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WOODEN FISH SONGS

Ruthanne Lum McCunn

With an Introduction by King-Kok Cheung and a New Afterword by the Author

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For my Hong Kong family,
now scattered in this world and beyond

and

for Don, who has been at the heart of my life
in America almost from the beginning

History is a novel that has been lived.
—Edmond and Jules DeGoncourt

Who has the right to speak for whom?
—Anna Deveare Smith

Introduction

KING-KOK CHEUNG

In the Epilogue to the 1995 edition of *Wooden Fish Songs,* Ruthanne Lum McCunn reflects on a paradox about Lue Gim Gong (1858–1925), the silent protagonist of her biographical novel. She notes that Lue contributed to the "citrus industry in the millions, and his work was honored in the Florida Pavilion at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair and the 1940 New York World's Fair," but the horticulturist, who died a pauper, "was not acknowledged in death any more than in life." *Wooden Fish Songs* commemorates the life of this unacknowledged pioneer who suffered multiple rejections—from his family in China, from his Chinese compatriots in the United States, and from the racially segregated communities in North Adams, Massachusetts, and DeLand, Florida. McCunn, after conducting extensive and meticulous research, weaves history and fiction into a colorful fabric that spans three-quarters of a century, two continents, several states in America, and three cultures. Lue Gim Gong's story is told from the points of view of three women: Sum Jui, Lue's mother in China; Fanny Burlingame, his white "mother" in the United States; and Sheba, Fanny's African American cook and Lue's friend. Three interrelated aspects of *Wooden*

Research for this essay is supported by funding from the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. I thank Marlon Hom and Him Mark Lai for their help in solving (and compounding) the mystery about Lue's Chinese name, and Ruthanne Lum McCunn for her generosity in sharing material and offering valuable comments.

Fish Songs distinguish it from most Asian American fiction and suggest new frontiers for ethnic studies, immigrant history and fiction, and American studies. First, while ethnographic fiction about early Asian experiences in the United States tends to focus on the predominant male immigrants and their points of view, this historical novel encompasses the people left behind in China and the non-Asians whom the immigrants encounter in the New World. It reveals that early Chinese immigrants were not all members of "bachelor societies," that women also played important roles in the immigrants' lives, and that female voices could fill in the details missing from official annals.

In particular, we are given intimate glimpses into the lives of the three radically different and self-contradictory female narrators. Unlike male historians and narrators who overlook female experiences, these three women tell us as much about themselves as about the men in their lives. Sum Jui chronicles family conflict and village life in China through fat and lean years. Though highly adept and pragmatic in cultivating fruit trees, she believes implicitly in ghosts and spirits, to the extent that she strangles her own grandson at birth to prevent his adoption by her sister-in-law, whom she believes to be a "fox ghost." Fanny, the Sunday school teacher whose devotion to Lue is inseparable from her supercilious patronage and her selfish desire to turn him into *her* "creation," is quick to notice the racism toward Lue in the white community but slow to acknowledge her own exploitation of him. Sheba has lost her father to lynching and her mother to grief; fear of her own powerlessness to protect her young deters her from motherhood. Thus she both shares her husband's desire for children and drinks contraceptive tea on the sly.

What connects these three women, besides their close relationship with Lue, are their strong beliefs in heterogeneous "ghosts" on the one hand and, on the other, their iron will and remarkable agency, their determination against formidable odds to control their own lives and the lives of those close to them. Marked by her grandfather's ghost since early childhood, Sum Jui is supposed to be a curse to her natal and conjugal families. Yet her green thumb enables her to find a desirable spouse and to sustain their extended family despite disinheritance, famine, and ostracism. Fanny, though a staunch believer in the Holy Ghost, strives to keep Lue to herself rather than lose him to missionary work in China. Sheba listens to her mother's spirit as long as it accords

with her own will; she goes against its counsel when, in her early teens, she decides to seclude herself in the woods.

Second, by orchestrating the three points of view, the novel espouses multiple ways of seeing, both structurally and thematically. It provides us not only with contrasting dimensions of the main characters but also with disparate religious, cultural, and medical beliefs in a singularly nonjudgmental and nonhierarchical manner. We learn from Fanny's account about her abiding solicitude toward Lue and her Christian charity. Sheba, however, paints a much less flattering picture. Fanny views Lue as a potential lover, whereas Sheba considers him to be Fanny's submissive servant and scoffs at her inconsistency: "For all she held Lue high, she never gived him the freedom of a dog. Outside of his working in the grove and their hours of sleeping, she made him stay by her side" (345). And again, "Whatever she said was what Lue done" (353). Not that Sheba's opinion is any more reliable than Fanny's. The reader, privy to Fanny's inner thoughts, knows that one of the reasons the white woman keeps Lue constantly next to her is her sexual attraction to him; this knowledge softens but does not nullify Sheba's criticism of Fanny.

Unlike Chinese American fiction that tends to set off Chinese "exotic" or "heathen" traditions against the European American Christian "norm," McCunn shows us both the strengths and blind spots of Chinese, European American, and African American cultures, as well as the diversity within each of them. While she does not hesitate to include peculiar rituals and beliefs in Lue's Chinese village, she juxtaposes them with American lore that is equally far-fetched through Chinese eyes. She attains such delicate balance by playing off the narrators' perspectives against one another, staging direct confrontations, and devising parallel scenes. When Phoebe, one of Fanny's sisters, reprimands a Chinese Christian convert for practicing ancestral worship, Lue defends the convert, asserting that "the ancestral tablet was no different from the tombstones in [Christian] cemeteries, the incense the boy lit before it had the same significance as the flowers [Christians] lay on graves" (91). It is Fanny's immediate dismissal of Lue's reasoning as "false" that comes across as Eurocentric. Lue, however, eats his own words once he turns Christian, adopting the stance of his white mother. Sum Jui complains:

> [White] ghosts . . . had lived among us for years, yet they had never really known us. How could they when the beams of conceit in their

> eyes were so big? Gim Gong, likewise blinded, found fault not only with our Gods but with everything we did. (226)

Sum Jui deplores the arrogance that prevents white people from understanding the Chinese in their midst, but she disavows her xenophobia and that of the villagers, who routinely refer to whites as "ghosts." The diametrically opposite positions of the two mothers reveal their equally partial perspectives and Lue's difficulty in meeting both of their expectations.

In addition, McCunn invites us to see complementary perspectives by constructing parallels. At a revival in Massachusetts, the preacher "sounded solemn notes of warning on the certitude of eternal damnation for the unsaved, thundering with such energy that his face swelled red, his eyes bulged, and sweat poured from him in rivulets" (92). Fanny, "tormented by the thoughts of Lue burning in the fires of Hell" "groaned in agony," with Lue seated beside her (92). Fanny describes how the Holy Spirit enters Lue and brings about his conversion: "His face glowing with the light of Truth, Lue leaped to his feet speaking in tongues" (94). Fanny herself is "felled by the Holy Ghost":

> I wept with sorrow and shame for my weak faith . . . my use of laudanum to keep the mark of God's grace burning bright. . . . But even as I wept I hungered for the joy and peace laudanum gave. With laudanum I felt afresh the otherwise dimly remembered thrill of Jesus' embrace. (93)

The insistent repetition of "laudanum" makes the reader wonder whether her heightened religious experience is induced by drugs, and whether Lue's conversion is likewise brought on by external factors—the preacher's fiery intimidations, Fanny's plaintive groans and fervent entreaty, the wails of penitence and the shouts of joy from the rest of the congregation.

An equally dramatic event involving a supernatural visitation takes place in Lue's Chinese village. After being haunted by Lue's grandmother, Sum Jui's evil brother-in-law and sister-in-law hire a diviner to summon the deceased grandmother's spirit to ascertain what she wants from them. According to the diviner, Grandma answers yes to all the charges made by relatives and neighbors against the couple. When the brother-in-law complains that he has no money to rectify

the wrong, "six gold eagles [dance] on a little pile of earth next to a shallow hole in the floor by the altar" (149). The couple then agrees to make all the recompense. Sum Jui asks rhetorically: "Now that Ma had shown her power to reveal their hidden gold, would they dare deny her?" (149). The ritual of summoning the dead would seem superstitious to American readers. But the Chinese present at the divination are as convinced by the grandmother's spirit as the New England congregation is by the Holy Spirit. Similarly, Sheba, steeped in African lore since childhood, is certain that her dead mother's spirit communes with her periodically: "There was a few times I lingered uncertain over a plant. . . . But then a heat'd come to me, and Mama'd be by my side, telling me if what I was studying was poison or safe" (257). These scenes delineate parallel conviction on the part of the participants, without either validating or dismissing any of their persuasions.

McCunn shows that gullibility and ingenuity are not exclusive to any culture. The Chinese diviner who summons Grandma's spirit fails to drive out the "Holy Spirit" from Lue; the conjure doctor hired by Sheba's mother to hex the white supremacist master and free her father falls short of bringing justice: "the Judge gived Master Gillian our farm, Daddy prison" (239). On the other hand, Sum Jui's mother's brew, along with Chinese herbal medicine, is able to alleviate Lue's consumption when the doctor in Massachusetts has diagnosed his disease as terminal (225). No less effective is the contraceptive brew Sheba concocts. Misguided beliefs in Chinese and African American cultures are presented side by side with folk wisdom and potent household remedy. American culture, instead of being the undisputed "norm," is shown to have its share of antiquated medical practice such as blood-letting and of old wives' tales such as attributing tuberculosis to the invasion of tapeworm and curing the disease by "hanging . . . patients from rings suspended from the ceiling, swinging them backward and forward, sideways and in a circle" (191). Sheba traces the African American belief in conjuring to the Bible: "When the Pharaohs was meanly to the Israelites, Moses saved them with conjure" (239). Sum Jui finds the "Jesus God wanting," especially in helping Lue: "Whether that God tried but was too weak to succeed, or whether he paid Gim Gong no mind, I do not know. But . . . nothing got easier for my son" (226). McCunn thus avoids naturalizing any one culture by treating Chinese, black, and white beliefs with a similar degree of skepticism and credence.

Third, and a counterpoint to the second, *Wooden Fish Songs* high-

lights the pernicious effects of nativism, dogma, and conformity, and of racial and gender inequality in both Chinese and American cultures. When Lue's brother brings back from America a water pump that enables the family to develop an orange grove on a hill, the Chinese villagers destroy the "ghost" machine, blaming it for ushering in the monsters that plague the village. Later, they harass Lue ruthlessly because of his Christian conversion. Even the missionaries who distribute rice in Lue's village are driven out violently, amid cries of "Kill the foreign ghosts!" (139). Although the villagers welcome the "gold eagles" from Gold Mountain, they denounce everything associated with the West, be it technology or religion. Once again, however, McCunn juxtaposes Chinese bigotry with white racism. Wai Seuk, Lue's older brother, fumes: "When the foreign ghosts stormed our quarter, I saw the woman ghost who talked loudest about that Jesus taking things from our dead. There were others from their worship hall who cheered and clapped whenever one of us fell" (220). These instances of Christian hypocrisy may have accounted in part for the Chinese animosity toward Christianity. European Americans in the United States are no less antagonistic to the Chinese presence. Many Chinese laborers in California and Massachusetts are either lynched or driven out by white workers: "Returning Gold Mountain guests said . . . villainous foreign ghosts, determined to drive our people out of their country, were robbing them, pelting them with stones, even killing them" (135). Even sympathetic Americans such as Fanny and her sister Phoebe considered the Chinese as heathens who must be "civilized," that is, converted to Christianity. The immense pressure exerted on recalcitrant Lue by Fanny and Phoebe to become Christian is matched only by the fanaticism with which his Chinese family attempts to exorcise the "Holy Ghost" from him.

Where dogma controls the religious realm, nativism governs the secular quarter. The power of whites to abuse or succor a person of color is dramatized when, after Fanny's death, Yankees try to squeeze Lue out by preventing him from getting help to harvest his oranges. Sheba observes:

> They was angry at a colored man outsmarting their own kind . . . and they put a bad mouth on Lue, spreading the word just before orange-picking season they didn't want nobody working for him.
>
> Now Yankees is powerful, cause working folks in Deland, Cracker and Colored, depends on winter wages from snowbirds to see them through summer. So ain't nobody dared go against them. (354)

Through Sheba and Jim's intervention, the Hagstroms—a Swedish family who "never did overlook Lue like other folks" (355)—save Lue's crop. They are able to go against the Yankees only because "Swedes rely on other Swedes, not on snowbirds" (356).

The most obvious examples of mutual prejudice between Chinese and Americans revolve around the relationships between Fanny and Lue, and between Lue and LaGette Hagstrom, Fanny's Swedish helper. Sum Jui blames Fanny, "the ghost teacher," for Lue's demonic possession and deplores their intimacy, considering Fanny to be a witch who has put a spell on her son. Most of Fanny's family members likewise eye Lue with distrust and disdain as an interloper. Because of their racism, they cannot view Lue as Fanny's son or friend, let alone lover. Their discomfort reflects the general disapproval of miscegenation in American society at the time. Communal sanction is felt palpably by the two when Fanny is about to welcome Lue, literally with open arms, on his return to Florida from China:

> At his next "Mother Fanny," a sudden shame seized me, and I stood rooted to the platform. My arms, raised for an embrace, straightened my bonnet and dress instead, then fell. Lue also dropped his outstretched arms, and we came together in an awkward silence. (294)

Sheba relates later that "white folks was red hot over a Chinaman calling a white woman mother" and "put the blame on Lue" (309). Even black folks frown on Lue because of his close association with the white family. The stalled embrace illustrates the prohibitive pressure of the communal gaze and foreshadows another thwarted liaison—between Lue and LaGette.

Despite Fanny's strong feelings for Lue, he views her solely as friend, teacher, and mother. His own love interest, which develops after Fanny's death, is LaGette, whose family has come to his rescue during the orange harvest. Sheba observes their amorous overtures at the celebration after the harvest: "There was no mistaking the feelings what spilled out of their eyes . . . them two was kneading and pulling on that candy like they was woofing about love" (357). Although Jim and Sheba try to dissuade Lue from wooing LaGette, he languishes after

her and takes a trip to visit her family, presumably to discuss marriage. Sheba relates that "he left home looking like he was on a mountaintop, and he dragged back deeper than if he was in the valley" (372). Although the reader is not explicitly told why the family rejects Lue, Jim and Sheba have most likely anticipated the reasons:

> Jim and me, we recognized Lue's wanting all right, and we got plumb weak in the knees for him and the trouble his wanting could bring down on himself and on all Colored in Deland. Cause the same white mens what act trifling with colored womens, they raise the very devil if a colored man even looks at a white gal, and they done made crossmarrying against the law. (371)

Sheba notes that while the anti-miscegenation laws at the time forbid men of color from courting and marrying white women, they do not prevent white men from dallying with or ravishing women of color. Furthermore, any man of color who defies these laws will incur white wrath not just on himself but also on the people of color in the vicinity. Needless to add, any white woman involved in such a union will likewise be disgraced. Although LaGette's family members are magnanimous enough to help Lue with his harvest, they decline to accept him as a prospective groom.

Inequality and intolerance of various forms—patriarchal subordination of women, racial discrimination, religious persecution, class prejudice, and xenophobia—have besieged the lives of all the major characters, resulting in pangs of loss and isolation. The phrase "wooden fish songs" refer explicitly to the tales favored by Oi Ling, Lue's betrothed in China, who, after Lue's disappearance on the day of his wedding, is made to go through the nuptial ceremony with a rooster in accordance with old Chinese tradition when a groom is absent. Sum Jui reflects on their significance:

> The wooden fish songs . . . lament the absence of husbands and lovers in Gold Mountain, warning young women of the loneliness that is the lot of most Gold Mountain wives. As [Oi Ling] chanted these sad tales, one or other of the twins would beat out the rhythm on a wooden fish [a Chinese percussion instrument], and it seems to me the hollow *bok-bok-bok* of mallet on fish echoed the emptiness of Oi Ling's heart. (314–15)

The situation of Oi Ling (whose husband has left China for good before the wedding) may be extreme, but the wooden fish songs, as Sum Jui observes, also convey the general plight of the Gold Mountain wives who lead the lonesome lives of virtual widows. Oi Ling herself eventually defies convention by moving to a *gu poh nguk*—a home for single women. "These women don't have to suffer childbirth or the responsibility of bringing up children," she explains. "They look after no one except themselves. Neither are their movements controlled or restricted by others. They earn their own rice, and they govern themselves" (363). When her parents-in-law try to persuade her to stay lest their son be removed from the *ga bo* or clan genealogy, she retorts: "Am I in the *ga bo*?" and, turning to face Sum Jui, "Are you?" (364). Through Oi Ling the author reveals the gender inequity in traditional Chinese families.[1]

In addition to evoking the plight of the gold mountain wives, the hollow sounds of the wooden fish also echo, to varying extent, the sense of bereavement and desolation felt by Sum Jui, Fanny, Sheba and, above all, Lue at different points of their lives. The elegiac musings of the three narrators about Lue and about themselves are the implicit wooden fish songs of the novel. Sum Jui is left alone by all her sons in her old age, having already lost one grandson to starvation and another to infanticide. Moreover, she is ostracized by Chinese villagers on account of Lue, her "ghost-son."

On the other continent Fanny's intense sexual longings for Lue remain unspoken and unfulfilled unto her death. Her long spell of waiting for Lue, with no end in sight, after his initial return to China, may be compared with the indefinite "widowhood" of Gold Mountain wives, thanks to inimical American laws that deter Chinese from leaving or returning to the United States: "I wanted nothing more than to have Lue back with me . . . But the exclusion law against Chinese forbade his return. . . . I wore out the road with my gaze. Still he did not come" (268, 271). Even after Lue rejoins her in Florida, they continue to keep a decorous distance from each other: "He never shared with me what kept him awake. Nor did I ever tell him of the dream that haunted my

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1. McCunn informed me that while she was able to adhere to the actual Chinese names of Lue's male relatives, she had to fabricate most of the Chinese women's names, including Sum Jui's, because female names were not included in clan genealogies (email correspondence).

sleep" (304); only when they are discussing plants does she occasionally feel the "reserve between [them] crumble" (304).

There are several reasons why Fanny chooses to remain single and conceals her feelings from Lue. Diagnosed with consumption, she is wary of passing "the disease on to another generation" (175). Like Oi Ling, she also realizes that single women enjoy greater independence, insofar as "married women—like idiots, felons, and minors—could not contract, buy, sell, or bequeath in their own names, and that a woman could not keep her own child should her husband choose to take it from her" (175). Patriarchal subordination of women exists in New England as well as in old China. Fanny, who has already experienced patriarchal domination under her father, balks at further domestic bondage: "Seething under Father's yoke, what I wanted was to rule myself, to hold the power of self-protection in my own hands" (175). After she is smitten by Lue, however, the disapproval of her family and peers is what deters her from cohabiting with him: "the southern eye clearly viewed Chinamen as Colored, fit only for labor. . . . Racial feeling would then proscribe us from sharing a house" (270). To be sure, Lue never expresses any sexual interest in Fanny; only in her imaginings is he ever a potential lover. But Fanny could have confided in him had not her religion told her that her desires were sinful: "during the long, hard months I was burying my *wrong* feelings for Lue, I had lain pale, rigid, and stony cold . . . as if I were the dead bride" (304; emphasis added). Perhaps the most important reason for Fanny's reticence, though unarticulated, is her own reservation about crossing the barriers of race and class. Despite her obsession with Lue, she views him as an exception to "ordinary Chinese" who hardly deserve a place in American civil society (270). To outsiders such as Sheba, Fanny treats Lue as no more than a favorite manservant who has to answer all her biddings.

Mourning for both her parents and her unborn children, Sheba has suffered two kinds of parental bereavement. Her father, who has bought land from his white master after emancipation, is subsequently dispossessed by the master, tortured by the Ku Klux Klan, and shot to death by a white captain (254); her mother has died of ensuing grief. Their inability to protect Sheba prompts her to take contraceptive measures, as indicated earlier, lest she and Jim, as African Americans, should likewise fail to defend their offspring. When Jim tells Sheba that a white master once protected a black man from white vigilantes, Sheba entertains the fleeting hope that Fanny, who succeeds in bringing Lue to

the United States despite the Chinese Exclusion Act, might be able to keep white supremacists from harming her family. But her hope is dashed when Fanny, who attributes white hostility toward Lue in part to his friendliness with the black couple, makes Lue "overseer over Jim" to Sheba's dismay: "I'd recognized Miss Fanny got no feeling for nobody outside of Lue, I'd recognized she'd never keep a youngun safe for Jim and me" (310). Besides demonstrating once more the power of whites to give or withhold, the last instance also illustrates the divisive racial triangulation that pits racial minorities against each other and reinforces white supremacy. Only the deep friendship between Lue and the black couple keeps them from becoming rivals. Sheba's fear for her young thus continues to outweigh her desire to be a mother. Like Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, she cannot brook the thought of witnessing her offspring as victims of white persecution. Yet her maternal longings keep gnawing at her: "I'd got to wanting a baby . . . bad . . . and when my misery'd come, I'd sorrow hard as Jim" (286).

The three female narrators are not completely alone in their old age, however. Sum Jui still has a loving husband and one endearing grandson (362). Fanny, though unable to claim Lue as a lover, has in him a devoted companion, who ministers to her until her death. Sheba finds solace in caring for other people's children. Lue, a victim of the xenophobia in both China and America, is probably the loneliest of all the characters. Teased by Chinese villagers as a *mo been yun* (person without queue), he is shunned by the villagers in China and by his compatriots in the States on account of his Christianity and his close association with Fanny and her family. He confides in a letter to Fanny: "The people in my village, including members of my family, vie with one another to see who can invent the best plan to vex me" (233). After his escape from his arranged marriage, he is struck from the Chinese clan genealogy. One sad consequence of this "excommunication" from his family is that his definitive Chinese name remains a mystery to this day.[2]

2. Him Mark Lai and Marlon Hom, after examining Lue's rather garbled signature on his will and collating it with Taishan dialect, conclude that Lue's Chinese name is Liu Gannong 刘锦濃/浓 (email exchanges with Him Mark Lai and Marlon Hom). Yet Liu Yaohuan (刘耀寰)—Lue's relative—who has conducted oral history with Lue's extant relatives in China and who has published several articles on him in Chinese periodicals, is equally insistent that Lue's Chinese name is *not* 刘锦浓 but Liu Jinzuan 刘金缵 (新宁杂志[*Hsin-ning tsa-chih*] 4 Dec. 1980: 42).

English speakers, on the other hand, refer to Lue solely by his surname, which reveals their distance from him in the New World. Even Fanny, who takes great pains to ensure that Lue pronounces *her* first name accurately through repetition upon their first meeting (73), never bothers to learn his name properly: "He reeled off a string of sounds. I caught only the first" (73). The uneven attention paid to the two names bespeaks their asymmetrical relationship. On account of being Chinese, Lue is also scorned and fleeced in American society at large. According to Sheba, "Growers scoffed Lue was thin-brained. . . . Snowbirds, Crackers, and Colored, they was all calling Lue a fool. Course they'd been against him from the day he come to DeLand" (309). After Fanny's death her family tries to dispossess him and forbids him to return to North Adams. His love for LaGette, though not unrequited, is blighted by anti-miscegenation sentiments. Even Christian institutions close their doors on him, so that he must worship in his own prayer garden in his grove. In Sheba's words,

> There wasn't one what ain't acted hard-handed and high-tempered to Lue. Huh, they cut him dead on the street and changed the name of the watering hole on his land from Round Pond to Chink. They even froze him out of First Baptist, the church he done gone to with Miss Fanny for fifteen years, the one he done gived all that money to.
>
> Lue tried going over to First Methodist. But them people ain't got any more filling between the crust of their religion than the Baptists. And folks in our church, they held too much envy for Lue to welcome him like they oughta. (370)

Fanny has complained earlier about Lue's Chinese villagers: "the abuse those pagans heaped on Lue showed such want of feeling that my mind became occupied with every possible horror" (234). But her fellow Christians—whites and blacks—are no less hard-hearted toward the

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After examining the signature on Lue's will myself, I concur with Lai and Hom's interpretation. But Hom also points out that it is not unusual for Chinese to have more than one name, so both of these names could be correct (email correspondence). Finally, Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, gives him yet another Chinese name: 吕金功, (*pinyin*: Lǚ Jīngōng).

Chinese convert. Nor does the situation improve radically after Lue has become renowned nationally because of his contributions to the citrus industry. Sheba observes:

> There was no invitations to their homes. . . . When Lue called on folks anyways, they ain't turned him away like before. But nobody asked him *in* to a house. Few offered refreshment, even a glass of cool water. Most they'd generally do is come out on their porches to visit. (376)

Notwithstanding his national fame, his Christianity, his generosity, and his friendliness to persons of all colors, Lue remains the solitary Chinese in DeLand, Florida.

In the face of the prejudice against foreigners and interracial mixing, McCunn—herself of biracial descent—affirms hybridity through recurrent horticultural imagery. Both Fanny and Lue (and later Sheba) compare plants to people. Fanny goes from discussing the superior fruit Lue has created to reflecting on the man himself:

> I boasted of Lue's successes to Cynthia and William: the bushes of his salmonberry were more early bearing and productive than the ordinary raspberry; his cherry currant grew on thrifty plants with dark, thick foliage; he'd also created an improved variety of tomato that resisted drought and produced large clusters of hardy fruit on vines frequently fifteen feet in length.
>
> My creation, although I did not say it, was Lue. For Lue—wonderfully lettered, cultivated, and strong in spirit—was, it seemed to me, as much of an improved variety of Chinaman as his salmonberry, cherry currant, and tomato were of plants. (232–33)

Although the passage commends Lue's accomplishments, it also betrays Fanny's bias. Fanny can only measure Lue's "improved" character by the degree of his assimilation into European American culture and religion. Just as she eclipses the fact that Lue develops his talent in nurturing seedlings in China, she credits herself with all that is superior in him, as though there were nothing salvageable in the garden variety of Chinamen.

Lue entertains a more egalitarian notion of hybridity, though his theory sounds specious to her mother's ears. Sum Jui observes:

> [Gim Gong] seemed sound enough when asking about our orchard. Or in discussing its development, in telling us of his own work in his ghost teacher's garden, how he had created new and better fruit. . . . But even as I smiled agreement, [he] would say something foolish such as, "People can be improved the same way," or, "The strength of the ghosts in Gold Mountain comes not from guns but from mixing together different peoples and new ideas." (224)

Lue's (and McCunn's) use of the grafting imagery here to support hybridity is especially felicitous. One of the major arguments leveled against miscegenation at the turn of the twentieth century was precisely that interracial unions would result in an inferior breed. The fact that Fanny and Lue, themselves from two disparate cultures, are able to work together to cultivate superior fruit by mixing different stocks undermines any theory that upholds the inviolability and the paramountcy of a "pure" stock.

In addition, Lue learns to forecast weather from Jim and to select wild plants from Sheba, knowledge the black couple have acquired from their elders. Sheba notes: "Plants was what Lue prized over everything, and he asked Jim to learn him the signs colored folks go by. When he seen I could read the woods like he read books, he asked me to learn him that, too" (308). The passage implies that Lue's success lies precisely in "mixing together different peoples and new ideas," in synthesizing theoretical and empirical knowledge from people of heterogeneous origins and stations.

Fanny's condescension and Sum Jui's incredulousness toward Lue signify that his idea of hybridity is ahead of his time. His own life exemplifies both the pain and the promise of being a cultural composite. Before his return to China, he tells Fanny that "Gim Gong is going back to China. Lue will stay [with her] in America" (233). Fanny continues,

> What he discovered, however, was that in people, as in plants, a hybrid once created cannot be separated. In his first letter from his village, he wrote, *I was foolish to think I could leave Lue behind. Lue Gim Gong is one. And . . . he feels estranged from his people, his father and mother and brother, even himself.*" (233)

Back in America, he is likewise alienated, especially after Fanny's death. Being a westernized Chinese, he is like a branch excised from his biological and adopted family, rejected by both Chinese and American cultures. Yet it is also on account of his hybridity—his ability to combine his hands-on knowledge of planting from Sum Jui, the botanical instruction from Fanny, and the teaching about weather and wild plants from Jim and Sheba—that he achieves national renown as a horticulturist who has an orange named after him. His name, as Jim observes, turns out to be a harbinger of his success: "You got Double Brilliance like your China name. . . . Maybe triple" (372). By amalgamating Chinese, White, and Black knowledge, he has produced a Lue Gim Gong (orange) that is hardy and frost-resistant.

Sheba concludes the novel by reiterating the analogy of crossing plants, mixing stories, and desegregating people—for the better. She describes the stories told to her young charges and their multiethnic peers:

> What the younguns like best . . . is stories. The stories about Africa. . . . The stories from Lue about China. Ain't only our younguns what ask for them stories neither, but the younguns what come to Lue's grove with their folks and teachers, then come back on their own and follow him over here.
>
> I tell you, the faces turned up at us for stories is like the roses on that bush Lue done made. They is a mess of colors, their skins soft as petals and smelling as sweet. Looking at them, a new dream come to me: a dream of better. Not with plants, mind, but with people. Yes. (380)

Through Sheba, McCunn intimates the need for transnational and interracial exchange. By grafting and pollinating ideas across nations and races, by propagating dissimilar points of view, and by fostering mutual critique and reciprocal understanding, *Wooden Fish Songs* too offers the reader multihued stories "like the roses on that bush Lue done made."

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