chacun devrait, n'est-ce pas, assumer son propre destin, se plier devant son propre sort, se réjouir de sa fortune mais aussi en porter le fardeau. Chacun vit pour soi. Rien n'est jamais juste*" (12; emphasis added). A desensitized indifference eventually adds itself to the rationalizing. With regard to the calls for help and the scenes of disaster that are regularly

disseminated through the news, the narrator declares, “[le] spectacle est quotidien, cela n’étonne plus personne. Je me demande d’ailleurs si cela vaut la peine d’accourir pour dénicher des corps de toute façon perdus, pour soutenir des murs qui ne tiennent plus. Le secours est une entreprise dangereuse, elle va nous coûter cher, elle va nous entraîner nous aussi dans des ruines” (64-65). There are indications that the public (people in the street outside the narrator’s house) may have learned about the earthquake, but its subsequent indifference seems to coincide with the narrator’s (83, 92).

The meaning of Chen’s novel would thus appear to turn on the narrator’s capacity to recognize the value of her double’s life. It must be said that this remains a point of ambiguity in the text. For her part, the double ends the novel on a tone of resignation mixed with bitterness. The hope for her own survival that she had held to throughout the narrative is now in a sense transferred to the son that she continues to believe is alive but that may be caught in circumstances similar to her own. She nevertheless continues to try to establish some sort of connection with the narrator, although she seems to see the futility in this as well. She believes ultimately that her child may still someday find shelter and assistance with the narrator, even if she herself was unable to do so (161-62). Throughout the novel, sleep represents death for both characters. “Il ne faut pas dormir si on doit se réveiller par la suite” (159), as the narrator says. Towards the end, the double chooses to close her eyes, and the narrator finds herself at the door to her bedroom and feeling drained by the day’s events (147-48, 159-60), suggesting that both hers and the double’s deaths are imminent. There is indeed a sense that something decisive has been lost at the conclusion of *Querelle d’un squelette avec son double*, even if the people in the narrator’s neighbourhood do not yet seem to understand this. It is certainly telling that the narrator appears to die along with her double at the novel’s end, her death being in a way the result of her own insensitivity and inaction. The narrator’s death demonstrates that hierarchies of grievability are not perpetually sustainable, at least not without incurring severe consequences. Due to the state of interdependency in which they subsist, the loss of the other must somehow also entail the loss of the self.

However, there may be another side to Chen’s narrator, one that she herself is not fully aware of and must struggle to acknowledge. In *Un enfant à ma porte*, she will again refer back to the double’s situation

in the earlier novel in a way that shows that she is capable of empathy. “Elle [the double] avait lutté pour survivre, peut-être même sans en être consciente, son enfant était l’ultime objectif de cette lutte,” she states. “J’avais l’impression d’avoir été moi-même là, à sa place, d’avoir perdu mon enfant, d’être morte dans l’angoisse de ne pas encore connaître son avenir, de n’avoir aucune certitude de sa survie à lui” (18). Likewise, the narrator shows in *Querelle d’un squelette avec son double* that she is able to imagine what is taking place in the double’s world, as, half-waking at one point, she visualizes the events resulting from the earthquake on the other side of the river (33). There is the suggestion in fact that the narrator takes in the lost or abandoned child in *Un enfant à ma porte* partly in an effort to compensate for her failure to act in *Querelle d’un squelette avec son double* (*Un enfant* 53-54). If she can identify with the other, it may be because she is herself in a similar manner trapped in her own middle-class culture, its “confort inconfortable,” which has the effect of separating the individual from his or her own “real” self more than anything (*Querelle* 32). The narrator’s own hierarchized condition as a woman in her society — a constant concern in Chen’s series — may in this sense be seen as a potential basis for cross-cultural understanding, even if she avoids overtly coming to such conclusions. To this extent, one may conceivably take the double’s situation — slowly being buried alive in a cramped space — as a reflection of the narrator’s own position within a liberal, patriarchal social order, a reading which brings one back to the possibility that the double may somehow be an actual part of the narrator. Indeed, there are times when the double’s speech comes across as the inner voice of the narrator’s conscience. The voice begins to be heard not long after the narrator moves into her new home at the opening of the novel and starts to participate more actively in the economic disparity at the centre of the text, a manner of social privilege that is contained emblematically in the image of the pâtisserie that provides the narrator’s neighbourhood with baked goods. As the narrator remarks, “Chaque fois que je vais à la pâtisserie, j’entends cette voix dont je suis la cible. Et maintenant elle monte dans ma maison, enveloppée de l’odeur de la farine cuite. Quelle audace et quelle indiscretion! . . . Elle ne me lâchera pas. . . . Cette voix me perce les oreilles” (10-12).

The narrator’s underlying receptivity towards the other is signalled finally by the increasing paralysis that she physically shares with the double throughout the novel and by the fact that she does, by the nar-

rative's closing, attempt to phone for help (149-50, 155). If still insufficient, the narrator's outlook is more constructive than that of her husband, A., and the middle-class world he metaphorically represents, both of which remain entirely immune to the voice that the narrator hears (18-19). In the end, the narrator finds herself in something of a double bind, for even if she were to report that a voice in her head is calling for help from a neighbouring city, she would, as she herself observes, be taken as requiring psychiatric help or accused of creating mischief (120, 93-94). If, in her own world, the narrator turns out to be the most amenable to the double's plight, at a pragmatic level, she is the least equipped to follow through on this sense of recognition. In a way, she represents a different, more receptive subjectivity that is however not yet viable in the present social environment. Butler ends *Frames of War* by commenting on the conditions that must be in place if an individual is to respond affirmatively to an appeal to non-violence:

Those "conditions" include not just my private resources, but the various mediating forms and frames that make responsiveness possible. . . . If the claim of the other upon me is to reach me, it must be mediated in some way, which means that our very capacity to respond with non-violence . . . depends upon the [socially constructed] frames by which the world is given and by which the domain of appearance is circumscribed. . . . If the claim is registered, it reveals me less as an "ego" than as a being bound up with others in inextricable and irreversible ways, existing in a generalized condition of precariousness and interdependency, affectively driven and crafted by those whose effects on me I never chose. (179-80)

It can thus be said that the nexus of social conditions that keeps the narrator from apprehending her double's vulnerability and grievability on the one hand also works against her responsiveness to the double's appeal to her on the other. As willing as she may be to respond to her double as an individual, she will not be able to if the prior conditions are not in place socially allowing her to do so. The question is not limited to a single, individual will to act, in other words, although this would also be required.

Mixed in with the profound sense of dissatisfaction that *Querelle d'un squelette avec son double* communicates with respect to the world's present state of affairs, then, is the indication that the situation is not

entirely irrevocable. But a more favourable social context is required, one that is perhaps difficult to envisage from within the framework provided by Chen's novel but that would necessarily involve a relativizing of the distance and division separating the liberal self and its subjugated other, what often amounts these days to racialized and non-racialized subjectivities. It would be a world in which the dissent of the other could not only be heard but also acted upon.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Three other names that tend to come up in discussions of this area of literary production are those of Ook Chung, Aki Shimazaki, and Kim Thúy. It is fair to say that critical attention directed towards these authors as a group has been entirely absent until recently, with two special sections and a special issue in Quebec periodicals on the topic of "orientalism" in Quebec literature having appeared for the first time, and almost simultaneously, in 2005 and 2006. See the special section "L'Extrême-Orient ou la destinée de l'écriture," edited by Janusz Przychodzen; the special section "Figures et contre-figures de l'orientalisme," edited by Mounia Benalil and Gilles Dupuis; and the special issue *Identités hybrides: Orient et orientalisme au Québec*, edited by Benalil and Przychodzen. Even here, however, the criticism on these authors — who are nevertheless acknowledged — remains peripheral to what is still for the most part the study of Eastern culture in the writing of white Québécois authors, as reflected in the continued use of the terms *Orient* and *orientalisme* in these publications, which have not acquired the same negative connotations in Quebec as they have in the English-speaking world.

<sup>2</sup> The following comments on Chen's critical reception are based on ninety-six articles and book chapters that I was able to locate, published between 1992 and 2018 (another nine were unobtainable at the time that this article was written).

<sup>3</sup> See also Caccia 61-62; and Harel 17-18, 20, 24. The same general scenario exists in English-speaking Canada; see, for example, Huggan 116-17; Kamboureli ch. 3; and Siemerling, "Writing Ethnicity" 14-18.

<sup>4</sup> The change in Chen's writing style is now commonly acknowledged in the criticism. In the early 2000s, shortly after the appearance of *L'ingratitude* and *Immobile*, references made more or less in passing to Chen's stylistic development and search for the universal begin to occur frequently. For three in-depth discussions on the issue, see Dubois and Hommel; Dupuis, "La littérature migrante"; and Huot.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the history of transcultural thought in Quebec social discourse, see Bissonnette; Lamore; and Moser.

<sup>6</sup> The situation is very similar in the francophone context; see Caccia 65; and Robin, *Nous autres* 296-98.

<sup>7</sup> The fantastic genre is widely known for its capacity to disrupt both realist literary expectations and the reader's sense of the referential world. On this issue, see Baronian 27, 259, 298; Bessière 11-13; Bouvet 27, 61-62; and Todorov 28-29, 35-36.

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