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UNFINISHED SYNTHESIS: GEORG SIMMEL'S ADVENTURE, TWO CHINESE JAMAICAN MIGRATION NARRATIVES, AND THE NEGOTIATION OF MODERN IDENTITY¹

Anne-Marie Lee-Loy

ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore how the Simmelian concept of “adventure” can serve as a symbolic category providing a framework for understanding two Chinese Jamaicans’ recollections of childhood migration and their attempts to mediate and synthesize the tensions caused by that experience into an overall expression of identity. The Simmelian adventure recognizes that the very process of synthesizing life events draws attention to the disconnections and disruptions—what Simmel defines as “dualities”—that Simmel concludes are characteristic of modern identities. The Chinese Jamaican narratives in this study display the dualities of the adventures as posited by Simmel and as such, reconfirm the understanding of the Caribbean as a site of modernity and recognize both the experiences and contributions of a minority group in this region as being significant for our understanding of modern diasporic identities in general and, more specifically, in the Caribbean.

Keywords: Jamaica, Chinese Jamaican, Jamaican Chinese, migration narrative, Simmel, adventure

RESUMEN

En este artículo estudiaré cómo el concepto de “aventura” de Simmelian, puede servir como una categoría simbólica, que proporciona un marco para la comprensión de dos recuerdos de emigración en la infancia de los jamaicano-chinos y sus intentos de mediar y sintetizar las tensiones provocadas por esa experiencia en una expresión general de identidad. La aventura de Simmelian reconoce el proceso que al sintetizar los eventos de vida pone de relieve las desconexiones y interrupciones —definidas por Simmel como “dualidades”— que Simmel concluye son característicos de las identidades modernas. Este estudio muestra cómo las dualidades de las aventuras en las narraciones jamaicano chinas, como afirma Simmel, confirman el entendimiento de lo caribeño, como un sitio de modernidad y reconocimiento de la experiencia y la contribución de un grupo minoritario en esta región. Este estudio es significativo para el entendimiento de la identidad moderna y su diáspora en general y la identidad caribeña en particular.

Palabras clave: Jamaica, chino-jamaïquino, jamaïquino-chino, narrativa de migración, Simmel, aventura

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, nous explorerons la façon dont le concept simmelien de «l'aventure» peut servir de catégorie symbolique offrant un cadre pour mieux comprendre les souvenirs d'enfance de l'expérience de migration de la part de deux Sino-jamaïcains ainsi que leur tentative de négocier et de synthétiser les tensions causées par cette expérience dans une expression globale d'identité. L'aventure simmelienne tient compte du fait que le processus même de synthétiser les événements vécus attire l'attention sur les déconnexions et les perturbations —définies par Simmel comme des «dualités»—, qu'il considère caractéristiques des identités modernes. Les récits des Sino-jamaïcains étudiés ici mettent en évidence les dualités de ces aventures, telles qu'elles ont été conçues par Simmel et, à ce titre, reconfirment la vision des Caraïbes comme un espace de la modernité. De même, elles nous permettent de reconnaître les expériences et les contributions d'un groupe minoritaire de cette région comme étant importantes pour notre compréhension des identités diasporiques modernes en général et aux Caraïbes en particulier.

Mots-clés: Jamaïque, chinois jamaïcain, sino-jamaïcain, récits de migration, Simmel, aventure

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In 1994, when Paul Gilroy prefaced his seminal text, *The Black Atlantic*, by claiming that it grew out of his attempt to show his students that “the experiences of black people were part of the abstract modernity they found so puzzling” (p. ix), he joined an eminent group of thinkers who consider the Caribbean region to be one of, if not the first, site of modernity in the West. For example, it has been argued that both CLR James’ 1938 *The Black Jacobins* and Eric Williams’ 1944 *Capitalism and Slavery* position the Caribbean as “the primordial site of Atlantic modernity”; or, more poetically:

[t]he colonial mission then, was a missile that launched the Caribbean, its European commanders, and African cargo on the path to modernity on board the plantation enterprise that rose on the site of native ruins. (Beckles, pp. 777 and 778)

Such arguments inherently position the potentially disruptive experience of multiple migrations and ensuing intercultural contact, as well as the new capitalist modes of economic interaction, as being intrinsically

intertwined with the construction and articulation of modern identities. Such ideas have had profound implications for understanding how cultural identities are negotiated in this region for they suggest that Caribbean identities are inherently sites of tension and ambiguity. As such, it is perhaps no surprise that contemporary Caribbean theorists have traditionally focussed on attempts to understand and synthesize such tensions. The concept of a creole identity, for example—a concept so closely associated with the Caribbean that one theorist claims that “Caribbean identity occurs within the discursive space of the ‘Creole’” (Hintzen, p. 92)—is, on a fundamental level, an attempt to articulate how various cultural components merge to form a new specifically modern Caribbean identity.

The heavy focus on cultural tensions born out of migration and modern economic relationships as being at the root of a sense of fragmentation deemed characteristic of modern Caribbean identities can, however, be problematic. One result of this focus, is that it often situates Caribbean modernity within a space understood to be composed ethnically in terms of “Black” and “White,” and ignores the presence and contributions of other ethnic groups in the region. For example, Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s influential text *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820* (1971) defines Jamaican creole culture as the product of Afro-Euro cultural and institutional adaptations. Similarly, Orlando Patterson’s work on Caribbean creolization (1975) is explicitly concerned with the contact between what he defines as “Euro-West Indian” and “Afro-West Indian” groups in Caribbean societies. Rex Nettleford (1970) summed up this limited theoretical focus perhaps most memorably when he described Jamaica as a site where the melody of Europe and the rhythm of Africa combined. Modernist Georg Simmel provides an alternative framework by which to explore how Caribbean identities negotiate their modernity in his concept of the “adventure.” Simmel’s adventure recognizes the inherently fragmented quality of modern identities and seeks to understand how such fragmentation is managed in everyday interactions; however, his lack of focus on ethnicity allows space for the consideration of the contribution of ethnic groups other than descendants of Africans and Europeans to our understanding of modern Caribbean identities. In this article, I specifically explore how Simmel’s adventure can be perceived as a symbolic category providing a framework for understanding two Chinese Jamaicans’ recollections of childhood migration and their attempts to mediate the tensions caused by that experience so that it can be synthesised into an overall expression of identity. In doing so, I also seek to reconcile the experiences and contributions of a minority group in this region to our understanding of modern Caribbean diasporic identities.

Simmelian Adventure: Dualism and Synthesis

Simmel's interest in the impact of money and capitalism on the production of modern culture and his insistence that significant meaning can be uncovered in the seemingly insignificant fragments of modern life suggest that his thinking might be particularly well-suited to considering the dynamics of Caribbean identities; and, more specifically for the purposes of this paper, the vagaries of Chinese migration in Jamaica. Like many other thinkers of his generation, Simmel considered modern identities to be deeply fragmented and unstable relative to what was perceived to be the more unified identities of previous generations. In particular, in what is arguably his most famous work, *The Philosophy of Money* (2004), Simmel depicts modern life as producing individuals who are fundamentally restless, exhibiting "a sense of continuous change, sudden rifts and convulsions" (p. 500). Nevertheless, Simmel continues to believe in an underlying cohesiveness to modern lives and identities; that, whilst recognizing the tensions and ambiguities of the modern condition, "[t]he substance of our life is constantly seized by interweaving forms which thus bring about its unified whole" (Simmel 1997:232). His idea of adventure is one such attempt to make sense of the perceived fragmentary nature of modern identity.

For Simmel, the adventure is a life episode that is characterized by being clearly defined (that is, has a clear beginning and a clear end) and by being seemingly disconnected or distinct from the rest of one's experiences and yet, is actually very much connected to one's overall sense of life and self:

What we call an adventure stands in contrast to that interlocking of life-links, to that feeling that those counter-currents, turnings, and knots still, after all, spin forth a continuous thread ... it occurs outside the usual continuity of life. Nevertheless ... While it falls outside the context of life, it falls with this same movement as it were, back into that context again ... it is a foreign body in our existence which is yet somehow connected with the center. (Simmel 1997:222)

As such, the concept of adventure captures a fundamental paradox; namely, that identities exist in an ongoing state of tension between "synthesis" and "antagonisation" and "compromise." Furthermore, the very process of synthesizing events into an adventure draws attention to the disconnections and disruptions—what Simmel refers to as life's dualisms—that this synthesis attempts to overcome. In particular, Simmel argues that the adventure exposes three dualisms that he suggests are characteristic of modern identities: chance and necessity; activity and passivity; and certainty and uncertainty. For Simmel, the paradox of modern identity as revealed in the adventure is that identity can still have

meaning and cohesiveness, despite the presence of these dualisms. It is the recognition of this ongoing tension at the heart of Simmel's ideas regarding adventure that allows it to serve so effectively as a model by which to explore the limits and potentialities of subjective agency for integrating the seemingly random and potentially disruptive events of multiple migration that are so important in the articulation of Caribbean identities in general and, more specifically, for the narratives of the two Chinese Jamaicans who are at the centre of this paper.

Background to the Narratives

Anecdotally, the migration of the Chinese to Jamaica has been referred to as occurring in three waves: the first in the latter part of the 19th century when indentured labourers—significantly less in numbers than those in British Guiana and Trinidad—were brought to Jamaica from China;² the second around the beginning and early part of the 20th century when Chinese entrepreneurs travelled to Jamaica from China and other areas of the Chinese diaspora looking for opportunities to set up business; and finally, a new base of Chinese business immigrants that started coming to Jamaica around the latter part of the 20th century, after the original Chinese Jamaican population was decimated by a massive out-migration of Chinese-Jamaicans in the mid-20th century, particularly following the election of the socialist leaning People's National Party in 1972. Within this overall pattern of migration, a secondary migration phenomenon occurred during the first half of the 20th century; namely, the sending of Jamaican-born children of Chinese descent to China to be raised and educated. This migration also took part in two waves. The first ended around 1937 when the second Sino-Japanese war broke out and Chinese-Jamaican parents kept their children at home in Jamaica. The practice of sending Jamaican-born Chinese children to China was then briefly re-established following the end of the Second World War, however, for all intents and purposes, such migration probably ended by 1950 as parents in Jamaica hesitated to send their children into the uncertain future that the rise of a Communist China represented. The narratives considered in this paper pertain to two men who were part of this migration having been sent to mainland China as young children just prior to the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War. Their stories were two of a number of interviews that were collected in Toronto, Canada during the summer of 2005 at the Tsung Tsin Association³ as part of what was essentially an oral history project that sought to collect stories of what it was like to grow up in China as migrants at that time.

The interviews consisted of open-ended questions that allowed the subjects to speak at length on topics that interested them or that they

particularly wanted to convey regarding their migration experiences. During the process of collecting the stories, it became evident that not only did the subjects have their own specific reasons for participating in the project, but in telling their stories, they were attempting, to use a Simmelian term, “to weave” the seemingly random events together to create a more synthesized “life story,” and ultimately, a cohesive identity. In this regard, this paper looks specifically at the narratives of two men, Alfred (Freddie) and Bertram,⁴ who were chosen for two main reasons. First, the men share some similarity in their backgrounds. Both Freddie and Bertram were born in Jamaican country parishes in 1929 and 1931 respectively. Their fathers were Chinese shopkeepers and their mothers were local, non-Chinese Jamaican women who never married their fathers, although they had multiple children with the men.⁵ Unlike some of the other interviewees, Freddie and Bertram were sent to China alone without siblings or parents, although in the case of Freddie, he was sent in the care of a Chinese family that was returning with their own children to China. Bertram was entrusted to a woman who was taking a number of other children to China on behalf of their parents.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, Freddie and Bertram were particularly keen to participate in the interview process and to share their stories. Indeed, they gave the longest interviews. As a result, their attempts to create an overall story and identity—to make the pieces of their lives fit so that “the whole of life is somehow comprehended and consummated” in their various memories—were more apparent than some of the other interviews, as were the ambiguities they faced in trying to synthesise their recollections (Simmel 1997:223). For example, Freddie and Bertram’s narratives reveal what Simmel described as the dualism of chance and necessity. Both men showed a high awareness of the fact that chance played a significant role in their lives. It was chance, after all, that brought their fathers to Jamaica rather than to some other location; chance that caused their fathers to become involved with local women who would not or could not particularly resist sending their children to China; chance that caused them to arrive in China just prior to the outbreak of war; and finally, chance that helped account for their returns to Jamaica. Nevertheless, neither man was able to tell their tales in such a way that these chance events remained entirely random. Instead, their stories were presented as a “process playing back and forth between chance and necessity, between the fragmentary materials given us from the outside and the consistent meaning of the life developed from within” (Simmel 1997:224). In the end, for both men, the chance events of their lives were deemed necessary to how they ultimately defined themselves, in Freddie’s case, as an individual especially protected by providence and in Bertram’s case, as an important

member of his family. Thus, the chance migration experience that they encountered was given “meaning of the life”—that is, became a necessary component in their articulations of identity. The two other dualisms identified by Simmel, activity and passivity and certainty and uncertainty, would also play key roles in the shaping of their narratives and identities and will be discussed in more detail below.

Activity and Passivity: Freddie's Providential Life

The duality of activity and passivity that is revealed in the adventure is described by Simmel as the spectrum “between what we conquer and what is given to us” (Simmel 1997:225). He insists that:

In the adventure, the interweaving of activity and passivity which characterizes our life tightens these elements into a coexistence of conquest, which owes everything only to its own strength and presence of mind, and complete self-abandonment to the powers and accidents of the world, which can delight us, but in the same breath can also destroy us. (Simmel 1997:226)

The description appears to be particularly apt to the manner in which Freddie constructs his identity in his narrative. On the one hand, Freddie's stories consist largely of negative events to which he was subjected. In this sense, Freddie positions himself as a passive being, “conquered,” so to speak, by the cruelty around him. On the other hand, however, Freddie reveals himself to also be an active participant in his life—an individual who is able to demonstrate “strength and presence of mind” in the face of humiliation and dangers that were “given to him.” This duality is contained within an overarching story of divine intervention or providence that becomes the loom on which Freddie weaves his narrative and ultimately, his identity; for as the subject of divine interest, Freddie's identity is intrinsically both passive and active. Simply put, Freddie is an active participant in his life because he attempts to make the best of his situation, but at the same, he is ultimately passive, since providence is the true conquering force that controls the events of his life.

To establish the overall story of divine intervention in his life, Freddie sets up a distinction between good and evil in his life where evil is consistently associated with China, represented as a place of hell. Such positioning occurs from the very beginning of his migration memories when he describes the manner in which, as a four-year old boy, he was sent to China:⁶

Now one day, my father take me to the taxi in Kingston along with [another Chinese family]. That was not unusual. I think he was going to play mahjong. So, we stop at a place call Rockford where the cement

factory is—you see it on the left-hand side going to Kingston—and there's a little wharf—Shell wharf—and then there's a ship. So they take me to the ship. I don't know if it a cargo ship or banana ship. My father ask me to stay in one room to play with the boys—there were four boys to play with. Give me, you know, an orange or cookie or candy, something. Have a nice time, go in there. The three, four of us, we play, play, play until after we say, "Wait, where all the old people gone?" Just the four of us in there. And when I climb, look through the little window for my father—Backside! Water—everywhere is water! I see ocean. I see the sea gull [imitates the sound of a sea gull] and water. No land. I don't know how loud I scream—I know I was crying hell loud. The poor seagulls, they must be tired of hearing me crying for some time. So that is the beginning of hell.

Not only does this memory establish that in entering China, Freddie was entering a dark and evil space, it emphasizes the idea of Freddie as a passive player in the events about to be unfolded. This is, perhaps, unsurprising, as he was but a child when he was sent to China and had no say over such a decision; however, the image of Freddie's passivity continues in his depictions of growing up in China, largely because of his status as an outsider in the village. Freddie describes his early encounters with the village in a manner that is actually not too different from the memories of some of the other interviewees who recounted curious children coming to see them, the newcomers, upon their arrival: "Then now other children, everyday, they come to my door—the doorway—look at me like a circus, like a clown." Unlike many of the other Chinese Jamaicans who were interviewed, however, Freddie never appears to really be able to connect with the children after this initial period of curiosity: "I don't like the children, you know. Come so, I stick to my mother."⁷ Part of this dislike is evidently connected to the fact that Freddie is the subject of negative comments and treatment because of his mixed-race background and, as he reveals later, because of his poverty: "You know when I get a little bigger, people really say so much bad thing about me, you know. Not my father, but me. I didn't tell him to go sleep with the woman [in Jamaica]—but [they said the "bad things" to] me." The pain and the sense of unfairness that Freddie suffered are particularly poignant in his recollection of what he believed to be an example of an unfair punishment that he was subjected to at school:

You know, every Thursday there's a one-hour program in painting—art history—painting. Some people not good for this. One of the girls in our school asked me to draw [the assignment] for her. So, I draw it, I give it to her and she give me peanut. Hungry, I hungry. And then she sign her name and send it up. Now painting, [is like] handwriting. You can't fool nobody. The teacher look at it. He call me: "Fan Jai⁸! Come here! Who do this?" I don't want—it's not my job to tell you who do

it. I get paid. She's the one he's supposed to punish, isn't that right? You nuh think so? I get the punishment. Why? Because I'm a foreign [sic], I'm a half-breed, I'm no good. The Chinese, when your parents have money, have background, have prestige—you are like gold. They polish you. But when you come from down there [indicating a low level close to the floor]—even Jesus Christ come there, they would spit on him same way. So, he put me to stand up in the corner.

Throughout these stories, Freddie depicts himself as a passive player in his own life. He is acted upon—the village children stare at him, he is spoken badly of, and he is punished unfairly. As Simmel might say, Freddie simply appears to take what is given to him. Nowhere is this passivity more evident than in his long and detailed recollection of his half-brother's failed attempt to murder him. At the same, time, however, the story also reveals clearly a dualism in the identity that Freddie is constructing for himself. True, he is acted upon because his brother plans his murder, but Freddie also acts, in that he breaks the firing pin on the gun, thus foiling the murder attempt:

Japanese war start. Even before that, you know, we don't have enough land to produce things to support [the] family. Like I say, my father, mother in Jamaica, never send a dime or one penny to me. So my brother—they want to get rid of me ... Anyhow, so one day, my nephew tell me, "Ah Po [sic]⁹, if my father or mother call you, don't go." I say, "What happen? What's wrong?" [He says:] "They plan to kill you." I say [to myself], "Aww little boy, you know, he must be make up that story. How my brother going to do that? Even though I'm nine years younger [than my brother], there's no Chinese in the village can over power me."

So little boy start to cry. I say [to myself], "He's serious." I say, "How [is he planning to kill me]?" He say, "He have a gun." ... So, I say, "Please, come show me." Little boy go home. You know a Princess Dresser? A vanity. [The gun] is there. ... I say, "OK." I crack it—take something, break the pin—the firing pin, and I use the—in China, there's no glue, eh. You know they cook rice—you know you used to cook rice to paste with paper? So, OK, that can work. So I put the tape—rice glue it back. It not crazy glue, eh? Rice—if you put rice to glue back metal, you cannot fire, cannot make it work. Crazy glue, perhaps, yes. Anyhow, I put it back. So, next night, my sister-in-law come call me: "Your brother want see you." So, I walk in. ... And I open the door, just so. And she say, "You must go closer—closer to the second step." When I go to the second [step], my dear beloved sister, close the door. She use a piece of two-by-four, go across, like that [indicates barring the door]. I go up there. He say, [he] want [me to] come closer, closer. I already know everything. I even prepare. I got the knife they use to kill pig hidden in the bottom of my shirt. So, I pretending I'm scratching my head. I go prepare if he really take up the gun there, I go do that [indicates

grabbing the knife from under his shirt and making a chopping motion]. I even do some practice on the pine tree. When I go, my whole body, my head—everything is numb. And then, his pin wouldn't work—it just popped off [but] I couldn't kill him.

In this story, Freddie is represented as a conqueror, not only because he is able to save his own life, but because he gains a moral victory by not retaliating and killing his brother and sister-in-law. At the same time, however, the story's suggestion that Freddie was protected through divine intervention essentially repositions Freddie in a passive role as a subject to the vagaries of providence. After all, if it were not for his nephew fortuitously advising Freddie of the plan, Freddie would not have been able to act to save his own life. Indeed, the insistence on providential protection around which Freddie structures his story becomes more clear when this incident is placed in relief against other stories that he recounts of his life in China. For example, after this overt attempt on his life, Freddie moves into an abandoned haunted house on his own, even though he is barely 13-years old. In this situation, the negative attitude and treatment that he had endured in the village that forced him to seek a close relationship with his mother, turns out for the best, because from her, he had already learned the agricultural skills that he would need to survive on his own at this young age. Later, as further proof of divine intervention in his life, Freddie recounts a story of missing a train that was subsequently involved in a horrific accident and yet another story of "Chinese gypsies"¹⁰ advising his mother that Freddie was protected by what they could only describe as a bright light. These stories highlight the overarching idea within which Freddie structures his identity; namely, that a divine force is shaping his life.

The presence of Freddie's Chinese mother in his life is also recounted in Freddie's narratives as further examples of divine interest and protection. Certainly, life would have been much more miserable without the consistent love and care that he describes her as lavishing on him despite their abject poverty. Indeed, she even puts her life on the line for him, not only in sharing her meager food with him, but at one point, in literally taking a blow meant for Freddie by his half-brother. Her connection to some kind of divinity is amplified by Freddie's consistent description of his mother as a type of saint-like figure manifesting infinite patience and love. For example, she never shows resentment towards her wayward husband in Jamaica, despite the fact that he never sends her any financial support and has increased her life burdens by sending his illegitimate son to her. Thus, when Freddie complains:

My father never send a dime. I say, "Mama, why he do that? Now you have one potato—one potato, your sweet potato to eat to full or half-full your tummy. Now you have to give me half. You have to take

quarter. Why he do a thing like that?" She say to me, "Son, I know you're angry. Don't hate them at all."

Eventually, Freddie suggests that she is directly connected to God when he asserts that any moral code that he might live by was inspired by her: "If there's any Bible in me, it's not from the Bible—sorry. Not from anybody but my mother. Where she get her knowledge from is only God in Heaven know. Maybe God speak through her."

Any ambiguity about providential guidance in his life, is, however, removed when Freddie recounts the fortuitous way in which he was able to escape the "hell" of China and return to Jamaica. In setting up the tale, Freddie already suggests a divine hand is at work because the fact that Freddie is forced to live alone is the reason that a school friend gets him a job working for his father. It is this job that would set the events in motion that would bring about his return to Jamaica; and, at the centre of this story is an individual who is overtly recognized as having a divine connection—a priest:

There was a man, a priest—when I say a priest, I mean a Catholic priest, a Franciscan, not Chinese—who would come to the shop ... He didn't speak Chinese. Don't ask me why, God in Heaven know, but I am good with body language to read people mind. When they can't understand him, they call me. I think it was one of those days, but when I go, he point at the clock—we have a grandfather clock—want to know what time I finish work. He say, "When you finish work, you must come to the church." I say, "OK."

After work, I walk to the church. He have a Cantonese woman there to translate. So when I go there, the priest want to know if I am from Jamaica. ... I say, "Yes, I'm from Jamaica". He want to know if I have a passport I could show him. That don't make any sense [to show him the passport] because my half-brother had cut up my passport in three pieces and put it in the rubbish heap to burn. Plus, it was expired and the picture in it was of me as a four-year old baby and by then I was 16, 17. Then, next thing, he ask if I have any other document in English like a baptism paper. I had been living in China for 14 years, I didn't know what he was talking about, baptism paper. Passport, yes, I knew that, but not a baptism paper.

Anyhow, I go back to Mama and say, "The priest ask me if I have any paper, you know, written in English." Now the passport and the birth certificate¹¹ had been together when my brother chop up the passport in three pieces and put it in the rubbish heap. He burn it, but not completely because in them day, the British passport was black and royal blue and very tough and very waxy. So, is about a year after that—you're not going to believe this—one day, my mother go there [to the rubbish heap] and she see a piece of paper fly. [It was in] English. So she say

keep it. I can't read it myself, so I carry it, go to speak to the priest. Him—that priest—don't weigh more than 100 pounds and I was about 185 pounds – that priest, he trying to lift me up and jump up and down. Not even shake my hand. And call me—at that time it sound [to me] like, "Mai song! Mai song!" "Mai" means "go buy" and "song" was a particular kind of poison in China. So, I say to the Cantonese woman, "Why is he telling me to buy poison?" But he was saying "my son!" , but that's what I hear—I don't speak English, you know? If I'm not mistaken, I think he was crying. The Cantonese woman, she say, "You know, the priest is so happy that you are one of his members and brothers," or whatever have you. I can't remember the exact words that she use. So he take me to Hong Kong to the British—because in them days Jamaica was ruled by the British—and because of the priest, I have no problem [getting papers to return to Jamaica] ... That's why you have to believe in God—for that piece of paper to blow—you know how much rain fall in China? Monsoon rain? You know what kind of breeze that we have there?

Again, in this dramatic tale, the focus is not so much on Freddie as an active participant arranging his escape from China as it is on the hand of divine providence that shaped his life events in such a way that he is saved from a life that he has only been able to describe as a hell. In this sense, the narrative depicts Freddie's identity with a certain level of passivity as he accepts what fate hands out to him. At the same time, however, when read against Freddie's other memories of this time period, it is evident that he depicts himself not simply as a pawn of fate, because he actively develops those qualities and demonstrates those behaviours that allow him to eventually participate in what is ultimately understood to be providence's plan for his life. In this case, for example, Freddie has already demonstrated that he is a trustworthy and responsible young man which is why he gets the job that puts him into contact with the priest in the first place; further, he has honed the ability to read body language, a skill that draws the attention of the priest. In this way, Freddie's identity, encompassed within a tale that synthesizes the seemingly random twists of fate into a story of divine intervention, dramatically reveals the duality of activity and passivity that Simmel posited was one of the unresolved tensions inherent in modern identities.

Certainty and Uncertainty: Bertram's Quest for Belonging

The final duality evident in modern identities that Simmel describes in his definition of the adventure is that of certainty and uncertainty. In this duality, Simmel is making reference to what he calls the "incalculable element of life" and the reaction of the adventurer to the uncer-

tainty inherent in modern lives (Simmel 1997:226). Simmel explains this duality through a comparison with a love affair, emphasizing how the lover pursues his quest with little recognition of the role of fate or other events that might negatively affect his ultimate success in wooing the beloved. Specifically, Simmel notes that the lover pursues his love believing that love will last eternally and that he will certainly obtain the object of his devotion. As Simmel puts it, the lover proceeds as if the "obscurities of fate" are transparent to him (Simmel 1997:226). Nevertheless, the love affair itself always contains a level of uncertainty for love may not last and the lover may not obtain the object of his affection. A similar duality is displayed in the manner in which Bertram shapes his stories in terms of defining his relationship with his family members. Bertram's narratives are synthesized in such a way that, overall, they assert his belonging within his family circles in both Jamaica and China; nevertheless, such assertions of belonging coexist alongside comments and other narratives that suggest that his place within the family is much less secure. Bertram never explicitly acknowledges this insecurity and it is through an insistence of his importance to his family and perhaps willful ignoring of any challenges to such a claim that Bertram reveals the "sleepwalking certainty" that Simmel uses to describe the synthesis between uncertainty and certainty that occurs in the negotiation of modern identities (Simmel 1997:227).

While Freddie, despite his dramatic storytelling and exuberance throughout the interview, may have actually been a bit constrained at the beginning of his interview by what he would later identify as a sense of shame in terms of what he was willing to recount, Bertram indicated no such hesitation. Bertram made it clear that he wanted to communicate his history to his family so that they would have a better understanding of their Chinese heritage. As a result, Bertram's interview was peppered with seemingly extensive and insignificant details of a general family history—where their family village was, who was related to who, estimating dates of birth, delving into family mythology and the like. These were not, however, useless divergences. Instead, focus on the family and his place within the family was the organizing principle of his narrative. The events he recounted therefore established the family space within which his other recollections would attempt to place him as a valid and important member. Nevertheless, despite Bertram's attempts to shape life events so that they revealed a young man who fit in comfortably with his family in both Jamaica and China, within his narrative, a number of "off-the-cuff" comments and even his need to assert this belonging, call this very belonging into question.

The paradoxical revelation of security and insecurity that occurs in Bertram's depiction of his identity within his family was revealed from

the very beginning of the interview when a seemingly inconsequential detail was reintegrated into his story of his return to Jamaica. Early in the interview, he described the one time in his life when his entire family lived together in a house connected with a shop in a small, rural Jamaican community. Near the home was a green space in which Bertram, playing with his sisters, ended up injuring himself and gaining a permanent scar:

I with my sister-dem, go to park, some park, nice park, green grass. But they have some hole. Them people dump garbage in the hole. I running—I playing with my sisters—I running and drop in the hole and cut my eye. That's why my eyebrow [points to a scar in his eyebrow].

He returns to this episode later in the interview when he recalls his return to Jamaica 27 years after he left as a five-year old boy:

When I get off the plane, I see lotta people from the plane side ... first thing, I see my mother. I recognized her, yeah. Is she, you know. She sent picture, you know? I first land, I get to my Ma, and she hold me—my head—hold up my head and look 'pon my eyebrow, make sure is me. She there looking for my eyebrow because [it had been] 27 years. When she see [the scar], she say, "yes," after that she start hugging me. [My older sister] is there, she see my eyebrow that time, start hug and kiss. After that, my sister a-hug me now.

In this story, Bertram's recognition as belonging to his family, the moment when his mother sees his scar, is also the moment that draws attention to the possibility of being rejected by his family. This possibility is not articulated or overtly recognized by Bertram in his narration; indeed, the story is narrated in such a way that his welcome into the family seems inevitable. In this way, like the lover who refuses to recognize the possible failure of his pursuit or an end to his love, Bertram synthesizes the certainty and uncertainty of belonging by proceeding in his storytelling as if such belonging was a *fait accompli*.

Although the official focus of the interview was to be on recollections of growing up in China, Bertram obviously felt that it was important to relate events that occurred outside of that time frame. Such stories tended to have a strong emphasis on establishing Bertram's significance to his family in Jamaica. For example, Bertram explains that, after the untimely and unexpected death of his father, his father's cousin, referred to as an uncle by Bertram and his siblings, offered to take care of his mother and the remaining children in the family on the condition that Bertram be recognized as his son. The story Bertram tells about this informal adoption highlights Bertram's importance to both his uncle and to his mother and siblings. After all, the family's well-being and survival depends on Bertram. At the same time, however, a type of insecurity at

having been basically designated the “sacrificial lamb” for his family’s welfare becomes evident when Bertram attempts to belie his status as a “give-away child” in his explanation of why his mother might agree to such an arrangement:

He wanted me to be him son. So my Mamma say, “OK.” And Mama no worry much that time. We was living together, stay, and want anything, go to shop, go get it, you know. My Mama no worry much at that time.”

In a similar, but more charming fashion, Bertram synthesizes the tension of belonging to two family spaces when he describes his ability to get two breakfasts out of the arrangement between his mother and uncle. Expected on occasion to spend the night at his uncle’s shop, after eating breakfast there, Bertram would run to his mother’s house and eat another breakfast, thus earning the endearing nickname from his family, “Two-Teas.” Later, another story about a family nickname is again used to suggest Bertram’s importance—that he was “really loved” as he would put it—by his Jamaican family:

He [the Chinese uncle] fight with Eldridge [the mother’s brother] all the time. He fight with Eldridge. I don’t know what happened, but I think maybe [it was because] him [the Chinese uncle] send me away. Because Eldridge really love me you know. Because, you know one time, I have these troubles with my girlfriend [after having returned to Jamaica]. My Mama send me to the country. Mama carry me go to Uncle Eldridge. Uncle Eldridge say to me, “Oh Little Papa!” I didn’t know my nickname. Him call me, “Little Papa”. He say, “Oh Little Papa, you come home!” And he take me go—[the village] have one straight street—take me go everyone, barber shop, tailor shop. He say, “Oh, you know this one?” And he tell the shopman when he look at me, “You see Little Papa?” Yeah. That’s why I think that them fighting. They fight all the time.

Unsurprisingly, Bertram’s stories about his life in China reveal a similar duality in his ability to create an identity of belonging within family space. For example, Bertram was sent to China with a chaperone, an older woman, who was in charge of about six other children from Jamaica who were also making the trip. Evidently, the children were kept below deck for most of the trip, an experience that may have helped forge strong bonds between the children that Bertram would describe in terms of family. Bertram uses the relationship that he had with these children as a means of signaling a more general sense of family loss upon his arrival in Hong Kong:

When I go to Hong Kong, everybody gone different way. It was 49 [days together on the trip]—and the children like sister and brother, you know? Everybody—one gone that way, and one gone that way, and one gone that way.

This sense of family loss and insecurity is amplified in Bertram's descriptions of his first memories of life in China in the presence of his new family as represented in the cousin, referred to as Big Brother, who was sent to retrieve him:

He go and take me, go to the hotel. I find a children [*sic*] tricycle. Wow! So I excited. Ride, ride, ride and boom! Bust up the hotel wall. Big Brother take my bottom and slap me in my bottom – Pam! Pam! Pam! Always remember that. And then, in the morning, we have to take the train. I never take train in Jamaica, you know. I put my head out of the window and Big Brother take me and [motion of spanking]. I remember that.

Despite, or perhaps because of this inauspicious beginning to life in China, many of Bertram's later memories of his time in China position him as being unambiguously accepted within his family and the greater village. For example, he describes the reaction of the villagers to his arrival in terms of an unmitigated homecoming:

Everybody see me, so glad. When [I was] a little boy, is really pretty a me. Everybody like me, you know? I go inside and White Beard [the father of the uncle who sent him to China] still alive. White Beard see me, he hold me, he say [that I am] him grandson, you know?"

Bertram also stresses his importance to his family when he notes the care and responsibility that he had for Big Brother's young daughter, basically acting as her nursemaid and even carrying her on his back when the family became refugees during the war. The recognition that Bertram is indeed a full family member is also suggested in the story that Bertram tells about Big Brother's first attempt to procure a wife for him:¹²

I have a girl too. Japanese time, Hong Kong people carry children to sell. Them buy a girl too, you know, buy a girl to be my wife. But my father [*sic*], White Beard say "That girl come from Hong Kong, no background, them no have the background"—you don't know the background, you know? Then him say, tell me call her "sister." My father's side people come say, "Can't be that girl. You don't know she—don't have no background, you know."

The point that Bertram appears to be making is that the process by which Big Brother initially finds him his wife is not proper. White Beard's and his father's people's refusal to accept the girl with "no background" as a suitable bride for Bertram suggests an unwillingness to allow Bertram to be treated any less than any other family member. At the same time, however, the story draws attention to a certain precariousness inherent in Bertram's claim to belonging since Big Brother has clearly overlooked Bertram's status as an equal member in the family in his choice of bride. Indeed, despite the numerous stories that Bertram told

that depicted him as a fully accepted member of the village and the family, such depictions were often subtly undermined in other recollections. He mentions in passing, for example, that his father's wife, who also lives in the village would:

tease me all the time, say, "You isn't my son", you know? Tell me all the time, teasing me. She say, "You isn't my son!" I don't belong to her, I know. I go to White Beard's house. I no live with the woman. She can't have me because White Beard's son send me.

Here, Bertram's claim to belonging to White Beard's family also draws attention to the unusual circumstances of his place in China—that he had not been sent to his father's wife as many of the other children arriving in China had been—and to the regular "teasing" that he undergoes from her that points to the fact that he does not belong, at least to her. Both facts might suggest a possible underlying sense of rejection that Bertram was aware of, even if generally ignored in the narratives he tells, an idea that gains relevance when one realizes that, after White Beard's death, Bertram's acceptance in the family seems to become much less clear, as indicated in the following memories of life with Big Brother:

My brother say: "[You] have to wash the clothes, your clothes before you go to school." I no like it, no like it.¹³ And that time, he carry one, you know, chopper – Chinese chopper. "If you no go, I cut off your leg! No leg for you! I cut off your head!" ... I run [to] the neighbor side. And he catch me in there. And he hold me with the chopper. But the old Po Po¹⁴, she say, "No, you can't do that! You can't do that!" Wow! When that man is—when he's angry, that the time, the eyes so big, like some cat eyes. She say, "You can't do that! You can't do that!" That Po Po make him stop. He really would cut off my head.

You know, one time, I play basketball in school. Somebody hit [indicates getting hit in the liver area] and I go [sound of coughing] all the time. I can't straighten my back. Me walk like this [indicates a hunched back walk]. Them say, "Something happen. He hurt," and Big Brother say, "I know." Him say, "I know." Him say, "I want to make him hurt worse." He no like me you know, never.

Indeed, the stories of his treatment get progressively worse when he describes how, later in life, his daughter was not treated fairly by Big Brother, as is particularly evident in Big Brother's unwillingness to help Bertram financially when he needed a doctor for the same daughter, an incident that eventually led to Bertram moving out of the family home with his wife and daughter. Most memorable, however, is a brief comment that Bertram makes when discussing the incidents that led up to his return to Jamaica. He needed to go to Hong Kong to arrange paper work to travel and, when requesting permission to make the trip

to Hong Kong from the village chief, he notes that the man was shocked to learn that Bertram was not Chinese-born:

Him say, "What! You are foreigner?!" He say, "My God, you is come from foreign! I go ask your brother if it's true." He go ask my brother if it is true and my brother [Big Brother's son] say, "Yeah." My brother call me "Chocolate." He say "Chocolate come from Jamaica, yeah."

Although Bertram did not mention the nickname again—indeed, it was the only time that he mentioned its existence in the interview—"Chocolate" seems to be an overt reference to Bertram's mixed-racial background and, by implication, his difference from other members of the family and village. As such, it positions him as an outsider and stands in striking relief to the names "Two-Teas" and "Little Papa," names that designate acceptance by family and claim Bertram as their own. In fact, the simple phrase "My brother call me 'Chocolate,'" suggests that this is not a one-time incident; rather that the positioning of Bertram as an outsider has been an ongoing under current throughout his time in China. As such, this incident, like other of Bertram's stories undermine his assertions of family acceptance and belonging despite Bertram's overt assertions to the contrary.

Migration can certainly be conceived of as an adventure in its most traditional sense—as an unusual life episode characterized by heightened emotional experiences. Simmel's concept of adventure as a symbolic category, however, allows for the contemplation of modern identities that goes beyond a superficial celebration of the extraordinary experience found in adventures. In particular, Simmel's adventure gives us a language and conceptual framework for thinking through the tensions and ambiguities of modern identities that is particularly relevant to the Caribbean. Caribbean theorists have long pointed to a certain "unfinished" quality as being characteristic of modern Caribbean identities and of modern identities in general. For example, Brathwaite describes creole Jamaican identity as not being "fixed and monolithic ... there are infinite possibilities ... and many ways of asserting identity" (p. 307) while Gilroy celebrates "the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade" (p. xi). A root cause of such instability for many such theorists is the multiple migrations that are often central to modern experience, particularly in the Caribbean. Simmel's thinking on the adventure and the identity of the adventurer recognizes a similar paradoxical coexistence of synthesis and fragmentation as indicative of identities constructed with the disruptive, highly mobile conditions of modernity. Unlike many Caribbean theorists, however, Simmel's ideas of modernity are not limited to the experiences of any particular ethnic groups. As such, they provide a starting point from which to acknowledge

and include traditionally marginalized Caribbean ethnic groups within discussions of Caribbean modernity. The stories of Freddie and Betram are examples of such contributions. Not only do they add to our knowledge of Jamaican experience in general, the men's attempts to negotiate the instabilities of modern life, particularly as impacted by migration, in the production of their identities reconfirm the idea that "unfinished synthesis" is one of the defining features of modern identities.

Notes

- ¹ I would like to thank Carol Wong and the Tsung Tsin Association in Toronto, Canada for their help in facilitating the majority of the interviews used in this research and to especially recognize the great generosity, grace and candour with which the interviewees participated in this project. I would also like to recognize my uncle, Vincent Lee, whose determination to tell his story first inspired this research.
- ² Indentured labour to the West Indies began as early as 1806 with a small group of Chinese labourers arriving to work the sugar plantations of Trinidad. The bulk of 19th century Chinese indentured labour occurred between 1853 and 1866 with the overwhelming majority of Chinese migrants—some 13,500—bound for British Guiana. In comparison, Jamaica received just under 500 indentured Chinese labourers in 1854. One more boatload of almost 700 Chinese labourers would arrive in Jamaica in 1884. A detailed table of the vessels carrying Chinese indentured labourers to the West Indies in the 19th century can be found in Appendix 1 in Walton Look Lai's *The Chinese in the West Indies 1806-1995. A Documentary History* (Kingston: The Press University of the West Indies, 1998).
- ³ The Tsung Tsin Association is an international association of Hakka Chinese that is organized into chapters in various cities and countries. The Toronto chapter is heavily dominated by Jamaican Chinese.
- ⁴ The names of these individuals, as well as other personally identifying information in their narratives, have been changed to protect their privacy.
- ⁵ As was not uncommon, both fathers had wives in China while involved in these liaisons with Jamaican women. Indeed, a number of interviewees indicated that the children of such liaisons often lived with their fathers' wives when sent to China.

- ⁶ It should be noted that the interview process was complicated by the fact that many of the subjects spoke Jamaican patois, not only as a second language to Hakka, but with a Hakka accent, and peppered their interviews with Hakka words and phrases. Nevertheless, there is great beauty in their speech, and as such, I have opted to retain the rhythm and uniqueness of their language to the best of my ability in the transcribed quotes from the interviews. My lack of knowledge of Hakka, however, has meant that when Hakka terms and phrases have been used by the speakers, I have used a phonetic rendering of the language and have indicated my own limited understanding of the meaning of such words and phrases in a relevant footnote.
- ⁷ Although not his biological mother, Freddie made it clear that he considered his father's wife in China, the woman who essentially raised him, to be the mother figure of his life.
- ⁸ "Foreigner" or "Foreign boy."
- ⁹ "*Ah Po*" means paternal grandmother. "*Ah Shuk*" means an uncle who is a younger brother of one's father.
- ¹⁰ Freddie was unsure as to how to describe this group of Chinese who came to his village. They seemed to be of a different ethnic background from the Hakkas and told fortunes. In the end, he settled on describing them as "Chinese gypsies."
- ¹¹ It was unclear whether Freddie was referring to a birth certificate or a baptismal certificate in this narrative.
- ¹² In the following story, Bertram is referring to a practice that a number of the other interviewees also mentioned. Families would apparently procure a young girl as a future wife for a son. Until the couple reached marriageable age, the girl would work for, and be raised by her future husband's family. The fact that Bertram is to call the girl "sister" indicates the change in their future relationship; that is, that she will no longer be his wife.
- ¹³ Bertram had indicated earlier that washing clothes was deemed to be "women's work" as an explanation for his resistance to taking on the task.
- ¹⁴ Affectionate, informal name for one's paternal grandmother.

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