

# **Not Yet Alone: Axes of Exclusion in Wayson Choy's Not Yet: A Memoir of Living and Almost Dying**

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# Not Yet Alone: Axes of Exclusion in Wayson Choy's *Not Yet: A Memoir of Living and Almost Dying*

SABRINA REED

HOSPITALIZATION, AS ANNE HUNSAKER HAWKINS has noted, often places patients in a “liminal” world in which “passivity, near-nakedness, obedience, anonymity, and sometimes painful and invasive medical tests and procedures” are the norm (86). “The individual — now a patient — crosses a threshold into a strange other-world of rituals and ordeals, an unknown territory that must be negotiated alone and, often, in pain and fear” (78). Wayson Choy describes just such a transition from his busy life as a respected writer and teacher to a liminal state at the border between life and death in the final book-length work of his career, *Not Yet: A Memoir of Living and Almost Dying* (2009). Hunsaker Hawkins uses the term “pathography” to describe “a subgenre of autobiography” in which the author’s task “is not only to describe [the] disordering process” brought on by severe illness “but also to restore to reality its lost coherence and to discover, or create, a meaning that can bind it together again” (2-3). The first two parts of *Not Yet* work in this way as Choy describes a severe illness and his journey back to health, but the third part of the book and its epilogue complicate his narrative of triumph over illness by describing how he slides back into ill health and a second brush with death. Choy essentially undermines his own narrative closure to create a much “messier” narrative that refuses pathographic tropes such as battling against an invading foe or creating a new and better personality through the lessons learned from being ill (Hunsaker Hawkins).

In this essay, I use Robert McRuer’s theories on how queerness and disability challenge the composed self to suggest that the contradictory nature of Choy’s memoir rests in his understanding of how a composed self actually limits his ability to *be* himself. As Choy grapples with the fear that he will “die alone” (*Not Yet* 10) because of his failure to adhere to internalized cultural “norms,” he comes to realize that, as

McRuer states, “desiring queerness/disability means not assuming in advance that the finished state is the one worth striving for, especially the finished state demanded by the corporate university and the broader oppressive cultural and economic circumstances in which we are currently located. It means striving instead for [what Donna J. Haraway calls] ‘permanently partial identities’” (*Crip Theory* 159).

In his acknowledgements to *Not Yet*, Choy gives special thanks to a friend “who shattered my writer’s block when he said, ‘memory is just another form of fiction’” (194).<sup>1</sup> Given that Choy acknowledges in his author’s note that “all memoirs are works of creative non-fiction,” and that he has “collapsed chronologies and events” to improve “narrative flow,” the lack of cohesion in the third part of his memoir suggests his perhaps unconscious desire to subvert the happy ending that the first two parts lead the reader to expect.

My essay is structured in four parts. In the first section, “Robert McRuer on Composition in the Corporate University (and How We Compose Identities),” I reference McRuer’s analysis of how “the composition of a coherent and disciplined self in modernity has, in fact, often been linked to the composition of orderly written texts” (*Crip Theory* 152). Although this preference for order and conformity might forward neoliberal ideals, it erases the messiness and disorder of the process of composition as well as the diversity that exists within composing minds and bodies. In the subsequent sections, I examine how Choy’s life-threatening illness exacerbates and resurrects old fears about being rejected along several axes of exclusion — homosexuality, aging, illness, and ethnicity — and relate his crisis of identity to McRuer’s theories on the need to allow for a self that embraces and celebrates deviations from what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls “the normate” (8). The second section, “‘Dire Bachelorhood’: Homosexuality, Loneliness, and the Aging Body,” links Choy’s fear of dying alone to childhood memories of the rejected “bachelor men” of Vancouver’s Chinatown. Like those whom he encountered during the 1940s, Choy does not have a wife or biological children to take care of him, yet he finds solace in the close friends with whom he has created an alternative family structure in place of the one that he was raised to believe was essential to his happiness. In the third section, “‘I Knew Now, with Certainty, Where My Bones Belonged’: Choy and the ‘In-Between Generation,’” I look at how illness allows Choy to evaluate his liminal status as a Canadian citizen of Chinese descent. And in the fourth section, “Challenging

the Composed Self: Rehabilitation and Its Discontents,” I discuss how Choy problematizes his initial narrative of rehabilitation. As he considers the many axes of exclusion that he has experienced over his lifetime, he finally rejects the model of a composed, whole, and healthy self by embracing his messy but exuberant personhood.

### Robert McRuer on Composition in the Corporate University (and How We Compose Identities)

In *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, McRuer titles his fourth chapter “Composing Queerness and Disability: The Corporate University and Alternative Corporealities.” As a professor with a forty-year career teaching English literature and composition, Choy might have responded with interest to ideas that McRuer puts forward in this chapter, and his thoughts certainly apply to the memoir that I discuss here. McRuer begins by questioning a common assumption in composition classrooms: that good writing involves ordered thinking and the disciplined expression of ideas. Although his critique is outside the scope of this essay, McRuer also points out how university-level composition is primarily taught by contingent faculty who “serve professional-managerial interests” (148) not only by teaching skills that students can transfer to jobs outside the university but also by being an inexpensive and exploitable source of labour. “Corporate processes,” says McRuer, “seem to privilege, imagine, and produce only one kind of body on either side of the desk: on one side, the flexible body of the contingent, replaceable instructor; on the other, the flexible body of the student dutifully mastering marketable skills and producing clear, orderly, efficient prose” (148).

McRuer earlier discusses the concept of “compulsory able-bodiedness” (2), arguing that “homosexuality and disability clearly share a pathologized past” (1) of prejudice, exclusion, and persecution intensified by how they are defined against cultural conceptions of “normal” or “preferable” states of being. Just as Garland-Thomson problematizes her concept of the “normate,” observing “the variation among individuals that cultural categories trivialize and that representation often distorts” (13), so too McRuer considers how the “normate” actually includes wide variations in sexual preference and bodily health. “Able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality,” he writes, “still largely masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things” (1). In other words, able-

bodiedness, like heterosexuality, is invisible because it is considered the norm, even as queerness and disability help to define able-bodiedness and heterosexuality by showing what they are not.

In composition, an acceptable finished document often effaces the writer in that the teaching of composition encourages students to eschew idiosyncrasies of grammar, content, and style in favour of an accepted template. As with the model of compulsory able-bodiedness, the messy, disparate, and unusual traits that sometimes define what good writing is *not* serve, in contrast, to define what good writing *should be*. McRuer, in contrast, hopes for a time when “disability studies and queer theory will remain locations from which we might speak back to straight composition, with its demand for composed and docile texts, skills, and bodies” (170). In challenging the narrative of the return from sickness to health, Choy does just that. He creates an undocile text that reflects how he himself resists attempts to make him a different and more disciplined person. He insists instead that he will “be the same person I was before almost dying, twice. That all my faults would remain completely intact” (*Not Yet* 190).

### “Dire Bachelorhood”: Homosexuality, Loneliness, and the Aging Body

To understand how Choy’s memoir moves from a composed narrative of triumph over illness to “de-composition and disorder” (McRuer, *Crip Theory* 154), it is important to summarize the book’s three parts. After a short prologue in which Choy tells a self-deprecating story about his cavalier disregard for his health, *Not Yet* recounts how, in August 2001, he wakes up in a hospital after a severe asthma attack complicated by “multiple cardiac events” (22). Doctors save his life by placing him in an eleven-day, medically induced coma, but his recovery is difficult both physically and emotionally. Choy experiences drug-induced ICU psychosis and wakes up from his coma unable to speak, walk, or even hold a spoon. The first two parts of *Not Yet* recount his initial illness, ensuing fears that his friends will desert him, slow recovery, and rehabilitation. The third part complicates his initial narrative of triumph over illness by describing a trip to China to visit the home of his ancestors, an encounter with two ghosts, and his return to old habits of ignoring his body’s warnings and indulging in practices that exacerbate ill health. The work ends with a short epilogue in which Choy describes how he

was hospitalized once again in 2005, nearly died of a heart attack, and underwent quadruple bypass surgery to save his life.

Since severe illness often intensifies personal vulnerabilities, and coming close to death can cause people to re-evaluate or relive past events, it is unsurprising that while in the hospital old uncertainties surface, and Choy entertains doubts that his younger, mostly straight, white friends will remain loyal to an ill, older, gay Asian man. Although, as Erving Goffman famously stated, there is probably only one completely “normal” person in all of North America, societal bias defines that person as young, straight, male, able-bodied, and white — all things (with the exception of gender) that Choy is not.<sup>2</sup> His account of his initial hospitalization is notable for the emphasis that Choy puts on being forgotten, alone, and rejected because of his illness, age, and sexual orientation. Like “a chorus from an ancient opera,” voices in his head repeat unsolicited advice from his childhood: “*One day you be old and sick and no wife be there for you. . . . For sure, you marry or no one be with you!*” If Choy retains his “dire bachelorhood,” the voices tell him, then he will “die alone” (*Not Yet* 10, 26).<sup>3</sup>

The theme of “discarded bachelor-men” (Choy, *Jade Peony* 36) is prominent in each of his four major works, indicating the power that the idea holds in his psyche and perhaps why Choy would invoke the image as he lay near death. Yet his conflation of bachelorhood, homosexuality, and loneliness does not fit with Canada’s legalization of same-sex marriage or with what some readers know of his life as an openly gay man whose acceptance of his sexuality made him “a role model for LGBTQ activists” (qtd. in Lederman). Choy was even named one of CBC Arts’ sixty-nine “Super Queeroes,” who, in the words of Peter Knegt, “have given hope, courage and visibility to LGBTQ folks in this country, long before we got the respect we deserve from the state.” Choy’s two novels and *Paper Shadows*, his memoir of his early life in Vancouver’s Chinatown, also project largely positive attitudes toward homosexuality. In *Paper Shadows*, Choy writes of an experience around grade three in which he is given a piggyback ride by a young man named Sum Sook and experiences a moment of “almost unbearable” pleasure that he says made him feel “different” but of which he “had no understanding” (185, 186). At the end of the book, however, Choy reminds readers of the incident and says that, “forever after, I knew — without shame — something about my sexuality that I was not able to fathom until fifteen years later. I love, as Dante wrote, the other stars” (337). Similarly, in

*The Jade Peony*, Choy writes a sympathetic account of “second brother” Jung-Sum’s growing awareness of his homosexuality. Zhen Liu posits that “traditional Chinese thinking actually creates a space for Jung to face his homosexuality, since Poh-Poh, the ‘standard-bearer’ of the old ways, can appreciate his nature, thinking the transgression in his sexuality extraordinary rather than abnormal” (33).

But Choy also recognizes how his and his characters’ acceptance of difference is at odds with the Chinese community’s imperative toward heterosexual marriage. In *Not Yet*, Choy recounts how the voices pressuring him to marry (and, in the context of Vancouver’s Chinatown during the 1940s and 1950s, commit to heterosexual norms) did not stop “until, at twenty-three, I did what many young people did then, and still do, consciously or not — I left home to begin a life where I could discover my own values” (10-11). Although he quickly realizes that his fears are groundless, that he is “*not forgotten*” and “*not alone*” (11), in the hospital Choy initially reverts to the many warnings of his childhood, themselves a product of what he calls “the painful humiliations [that his elders] had suffered as undesirable immigrants to Canada” (57). As he mentions in all of his major works, the “natural law that all men should marry” (*Jade Peony* 105) was thwarted by the Canadian immigration policy that prevented the expansion of the Chinese population by keeping Chinese women out of the country. This policy, which amounted to “racist attitudes towards the sexual activities of a people who were told they had no more right to life than animals” (Choy, “Interview” 41), led to a disproportionate number of bachelors. Choy writes of the stigma associated with “the bachelor elders of Chinatown, those men who were abandoned by the railroad contractors, dismissed without a second thought” (*Not Yet* 134). Victims of the racist head tax imposed on Chinese immigrants from 1885 to 1923 and the subsequent Chinese Exclusion Act in effect from 1923 to 1947, these men were pitied and marginalized within a Chinatown society that valued lineage, familial duty, and inheritance. Choy says in an interview about *Not Yet* that until he was in his thirties his mother was “pressured by her friends about [his] bachelorhood status.” He adds, however, that before they died his parents “came to know that I shared my life with two families” and that his “shared contentment with each family must have convinced them everything would be fine” (“Truly Family”). *Not Yet* confirms this comforting thought, because Choy recounts how the presence of

the people who love him makes him realize “*I’m not forgotten. . . . I’m not alone*” (11).

Having twice taught *Not Yet* in a fourth-year seminar on disability narratives in Canadian literature, I have been struck by how a significant number of students find Choy’s insistence that he is loved overly self-indulgent and egotistical. After all, the first part of *Not Yet* is particularly full of references to how his “family” of friends and housemates come through for him even though he fears that he will be rejected. Choy recalls, for instance, an early meeting with his good friend and future housemate Karl. When Choy takes his hand “to thank him for some carpentry work,” he recalls how, “Given that he was straight, he let my hand linger upon his much longer than I dared to expect,” especially since, as Choy recounts, Karl “had been warned by some well-meaning friends to be careful of fags like me” (14). Similarly, during his first week in hospital, disoriented, weak, and helpless, Choy awakens to find two beautiful young men about to massage his body. Nancy Mairs has written about how disabled people are assumed to lack sexuality or are deemed undesirable, and McRuer similarly writes that “for many sex and disability at times seem not so much intersectional as incongruous” (“Disabling Sex” 107). Choy fears in *Not Yet* that his “old flesh and bones might dishearten, even disgust,” these two younger men, whom he finds sexually attractive, but the masseurs are professional and non-judgmental. As he writes, “I felt a kind of happiness, to be touched without judgment, without shame or disgust” (34, 35). In a moment that echoes Julia Kristeva’s definition of the “abject,”<sup>4</sup> Choy also mentions how he once lost control of his bowels while using his walker in a hospital corridor. “Naked and humiliated,” he makes fun of his aging body to the hospital aide who helps him to clean himself by saying that “the crumpled folds of my sunken tummy” look like a “cartoon” Buddha’s face. His caregiver, however, refuses to “join in my defensive joke,” instead pointing to various parts of his body and insisting that he is “*all Buddha*,” acceptable in spite of his imperfections (85, 86).

Yet Choy’s fears about his body, illness, and sexual orientation evoke McRuer’s comment that we often subscribe to unacknowledged binaries that subtly enforce hierarchies of being. In the case of hierarchies of ability, for instance, “dissent requires comprehending the able-bodied/disabled binary as nonnatural and hierarchical (or cultural and political) rather than self-evident and universal,” but “the vast majority of both nondisabled and disabled people have in effect consented to compre-



hending that binary as natural” (*Crip Theory* 37). The rediscovery of his friends’ loyalty and love stills the “righteous voices” that Choy hears in his head, observing how, “within me, the ancient voices of the elders were dumbstruck” (*Not Yet* 26, 38). Yet his early doubts confirm how difficult it is to resist ingrained prejudice, even against oneself. McRuer writes that

The institutions in our culture that produce and secure a heterosexual identity also work to secure an able-bodied identity. Fundamentally structured in ways that limit access for people with disabilities, such institutions perpetuate able-bodied hegemony, figuratively and literally constructing a world that always and everywhere privileges very narrow (and ever-narrowing) conceptions of ability. Advice on how to help your kids turn out disabled, not to mention your students, your parishioners, your therapy clients, or your military subordinates, is less ubiquitous than you might think. (*Crip Theory* 151)

McRuer might have added that the above statement could pertain to LGBTQ2S+. In fact, the logic of rehabilitation (largely — though unfortunately not entirely — discredited when applied to “conversion” or “reparative” therapy but still strongly in place in terms of non-normate physical identity) implies that there is a preferred state of being that one would attain if one could, what McRuer calls “an affirmative answer to the unspoken question, ‘Yes, but in the end, wouldn’t you rather be more like me?’” (9).

Even social movements that advocate inclusion and acceptance can work against the individuals whom they represent because, “to the extent that identity-movement identities are rehabilitated identities (‘gay is good [not bad],’ ‘black is beautiful [not ugly],’ ‘disabled and proud [not pitiful]’), they are also in some ways normative identities that inevitably incorporate generic sameness *in and through their distinctiveness* and that require and produce degraded others” (McRuer, *Crip Theory* 141; brackets in the original). Any identity composed by — or in response to — the normate risks reifying the factors that it resists. McRuer uses the example of the debate within the queer community about same-sex marriage. Although legalizing same-sex marriage is a necessary step forward in terms of acknowledging same-sex relationships and enforcing legal rights such as inheritance and sharing of health benefits, it might also create a split between domesticated “good” homo-

sexuals and undomesticated, promiscuous, and potentially dangerous or diseased others (79-86).

Neither I nor McRuer, of course, is arguing that being gay equates to being sick; rather, social “givens” such as able-bodiedness and heteronormativity create unvoiced preferences that make deviations from a supposed norm appear anomalous and therefore less desirable. McRuer posits the embodiment of a queer and/or crip identity in opposition to “a rehabilitative logic of identity” that “discounts difference and noncompliance, essentially making them disappear” (*Crip Theory* 121). Instead of projecting a teleology of tolerance based on rehabilitating difference, queer/crip identity accepts and celebrates difference and seeks to accommodate it. It is through “a loss of composure,” McRuer states, “that heteronormativity might be questioned or resisted and that new (queer/disabled) identities and communities might be imagined” (149).

### “I Knew Now, with Certainty, Where My Bones Belonged”: Choy and the “In-Between Generation”

During his recovery from the first of the two health crises that Choy describes in *Not Yet*, a hospital orderly mentions how “dozens and dozens” of people have visited Choy, “and they all swear they’re family,” even though “only two of them were Asian.” Choy then writes “*How odd . . . they all look Asian to me*” (54). Although one of his themes in *Not Yet* is how family expands beyond the ties of blood and ethnicity, his comment that all of his visitors “*look Asian*” does not quite ring true, for Choy, in this memoir and his three previous works, repeatedly returns to questions of ethnic identity and difference. He speaks, for instance, of his “in-between generation” and “the themes of bones and belonging and family, and of being a neither-this-nor-that” (*Not Yet* 139, 141). Born in 1939 and raised in Vancouver’s Chinatown, Choy was a “resident alien” until the Canadian government rescinded the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act and granted Chinese Canadians citizenship in 1947.<sup>5</sup> Choy commented multiple times on how he grew up feeling like “a banana: yellow on the outside and white on the inside” (*Paper Shadows* 84) and thus unsure of “which self” he should manifest, “the peel or the banana?” (*Not Yet* 124). Although his Asian features made him subject to prejudice from outside his community, he was also named by his elders as having “*mo li, no manners*,” not being Chinese enough. Choy explains in *Paper Shadows* how, “having *mo li*, you were marked as

someone ignorant and crude; in short, you were someone destined to fail in life, fated to become life's fool. A loser. A bum" (96-97). As he says of growing up in Chinatown, "people marginalize you and you marginalize yourself. It is a way of keeping your place" ("Death's Lesson" L2).

Readers of Choy's works will likely remember the account of Jook-Liang, in *The Jade Peony*, of how she lost her best friend, the elderly bachelor Wong Suk, when he returned to China with a shipment of two thousand bones. With no direct family ties in Vancouver and with little value to anyone but Jook-Liang, Wong Suk decides (or is pressured) to act as a guardian of the bones of the Chinese men and women who died in Canada but wished to be buried in their place of origin rather than in a foreign country whose prejudicial laws made it clear that they were not wanted. As Choy recovers from the illness that nearly killed him, he also thinks about where his bones belong: metaphorically, is he closer to his Chinese ancestors and cultural heritage or to Canada, the country in which he was born? The third section of *Not Yet*, which begins with his account of his trip to China to narrate a documentary about Confucius, at first seems to answer this question. Having been told as a boy that "Chinese is best" and that Canada is not his homeland (120-21), Choy jumps at the chance to visit his ancestors' country of origin and determine once and for all whether his elders were right. However, as he completes his time in China, which has been marked by feelings that he is more "tourist" than citizen returning to his homeland (129), Choy concludes by reaffirming that he is "such a banana" as he craves that most Westernized aspect of Chinese food, the fortune cookie (137). In fact, as he writes at the end of this section, "pushing through the alien crowds to make my way back home, I knew now, with certainty, where my bones belonged" (139).

Far from being a triumphant assertion of his Canadian roots, however, Choy's trip to China feels out of place both thematically and structurally. In the context of the narrative of illness, recovery, relapse, and renewed illness that makes up most of *Not Yet*, his mini-travelogue seems to be off topic and somewhat jarring, especially since Choy almost immediately reverts to a mindset in which he feels the push and pull of being Canadian but not Canadian enough (or Chinese but not Chinese enough). Larissa Lai's insightful comments in *Slanting I, Imaging We: Asian Canadian Literary Production in the 1980s and 1990s*, on how rhetorics of completion undermine the realities of racism and exclusion in Canada, might help to explain why Choy remains unwilling to decide

unequivocally that his identity is rooted in his Canadian present rather than his Chinese past. Quoting Chris Lee, Lai agrees that “what gets privileged” in narratives of progress “is the completed act of emergence, which marks the culmination of a historical narrative of oppression and resistance, a narrative that finally functions to call into existence and justify the Asian Canadian” (6-7). Narratives that focus on how racialized groups have overcome adversity to become accepted within Canadian society focus on how Canada has overcome its racist past and now accepts all peoples equally, no matter how false such an assumption is in practice. “Indeed,” Lai states, “it is precisely representations of past exclusions that, under narratives of progress, allow state apology to stand as a key turning point and a sign of incorporation — a second obliterating fantasy that hides a prior trauma” (7). Whether in regard to racism, ableism, or homophobia, narratives that focus on triumph over prejudice can shift the focus away from those who have suffered personal attacks and toward the benevolence of the group that has now seen the error of its ways.

Lai includes Choy among a group of authors who broke the silence on Canada’s history of racism, “making space for the articulation of histories that until that point had been kept from the official record” (37-38). But, as Lai continues, there is a danger that once these stories are told they become *part* of the official record and end up “redeployed as a sign of Canada’s benevolence, a sign of liberal/multicultural arrival” (60). Lai thinks that Choy avoids the pitfalls of breaking the silence only to reinforce stereotypes of Asianness by referring to ghosts in his works. By including ghosts in his fiction and two memoirs, Choy destabilizes the certainty of the text. As Lai writes,

By giving ground to these uncanny, unstable hauntings, Choy acknowledges the presence of the unknowable. It may or may not be traumatic, but that is not what is important. By making space for that which evades language, paradoxically, he makes space for language to matter. It is a kind of feeding of hungry ghosts, in which the void is given a nod in order that it not infiltrate and traumatize the entire work. (53)

In a sense, his brush with *becoming* a ghost forces Choy to examine some of the ghosts that have haunted his life and to accept that he dwells at the intersections of many identities. If the first part of *Not Yet* examines a series of binaries — marriage versus bachelorhood, being Chinese ver-

sus being Canadian, cleanliness versus hoarding, illness versus health — the latter part uses literal ghosts to call those binaries into question and to decompose the straightforward narrative of illness. Speaking of Choy's first three major works, *The Jade Peony*, *All that Matters*, and *Paper Shadows*, Nathan Jung observes how "Characters, objects, and themes recur in these texts from different perspectives and time periods. These recurrences suggest that Choy's individual works participate in a larger project aimed at representing the poly-vocal and multi-temporal nature of diasporic identity" (60-61). *Not Yet* affirms Jung's point because it reflects Choy's previous preoccupations with the trauma that Chinese Canadians experienced as a result of racist Canadian policies and the difficulties of moving between "'Old' Chinese culture and [life in] 'New' Canada" (Jung 62). Jung believes that "ghosts by their nature occupy multiple temporal planes, existing in the present while rising from the past; they also fluctuate physically, in some ways maintaining a sensual presence while also eluding stable ontologies. . . . As figures, ghosts generally straddle and disrupt the spaces between binaries, and thus provide useful devices for reading diasporic texts" (61-62).

Such is the case in *Not Yet*, in which Choy recounts how an old friend, Victoria, on a visit to Vancouver after his first brush with death, tells him that he entered her restaurant accompanied by two ghosts, an older woman and a young man. Unable to see these ghosts himself, Choy at first discounts her revelation as superstitious nonsense or a possible scam, but when Victoria describes the ghosts he identifies them as his birth mother and his childhood friend Philip. It is important to note at this point that Choy, having never seen the ghosts himself, could have chosen from a number of deceased individuals, including the adoptive mother who raised him. *Paper Shadows*, after all, is dedicated to thirteen people whom Choy introduces with "In Remembrance: Always with me, never gone," yet he chooses two individuals who represent unsettling events in his past.

Choy titled his first memoir *Paper Shadows*, a reference to the fact that many residents in Chinatown came to Canada with false papers and identities. His mother, for instance, immigrated to Canada on the papers of Nellie Hop Wah, the name of a Chinese Canadian woman who had died while visiting China. As Huai-Yang Lim notes, Choy lived until age fifty-seven with a series of "documented 'facts' about his family background and personal experiences" (249), but the discovery that he was adopted, as Rosalia Baena has stated, led Choy "to negoti-

ate body and place not only in racial or cultural terms, but also in the context of family ties in order to, in a sense, re-inhabit that milieu” (369). “Choy and his mother,” writes Lai, “exist inside the nation-state and inside the family on false papers with names that are not their own. Choy does not even know what his birth name, if he had one, might have been” (55).

*Paper Shadows* begins with his description of how, in 1995, Choy received a phone call telling him that his mother was alive, even though the woman whom he knew as his biological mother had died eighteen years earlier. “The past, as I knew it,” he writes, “began to shift” (5). He did not even know the name of his birth mother, and Philip, he tells us, was a friend with whom the seventeen-year-old Choy had “shared a strong emotional relationship” (*Not Yet* 160). Choy states that he “couldn’t find the words to write about my feelings for [Philip], feelings that frightened me” (160), and therefore when a friend tells him that Philip died of leukemia Choy feels particularly bereft. Interestingly, Victoria tells him that, unless he performs rituals of exorcism to return these ghosts to the other world, he will return from an upcoming trip in “a . . . a . . . wh-wheelchair” (159), as if reconciling himself to his ghosts will seemingly prevent future disability. In spite of his cynicism, Choy eventually agrees to the rituals and finds them surprisingly effective. He ends up telling Philip and his birth mother that they can go in peace because he “will soon join them” (171). As he writes, “I still do not believe in ghosts, but I confess that I talk to them. I write about them. They haunt me. I will not let them go” (171).

### Rehabilitation and Its Discontents:

#### Recovery from Illness and Challenging the Composed Self

Reconciliation with the two ghosts seems to work, for Choy returns from his trip abroad “standing on my own two feet. . . . No wheelchair required.” He immediately qualifies his statement, however: “At least, I thought, *not yet*” (172). It is this pull toward rehabilitation followed by equivocations and additional considerations that makes his work both maddening and profound. In his first memoir, *Paper Shadows*, Choy provides a study of his origins that seems to lead toward the triumphant discovery of the identities of his birth parents, only to frustrate readers by denying them the expected revelation; contrary to what readers expect of adoption narratives, Choy does not end *Paper Shadows* with

the revelation of his “true” identity. In fact, he consciously chooses to let the secret remain hidden. Seeing the distress that his questions about the past cause his father, he writes “What had I been thinking? The need to discover more, to know more, suddenly left me” (313). As Lim notes, Choy chooses to respect his father’s past “by respecting the silence of those who do not wish to disclose it” (252). He does not “rehabilitate” his life story by giving it a tidy conclusion.

The same is true of *Not Yet*, which begins as a narrative of illness and rehabilitation, takes a detour via a trip to Old China, continues with a meditation on ghosts and an exorcism meant to keep Choy healthy, and ends with Choy undergoing a quadruple bypass — definitely not the outcome that readers would expect. Narrating his initial illness, he uses “metaphors of battle and journey” that Hunsaker Hawkins states are “ubiquitous in pathography” (61), and his account fits Arthur Frank’s description of a “restitution narrative” since it “focus[es] on sickness as interruption, but this interruption is finite and remediable” (89). During the early days in the hospital, for example, Choy recalls his mother’s admonition that Choy be “a righteous, brave soldier” (*Not Yet* 12, 18, 20). Then, as he begins physiotherapy, he speaks of “the march to victory” (68) and triumph over bodily infirmity. As he wryly says of his early attempts to stand and to walk independently, “the best of those limb-struggling days return to me now like a single, unbroken Hollywood narrative, complete with the triumphant theme from *Rocky*” (67).

Moreover, while the hospitalized Choy begins the slow work of healing his mind and body, his friends decide to remake his life. Recognizing that his near-fatal asthma attack was exacerbated by the dust accumulated through years of compulsive hoarding, his friends embark on “a Herculean excavation job” (92), getting rid of enough possessions to fill a dumpster and creating a dust-free but visually sterile environment for his return. Choy’s allusion to Hercules might be another nod to his “abject” state since the fifth task of Hercules was to clean the Augean stables, packed with many years of excrement.

Choy’s response to his friends’ cleanup of his living space shows how a part of his personality resists being rehabilitated, even if it is for his own good. Choy knows that his friends want to save his life by eliminating years of dust and allergens, but he experiences this necessary purge as a betrayal: “My mind began to fill with the chaos of stuff that I had once owned. . . . I was going to have to face a future stripped

of objects from the past, of mementoes symbolic of people and times, and now left only in my memory. Had the totality of my things meant so little to those who loved me?" (110). Choy knows that rehabilitation from severe illness requires perseverance and discipline, but his regret about his past life shows that being "a perfect rehab outpatient" (117) comes at some cost. A self-deprecating comment that he makes about his hospital "performance as the Recovering Corpse" (51) suggests that Choy is aware that he is composing a compliant self.

With his space cleaned and his health restored, his life seems to be rehabilitated from within and without. However, if a bare and orderly room is a symbol of a disciplined and rehabilitated life, Choy soon returns to his "collecting compulsion" and other bad habits, and by January 2002 he is "exhausted, joyously in denial" (108, 119). In fact, his doctor soon tells him "Congratulations, Mr. Choy. It looks like all your faults are intact" (119). In continued defiance of the advice of his friends and health professionals, Choy returns to hoarding and ignores clear signs that things are not right, and in 2005 he is admitted to the hospital for a quadruple bypass procedure. In contrast to his comparison of his recovery with Sylvester Stallone's progress in *Rocky*, Choy now writes that "I had seen this movie before: the hero, blinded by his own ego, believing himself invincible because he had escaped death before, is struck down by his own fatal indulgences: delicious rich foods, a crowded life of unmet deadlines and obligations, a messy room" (186).

Since, in our culture, to be an "invalid" often means to be "invalid," Choy at first adopts the "rehabilitative logic of identity" (McRuer, *Crip Theory* 121) in which the subject moves from an inferior to an improved state of being. Contemporary health puritanism, after all, emphasizes how personal choice, rather than systemic factors, causes illness. Ill health is blamed on the stress of long work hours, and people are told to make more conscious health choices and achieve work-life balance. Yet few question how the modern industrial model has normalized doing more work with fewer employees and thus actually increased stress. (As an aside, it is also significant that "choice" has been used to discount same-sex attraction since, if one "chooses" homosexuality, then theoretically one can "unchoose" it and embrace being straight.) In keeping with the logic that we are somehow personally to blame when we move from health into illness, Choy paints himself as a naughty child who ignores signs of impending doom, just as he ignored the Chinatown elders when they told him to marry. He has overworked himself, attrib-



uted his shortness of breath to allergies rather than to anything more serious, and indulged in compulsive hoarding that has made his living space a dusty asthma trigger.

Choy ends *Not Yet* contemplating “the stapled red scar” on his chest and thinking “I would be the same person I was before almost dying, twice. That all my faults would remain completely intact” (190). He sees “a pattern of hands brushing against hands, multiplying into the millions, gestures making no headlines, sounding no trumpets, yet knitting together countless reasons for frenetic hearts — like mine — to rest in peace against uncertainty” (190), while at the same time embracing an uncertain future. In the sense that Choy problematizes binaries and subverts narratives of becoming able and whole, his memoir resonates with McRuer’s work on ability and disability. As McRuer writes, “positioned to critique the finished products heteronormativity demands, queer/crip perspectives can help to keep our attention on disruptive, inappropriate, composing bodies — bodies that invoke the future horizon beyond straight composition” (*Crip Theory* 155). Where the composed body of the rehabilitation narrative strives toward the normate, Choy chooses to hold multiple strands of identity, to use a metaphor from *Paper Shadows*, in “an endless knot” or “a Chinese box that opens in a variety of ways, revealing different levels, each sliding compartment secret” (338, 337). His resistance to “the twentieth-century dream of rehabilitative return” (McRuer, *Crip Theory* 109) might lead Choy to agree with another comment from McRuer: “[U]ntil the other world that is possible is accessed, the sites or locations where disability identities emerge will always be interrogated and transformable, sustaining our understanding that who we are or might be can only have meaning in relation to who we are not (yet)” (72).

## Coda

In one of the final images in *Not Yet*, Choy recounts seeing a hummingbird fly into a glass door, only to lift “into the air like a rocket and [shoot] backwards, then forwards, then up and down” (189). In a way, the hummingbird’s purposeful yet frenetic and darting flight is a good metaphor for *Not Yet* as a whole. By refusing societal and personal imperatives to decide once and for all where his bones belong, by denying his friends’ and his own better instincts to tidy up his life and be more compliant with the dictates of health professionals, and by cele-

brating a complicated family structure that subverts the norms of the heterosexual family, Choy creates a disordered, yet ultimately satisfying, text. Since he resisted, throughout his life, attempts by others to order and compose his identity, it makes sense that, when he writes about his two brushes with death, he eschews a stable and organized narrative structure in favour of a text that actively decomposes its own implied structure. In the latter half of *Not Yet*, Choy discards the tropes of the illness narrative and instead creates a composition as unique and varied as the life that it celebrates.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, the term “memoir” has a longer history than the term “autobiography” and has signalled different kinds of texts over time (1-3). “Currently,” however, “the term refers generally to life writing that takes a segment of a life, not its entirety, and focus[es] on interconnected experiences” (274). Choy’s text is thus a memoir since it narrates his experiences during a period of ill health, recovery, and relapse that stretched from July 2001 to Fall 2005. As Choy relates the events that happened during this period, he introduces autobiographical details from earlier parts of his life but always within the context of what is happening in the memoir’s “present.”

<sup>2</sup> “For example, in an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports” (128).

<sup>3</sup> Here and elsewhere in this essay, the italics occur in Choy’s original text.

<sup>4</sup> “A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. . . . No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death” (Kristeva 231).

<sup>5</sup> Choy writes in *Paper Shadows* that, “Until after the Second World War, no Chinese, even those born in Canada, like me, were given citizenship: I was a *Resident Alien*, forbidden to vote or to enter any profession, including law, teaching, medicine and engineering” (74).

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