

Chapter 11

Traces of Care: Chalk/Dust

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On a train in mid-February 2020, two young people sitting behind me started behaving strangely as I stood up to put on my coat. One hyperventilated loudly and said “Oh my god” repeatedly while the other stared at me with tensed muscles, ready to fight. I might have stared back at them, questioningly at first, only realising later the fear my appearance must have aroused. This is a story-so-far about communities in the United Kingdom (UK) during the COVID-19 pandemic. This story-so-far contemplates the violence enacted on behalf of communities, the myths of belonging proffered by utopic imaginings of diasporic communities and the forgotten imaginings of a multicultural, pluralist society. This narrative inquiry into communities is intended as a provocation towards thinking about the interconnectedness that extends beyond communities. This is a story-so-far about practices of care between places.

My methodological approach draws inspiration from Ruthellen Josselson’s approach to narrative inquiry which argues that the stories people create out of the chaos of random experiences reveal how people make sense of their lives (Josselson 2011, 223). My narrative inquiry begins with an interest in narratives that have shaped people’s impression of Chineseness in the UK. Allen Chun has argued that an understanding of identity as socially constructed should include an acknowledgement of how the discourse of each identity location is shaped by geopolitical forces specific to that place (Chun 2009, 342). This discourse shapes people’s perception of these identity

locations and this influences the individual's decision to identify or not (337). This is what he calls "the geopolitics of identity" (331). For Chun, "Chineseness has... been constructed in complex ways in diverse societies, the least of which is from the people themselves" (Chun 2017, x). Chineseness is seldom defined by the individual who is labelled by others as Chinese, regardless of whether this individual chooses to identify as Chinese or how this individual defines Chineseness. Rather, the discourse of Chineseness is crafted selectively and strategically by governments to serve certain geopolitical interests (Ibid.). Extending Chun's observations, my narrative inquiry attends to how certain discursive representations of Chineseness in the UK preceding the COVID-19 pandemic may have contributed to a particular perception of Chineseness that was imposed on Chinese, East Asians and Southeast Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic, regardless of nationality.

China's rise as an economic superpower has stoked fears in the United States of America (US) of a "monstrous" China that, in its unstoppable march to [economic] superpower status, threatens to swallow up the world' (Ang 2013, 19-20). In 2015, George Osborne claimed, as the Chancellor of the Exchequer of David Cameron's Conservative government, that "we want the UK to be China's best partner in the west" (Osborne in Phillips 2015). Since then, the US has allegedly pressured the UK government to distance itself from China (Wintour 2020). The 2019 protests in Hong Kong and the ongoing investigations into the genocide of Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang have provided convenient opportunities for the UK to appease the US. In extending a route to British citizenship to British National Overseas citizens in Hong Kong, British prime minister Boris Johnson has positioned the scheme as "honour[ing] our profound ties of history and friendship with the people of Hong Kong", proof of how the UK has "stood up for freedom and autonomy" (Johnson in Hale 2021). While I struggle to understand how Britain's colonisation of Hong Kong, from 1842 to 1941 and 1945 to 1997, can be framed as friendship, freedom or autonomy, Johnson's portrayal of China as a threat to democracy performs allegiance to the UK's "special relationship" with the US (US Embassy and Consulates in the United Kingdom, 2021). The US believes that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) "aims not merely at preeminence within the established world order...but to fundamentally revise world order, placing the People's Republic of China (PRC) at the center and serving Beijing's authoritarian goals and hegemonic ambitions" (The Policy Planning Staff 2020, 1). In other words, the US perceives China as a geopolitical threat to its economic, military and political interests as a superpower. These geopolitical relationships inform discursive representations of Chineseness in the US and UK that can contribute towards latent fears that motivate hostility towards Chinese, East

Asian and Southeast Asian people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fathali Moghaddam has persuasively proposed, in his *Staircase to Terrorism* (2005) model, that the violence enacted by terrorists is cultivated over time. Moghaddam suggests that relative deprivation may be an initial trigger that prompts certain individuals to perceive the world as unfair, unjust and lacking in opportunities for social mobility (Moghaddam 2005, 162). Those who ascend to “the first floor” may be motivated by the belief that socially unacceptable actions are the only means of achieving social mobility given that all socially acceptable routes are closed to them (Moghaddam 2016, 426). Moghaddam argues that those who ascend to “the second floor” are “influenced by conspiracy theorists, racists and other individuals harbouring extreme prejudices, all pointing to targets for displaced aggression” (428). This step is key in justifying hostility towards people who are blamed for hindering their social mobility. In a survey of 26,000 people in 25 countries designed by the YouGov Cambridge Globalism Project, one in five British respondents “believed it was definitely or probably true that COVID-19 had been deliberately created and spread by the Chinese government” (Henley and McIntyre 2020). Protection Approaches’ October 2020 report asserts that there has been a 300% increase in reports of hate crime directed at Chinese, East and Southeast Asian people in the UK within the first quarter of 2020 (Protection Approaches 2020, 1). Borrowing from Moghaddam’s staircase model, I suggest that geopolitically informed discursive representations of Chineseness, compounded with racist conspiracy theories about COVID-19, may have led these attackers to blame people who look Chinese for the death of loved ones to COVID-19 and the loss of employment experienced in the wake of the pandemic-induced recession. This misinformed perception of Chineseness is imposed on Chinese, East Asian and Southeast Asian people in the UK. Pawat Silawattakun (a Thai tax consultant), Jonathan Mok (a Singaporean student) and Wang Peng (a Chinese lecturer) were all attacked after being called a “coronavirus” or a “Chinese virus” (Silawattakun 2020; Lau 2020; Clarke 2021)¹. This tactical dehumanisation is often followed up with a justification for violence on behalf of a community: “I don’t want your coronavirus in my country” (Lau 2020).

I cannot claim to speak for all migrants, but as a Singaporean Peranakan, I have come to believe that belonging is a myth for those with limited leave to remain in the UK. I am not arguing for a revival of utopian diasporic communities here. Ien Ang has warned that “the discourse of diaspora itself is ultimately nationalist” where the imagination of the diasporic community is founded on “transnational nationalism” (Ang 2013, 24). This belonging, proffered on the basis of being ethnically Chinese,

¹All Chinese names in this chapter observe Mandarin naming conventions where the surname is placed before the first name.

comes with expectations to acknowledge China as an ancestral homeland. But this imagination of diasporic belonging is also a myth. Even though this Chineseness is different from the Chineseness imposed on Chinese, East and Southeast Asian people in the UK, these articulations of Chineseness are also not self-defined.

To be clear, there are multiple and diverse articulations of Chineseness. Chun has noted that articulations of Chineseness in Taiwan are different from articulations of Chineseness in Singapore and Hong Kong as they serve different geopolitical interests (Chun 1996, 70). Given that geopolitical interests shift over time in response to geopolitical situations, articulations of Chineseness in each country will also shift in order to serve these changing geopolitical interests. In response to these changing discursive representations of Chineseness, some theorists, like Ang, regard their identification with Chineseness as a matter of consent. Ang notes, “if I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent” (Ang 2001, 36). Arguably, Ang and Chun hold conflicting positions on the degree to which these discursive representations of Chineseness can be influenced by the person who is categorised by others as Chinese. My approach to Chineseness resonates with Kwan Sansan’s kinesthetic approach to Chineseness as a “fraught yet abiding concept” that “is negotiated through moving bodies in global cities” (Kwan 2013, 14). In the context of the geopolitical relations and the discursive representations that have contributed to present perceptions of Chineseness in the UK, I recognise that my tactical navigations of Chineseness may have little impact on those who shape discursive representations of Chineseness in the UK. Yet, I am interested in creating the possibility of counternarratives that nuance perceptions of Chineseness, encouraging a shift away from current hostilities that mark interactions in the UK. In doing so, I hope to make this place a little more liveable for Chinese, East Asian and Southeast Asian people in the UK.

I have asked colleagues to walk to the train station with me, opening up autotopographical conversations about place. In *Autotopography: Graffiti, Landscapes and Selves*, Deirdre Heddon describes her approach to autotopography as “the location of a particular individual in actual space, a locatedness that has implications for both subject and place” (Heddon 2002, 1). Here, this locatedness is realised through the performative writing of identity, through graffiti that articulates rejection of homosexuals (13). This graffiti, though intended to hurt, renders legible the presence of homosexuals in this place. Extending Heddon’s definition of autotopography, the heightened visibility given to my appearance in London has kindled a sense of dislocatedness in this place. I wondered if these autotopographical

walks might be read as performances of resistance. I hope that these conversations will help my colleagues persuade those who have been swayed by racist COVID-19 conspiracy theories. While reparation can be a useful starting point for anti-racist conversations, offering counselling support to those who have survived a violent racially-motivated attack is not enough and often feels too late. There is more that local communities can do towards the prevention of hate crimes by denouncing racist narratives of COVID-19 and Chineseness, for example.

In thinking about place, I have been inspired by geographer Doreen Massey's definition of space and place where "space is rather a simultaneity of stories-so-far" and "places are collections of those stories" (Massey 2005, 130). These stories describe a relationship with a physical site, as well as relationships between the human and the more-than-human in this site. *chalk/dust* (2020 - 2021) is a place practice that I have developed with the intention of intervening in these stories-so-far to create counternarratives of Chineseness. This place practice takes inspiration from Sally Mackey's place practices, which "can trouble the meanings of place, destabilising suppositions of locality, dwelling, inhabitation, territory, indigeneity, community, residence, belonging, connection and ownership" (Mackey 2016, 107). I hoped that these chalk graffiti poems, signed off with the character for love, 爱 (ài) in Mandarin, might open up the possibility of initiating a counternarrative of Chineseness in place.

At this time of writing in June 2021, 127,956 people have died of COVID-19 in the UK and the UK has the sixth highest number of COVID-19 deaths in the world. This figure does not include those who have died of causes that are not related to COVID-19. Co-op Funeralcare, UK's biggest funeral provider, estimated that "9.7 million mourners have been denied the opportunity to say their last goodbye at their loved one's funeral" during the first lockdown (Co-op Funeralcare 2020). While I believe that the COVID-19 restrictions are necessary, these restrictions have hindered the performance of funeral rites that many view as their last act of care for the deceased. Mourners closest to the deceased who could attend the funeral stood two metres apart, unable to comfort each other with a hug. COVID-19 physical distancing is experienced by the mourner as a form of isolation where one is left wrestling alone with one's grief. Recognising the need to create alternative ways of caring at a distance for those who have lost loved ones, I decided to create a series of online applied performance workshops that facilitate the exploration of physically distanced ways of offering comfort and support.

Between March 2020 to March 2021, whilst the UK endured three national lockdowns,

I conducted a series of applied performance workshops where participants were invited to create poems that they might chalk on the street during their weekly trip to the supermarket. Some of these participants were students who might consider themselves part of a community. Some of these participants were people who did not know each other. These applied performance workshops were conducted over Zoom. I often begin my applied performance workshops by inviting my participants to create abstract sculptures that represent their fears using furniture, food or laundry that they find around the home. During the pandemic, many of the fear sculptures seemed to express a fear of death or loss. In response to these sculptures, I tell my participants that I have lost an uncle during lockdown. I explain that the 14-day quarantine in Singapore has made it impossible to attend funerals in person. I choose to reveal this fear in order to dismantle power hierarchies inherent in the facilitator-participant relationship. I reassure my participants that they will not be asked to reveal what their fear is. At the end of the workshop, I invite participants to create a poem formed of words of comfort or support that they wished they had received during lockdown. This is an excerpt of what participants wrote in the Zoom chatbox:

I'm always here to listen.
 I'm here for you. You are not alone.
 What can I do to help you?
 I am reaching out, creating a home wherever.
 It's ok to not feel perfect in your grief.
 As days pass, I hope you find comfort and support in the people
 that surround you and the amazing memories you have created.
 I will see you soon.
 You can get through this.
 This too shall pass.
 You are not alone.
 I am here for you. I am here for you.
 I am here for you.

Inspired by Heddon's *Autotopography: Graffiti, Landscapes and Selves* (2002) where a fictional character uses chalk graffiti to perform queerness in defiance of the homophobic graffiti she encountered, I decided to create chalk graffiti poems inspired by the participants' words of comfort and support. I hoped that these words of comfort might speak to the loss that might have contributed to the displacement of aggression in the UK. Subverting the implicit "I was here" performed by the graffiti writing that remains (Whybrow 2011, 114), these chalk poems end with "I am here

for you, 爱” Heddon argues that autobiographical writing can “be a site of resistance, a potential site for forging other subjects and other stories” (Heddon 2002, 13). The identity performed in this graffiti is designed to respond to discursive representations of Chineseness with compassion, inviting a different approach to negotiated living in place.



Figure 1. (left) and Figure 2. (right): “You are not alone. I am here for you, 爱”
(Photos by author)

We are all vulnerable to COVID-19. And while I have been tempted to protest against the racially motivated violence directed at Chineseness by creating street performances that declare “I am not a virus”, I hesitate because I worry that these declarations might stigmatise those who have contracted COVID-19 by labouring for our survival and safety on the frontlines as supermarket workers, cleaners, transport workers and delivery workers. In May 2020, a report by the Institute of Fiscal Studies found that “Pakistanis, Black Africans and Black Caribbeans are over-represented among key workers overall” with one in five Black Africans of working age employed in health and social care (Platt and Warwick 2020, 12-13). There are no reports on the race of COVID-19 fatalities on the frontlines of food supply and distribution, cleaning services or transport. Their unrecognised labour of care is marked by histories of inequality that manifest in death when their absence goes

unnoticed, their deaths ungrieved by the communities they have served. Reparation can imply the desire to restore wholeness but this impetus must be problematised. Inequality does not emerge out of brokenness. Inequality is the intended outcome of meritocracy (Teo 2018, 31).



Figure 3. (left) and Figure 4. (right): “I will see you soon. I am here for you, 爱”.
(Photos by author)

I choose to recognise the precariousness of human life even though this common mortality is not one that evokes a sense of community. Chalk evokes the impermanence of life as well as an appreciation of deep time. Washed away by the rain, all that remains of the chalk graffiti poems I wrote are memories of place, formed by passers-by who might have chanced upon these chalk graffiti poems as they paused for rest under a tree. Yet chalk endures. The rainwater that carries this chalk to sea may contribute to the intricate formation of calcium carbonate shells found on marine organisms that will, after millions of years, become part of the limestone cliffs that characterise a future landscape of this place. Robert Macfarlane has described “this dance of death and life that goes into limestone’s creation [as] what makes it without doubt the liveliest, queerest rock I know” (Macfarlane 2019, 22). Traces of chalk remain - capturing the essence of *death-in-life*, an understanding of death as coexistent and inseparable from living (Nishitani 1982, 93). These are

traces of care - reminding me of the frontline workers who maintain their enduring, everyday care for community wellbeing at the expense of their own.



Figure 5. (left) and Figure 6. (right): “I am always here to listen. I am here for you, 爱”
(Photos by author)

I have chosen to write these chalk graffiti poems next to trees that have endured the three lockdowns. Most of these trees had shed their leaves for winter, waiting silently for spring. In Kuo Pao Kun's *The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree* (1988), the Girl prevents the Tree from being cut down by a bulldozer, but she is unable to stop the pruning of the Tree (Kuo 2000, 114). The Girl mourns for the Tree which has been pruned to conform with plans for the landscape (115). Like the Tree, migrants in the UK are compelled to assimilate culturally, towards a “united sense of Britishness” (Sewell et al. 2021, 89). The 2021 report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (CRED) in the UK claims that “creating a successful multicultural society” (8) remains its aim, yet this report shifts away from the language of multiculturalism after attributing the economic inactivity of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in the UK to “cultural traditions” (43). The CRED disingenuously proposes that “strong ethnic identities” can be accommodated in the cultivation of “a common, unifying, civic identity as British citizens” (Ibid.). It advocates for “reinforc[ing] the symbols of Britishness which signal to minorities that they are considered full members of

the British family while retaining their own distinctive identities” (47). This suggests that multiculturalism is tolerated as a transition phase towards Britishness. This British nationalism is arguably regressive in comparison to the pluralist vision of society envisioned in the 1985 Swann report.



Figure 7. (left) and Figure 8. (right): “It’s ok to not feel ok in your grief. I am here for you, 爱”.
(Photos by author)

The 1985 Swann Report positions cultural diversity explicitly as “a valuable resource to enrich the lives of all” (Swann et al. 1985, 326, 329). In its advocacy of multicultural education, the 1985 Swann report notes that:

In practice there was little real difference between the assimilationist and integrationist viewpoints in that they shared the common aim of absorbing ethnic minority communities within society with as little disruption to the life of the majority community as possible (197).

The Swann report argues that “both the assimilationist and integrationist educational responses to the needs of ethnic minority pupils” are “misguided and ill-founded” and emphasises the need for change in majority community attitudes, interrogating

the assumptions of those who viewed multicultural education as “irrelevant” in “all-white” schools and challenging those who expect migrants to conform to British cultural practices, values and attitudes (197-198, 235). Britishness is not emphasised here. While I am broadly sympathetic to the recommendations proposed in the 1985 Swann report, I suggest that multiculturalism will not go far enough. Tolerance and the grudging accommodation of cultural diversity will not mitigate the resentment or loss experienced by many in this pandemic. Extending Royona Mitra’s “new interculturalism” which “represents a conceptual, processual, embodied lived condition driven by one’s own multiple affiliations to cultures, nations and faiths” (Mitra 2015, 23), interculturalism recognises that our affinity to adopt a gamut of different cultural practices as part of our everyday lives is not limited by nationality or ethnicity. I argue that fostering an acknowledgement of interculturalism, already present in the so-called “British way of life”, may enable greater openness to an understanding of how cultural diversity enriches everyday life. After all, tea, which is so often referenced as quintessentially British, was originally derived from trade with China. In combining community-generated words of comfort and support with 爱 (ài), the character for love, I sought to materialise the interculturalism that migrants bring to a place through writing that evokes imaginations of this place as a pluralist society formed of many culturally diverse communities. I choose to speak of, and to, the irrecoverable loss experienced in communities that I am part of and communities that I am excluded from. In this pandemic, what becomes apparent is our interconnectedness beyond the communities we are part of, regardless of our ethnic or nationalistic identifications. Our personal decisions, from mask-wearing to travel, have had national and international consequences.

Before it falls silent, Kuo’s Tree tells the Girl not to be afraid of thunderstorms that toughen the branches and enable the development of deeper roots (Kuo 2000, 115). In writing chalk graffiti poems next to trees that resist the concrete confines of their paved surroundings, I draw attention to the trees as more-than-human co-performers in this work of community art. Taking inspiration from Lisa Woyrnarski’s attention to bioperformativity, which “recognis[es] the agency of the more-than-human, or the way the more-than-human performs as material and representation” (Woyrnarski 2020, 73), I suggest that it is in the acknowledgement of our enduring interconnectedness with the more-than-human that we might begin to practice distance as a form of care between places. This COVID-19 pandemic has forced me to reckon with a new “aero-consciousness” that “alters how we understand our responsibilities and to whom we feel we owe a duty of care” (Wilkie 2015, 175). As reports of new variants of COVID-19 emerged last summer, my worries

of contributing to the international spread of new variants outweighed the guilt of not being able to fulfill familial expectations by being physically present for the funeral. Instead, I attended my uncle's live streamed funeral on Facebook. Through WhatsApp, I sent my cousin shared memories and imagined stories of our departed loved ones catching up over ice-cream in the afterlife. I sent comfort food (curry puffs, fishballs, prawn nuggets and chicken wings) to my cousin, in lieu of being there. In this pandemic, distance is not a void or absence - it is filled with care.

This (pandemic) will pass.
I am here for you, 爱.



Figure 9. (left) and Figure 10. (right): "...and this too shall pass. I am here for you, 爱".
(Photos by author)

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