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Politicized Identity in Peter Ho Davies's The Welsh Girl and The Fortunes

Savanna S. Batson
University of Texas at Tyler

POLITICIZED IDENTITY IN PETER HO DAVIES'S *THE WELSH GIRL* AND *THE FORTUNES*

by

SAVANNA BATSON

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SAVANNA BATSON

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Approvals:

Thesis Chair: Carolyn Tilghman, Ph.D.

Member: Ann Beebe, Ph.D.

Member: Matthew Kelly, Ph.D.

Chair, Department of Literature and Languages

Dean, College of Arts & Sciences

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmothers, Shirley and Betti, for their courage and faith.

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Abstract

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Savanna Batson

Thesis Chair: Carolyn Tilghman, Ph.D.

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This thesis explores the effects of politicized identities on the basis of particular aspects of an individual's being, such as gender, ethnicity, or nationality in Peter Ho Davies's novels *The Welsh Girl* (2007) and *The Fortunes* (2016). By carefully studying each of his protagonists within the context of the particular time and place in which they have come of age, and are now living, this thesis demonstrates how Davies engages with themes of identity, community, and alienation relative to the specific socio-cultural matrix that informs the politicization of identities at their time. It explores how Davies's characters undergo the process of self-liberation from the oppressively politicized boundaries of identity by means of shared personal narratives with other characters, both overtly and subliminally through personal narrative embedded in the text itself. The transmission of personal narrative enables the protagonist to reclaim their story in their own terms, thereby reorienting them to the power of their own identity, a process that undercuts the politicized implications of identity imposed on them. As a result, this thesis views Davies's novels as works of contemporary socio-cultural criticism that cast doubt upon the functionality of politicized identity as a means of community-building and substitute, in its stead, community founded on the recognition of difference.

Chapter 1

Introduction and General Information

Identity is complicated. Dictionary definitions struggle to enlighten the reader; Merriam-Webster defines identity as "the distinguishing character or personality of an individual," while the Oxford Living Dictionary offers, "The fact of being who or what a person or thing is." Neither definition manages to address the underlying question of identity, which asks, who are you? In "Differences and Identity Politics," the social scholars Nadia Urbatini and Arturo Zampaglione cite Nancy Fraser's definition of identity that identity is "barely comprehensible if disassociated from recognition and power distribution. Yet we may say, even more radically, that identity is essentially a question of representation" (161). Taken together, identity is thus a product of both individual characteristics and social influences stemming from historical distributions of power. But, as this paper attempts to demonstrate, identity is not fixed in the equation; instead, it is continually formed and re-formed in the matrix of individual and social factors, which are sensitive to culturally-established mores that form a socially acceptable basis for behavioral expectations regarding gender, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and more. In fact, this paper posits that as individuals become more cognizant of the pre-existing power structures that shape their identities, those individuals become more liberated to make decisions that directly contradict the politicization of their identities. For the purposes of this paper, the term politicization specifically refers to the practice by regimes of power to define peoples' identities in terms of some particular aspect of their being, such as their sexual orientation, gender expression, ethnicity, or religion to further presumptions that generate sets of expectations, which simultaneously deny the multiplicity of individual identities and generate entry barriers for individuals' acceptance in communities other than those ascribed to them.

This definition of politicized identity is especially useful for exploring Peter Ho Davies's first two novels, *The Welsh Girl and The Fortunes.* Both novels share an approach to situating the politicization of their characters within a structural framework that draws attention not only to the socio-cultural mores affecting these characters but also the reader themselves. Both novels are historical: *The Welsh Girl* takes place over a few months near the very end of World War II in a tucked-away corner of provincial Wales, and *The Fortunes* surveys about one hundred and fifty years of the history of Chinese-American immigrants in America. Both novels feature an array of focalizing narrators, narrators whose perspectives are depicted through distinct third-person subjective point of view: Rotheram, Karsten, and Esther are the three focalizing narrators of *The Welsh Girl* who experience the novel's events within relative proximity of each other both temporally and geographically. Ah Ling, Anna May Wong, an unnamed friend of Vincent Chin's, and John Smith are the four focalizing narrators of *The Fortunes* whose lives, spread over a century and a half and from coast to coast, never quite intersect.

Compounding the complicated nature of identity in Davies's works is his emphasis on an individual's recognition of their self-concept versus the way in which others perceive him or her. The dissonance between one's self-image and the image others have, or that they *think* others have, becomes a crucial matter in this examination of politicized identity. To some extent, the characters studied below both benefit from and struggle as a consequence of differences between their own self-image and the image of themselves that they think others perceive. For instance, the Welsh barmaid Esther Evans in *The Welsh Girl* is shielded from public rebuke for an unplanned pregnancy by her village's trust in her compliance to their sexual conservatism. Yet her noncompliance is indicative of a will and desires that violate her community's rendering of her identity, and indeed complicate Esther's means of confronting the situation. This dissonance

between self-image and the perceived public image takes a literal form in the character of the Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong in *The Fortunes,* whose physical ethnic traits both distinguish her and constrain her job opportunities. The double-edged nature of identity as something deeply interior to a person and yet influenced and informed by reaction to his or her ascribed exterior identity deepens the author's engagement with identity as it is subject to politicization.

Davies's novels warrant an examination of politicized identity for a number of reasons. First, the popularity of contemporary social justice movements commonly known as #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and others push conversations about race relations and gender inequality to the fore of social criticism. In so doing, these movements have helped spur a fresh wave of interest in the complex socio-cultural matrix that creates and upholds systems of power such as the police force and the legal system in spite or even because of their biases against certain demographics. The leverage of race, nationality, and gender on either side of polarizing arguments of these social justice movements invite close consideration of the effect of politicizing identities. Second, Davies's novels, having been written just before and while these social upheavals were underway, provide insight into the mechanisms of politicization and how they are currently affecting identity. In addition, Davies's settings in the past allow us to trace a history of certain phenomena such as feminism and ethnic and racial violence across time, allowing the reader to grasp both the long histories of the socio-cultural elements at work on politicized identity and the specific ways in which current events are channeled to mobilize particular identities. And finally, Davies's use of multiple focalizing narrators, each of whom narrates in a voice uniquely their own, reifies the singularity of an individual identity while at the same time advocating for shared experience in identity formation.

Chapter 2

The Welsh Girl

Davies's *The Welsh Girl* takes place in rural Wales near the end of World War II and features three focalizing narrators, a young Welsh barmaid and shepherd's daughter, Esther Evans, a German prisoner of war, Karsten, and a German Jew, Rotheram, serving the British army as an interrogator. The novel draws its dramatic tension from the competing forces of the character's secret desires and the societal expectations they grapple with as represented by politicized facets of their identities that are implicated in national conflicts and social arrangements over which they have minimal control. The expectations engendered by politicizing identity are formed in relation to circumstances specific to time and place, such as the dual-edged expectation that women during World War II ought to uphold their society's preexisting family structure while simultaneously contributing to the war effort by taking their husbands' places in the work force. Likewise, the politicization of different aspects of their identities causes friction for the characters in the novel when they are in conflict with one another; for instance, Rotheram's status as a German person of Jewish descent during World War II immediately throws into conflict his sense of nationality and his religious identification. Importantly, neither nationality, religion, nor gender and sexuality, as study of Esther's conflicts will show, are inherent standards of societal expectations for those intending to remain within or attempting to join a certain community. Rather, particular societal expectations regarding identity formation fluctuate over time and according to their sociopolitical environment, thereby undermining a community's attempted rigidification of those expectations. By organizing his novel around the characters' slow awakening to, and reckoning with, the fallacious and politicized one-dimensionality of their identities, Davies draws attention to the complex matrix

of temporally- and culturally-sensitive factors influencing identity formation and their subsequent influence on narrative structure.

Each of the three protagonists of *The Welsh Girl* confronts questions of religion, nationality, ethnicity, and family identity. These characters share an underlying struggle between his or her own individual identity and the identity imposed upon them by society. Rotheram, a person of Jewish descent, was raised in Germany, and yet he serves the British military as a Nazi interrogator. Esther feels trapped by her provincial roots in Wales, and yet she is fiercely protective of her family and her family's traditions. Finally, Karsten, a German soldier, struggles with national and personal loyalty through his surrender to the British and his fellow soldiers' resulting mistrust. Each of these characters make choices that reflect identities that are neither as definite nor as unilateral as they first appear, but are dynamic and operate in relation to each other. In his own words, as Davies tells Christopher Shade, "Self is something in the middle, and it's possible that people on either side of that choice can't criticize. Maybe, we need to have faith in the space in between those places and forge it for ourselves in various ways." Thrust into the crucible of societally imposed identity politics, the three protagonists of *The Welsh Girl* assert their right to forge their own individual selves, and they emphasize the influence of societal and cultural pressures on the individuals whose actions, in turn, form the narrative.

The first narrator Davies introduces is Rotheram, a person of German and Jewish descent who now works for the English military as an interrogator and translator: Rotheram, "[i]n the eyes of Jews -- the eyes of his father's family . . . wasn't one of them. Yet in the eyes of the Nazis he was. A *mischling,* at least: a half-Jew" (3). As a result of his mixed heritage, Rotheram struggles with the competing forces of a politicized nationality and a politicized religion. The historical context of the novel's setting recognizes that one ought to negate the other; he cannot

be a Jewish person and a German, but the Nazi party's laws simply cannot disinherit Rotheram from his childhood or his parentage. Religious studies scholar Steven Leonard Jacobs recognizes the historical context for a mixed-heritage person, such as Rotheram, when he writes, "Translating [the Nazi] *weltanschauung* (world perspective) into reality would result in the infamous Nuremburg Racial Laws of 1935 … at the same time rendering problematic those persons of mixed identity with no connection to the Jewish community, the so-called *mischlinge*" (250). Rotheram certainly feels torn: "Rotheram had never met [his father], although he still kept his frayed campaign ribbons pressed in his wallet, as proud of them as he was ashamed of having run from Germany" (4). Familial ties, such as those imposing a Jewish identity on Rotheram, play a powerful role in this novel, especially when weighed against the identities of others. Indeed, Rotheram is "[n]either fish nor fowl," as Hawkins puts it (5). Hawkins's comment highlights the polarizing options readily available to Rotheram, neither of which rings true; he does not consider himself Jewish because he was raised according to his mother's Christian faith, and yet he cannot shake off the effects of the nationalist propaganda that saturated Germany, leading up to and prevalent during the Third Reich.

Weighing on Rotheram's nationalist and religious struggle is the fact of his military service, in which "he'd felt for the first time as if he weren't running from something, but being led somewhere" (5). The shift from active flight to passive action is an understandable one: identity attachments conventional to the novel's setting during World War II pull his character in opposite directions on the basis of religion and nationality: Rotheram was raised a German citizen, and yet his religious heritage endangers him within his own country. As a result, at the beginning of the novel, he strives not to mediate this internal conflict but to reject it altogether and, in turn, adopt the most palatable alternative offered to him: British service and British

citizenry. In an effort to attain societal approval, Rotheram proves himself to be an ambitious soldier, as when he volunteers to go undercover with unprocessed prisoners of war in order to retrieve information. Interestingly, his ambition seems to function on both an individual and a wider societal level: “He couldn’t say if loyalty to one man could grow into patriotism, but the harder he worked for Hawkins, the more suspects he questioned, the more British he felt” (6). Personal acceptance seems here to function metonymically, wherein Hawkins’s approval is felt as approval from the society he represents. Similarity to a norm and difference from it both function to facilitate the formation of identity groups, so Rotheram’s individual identity works for him and against him in this scenario: his Jewishness is used as a gambit in an interrogation, which has the result of making him more successful in the interrogation room. Yet, it is Rotheram’s religion that keeps him from taking part in the war crimes trials to come. In “Intersectionality and Identity Politics: Cross-Identity Coalitions for Progressive Social Change,” Tamar W. Carroll notes that “it was the suppression of difference, rather than difference itself, that inhibited movements for progressive social change”; non-recognition of difference, however, precludes Rotheram from offering the valuable perspective of a person of both German and Jewish heritage (602). In addition to complicating his sense of identity, Rotheram’s exclusion from complete citizenship also frustrates and informs the narrative. Ultimately, having bowed to the conflicting politicization of his nationality and his religion, Rotheram’s only realistic option is to interrogate the deserter Rudolf Hess.

Davies’s fictionalization of Hess brings the matter of Rotheram’s identity, in which he is neither British nor German, neither Jewish nor Nazi, to a head. Although Rotheram has been sent to determine whether Hess is truly an amnesiac or merely faking it, Hess himself seems to have little trouble getting the cut of Rotheram. Within moments of meeting, Hess asks Rotheram

whether he is a “German Jew,” about which Rotheram feels “himself coloring in the gloom” (14). For Rotheram, the problem of his identity is such that others feel predisposed to make assumptions about him on the basis of his inherited nationality and religion, neither of which Rotheram has laid claim to: “It’s just that I’m not Jewish,” he insists to Hess’s handlers, wherein “the mere thought of explaining his history to the lieutenant was exhausting” (220-21). Hess pushes the conversation to a climax by asking Rotheram how he feels about his mixed heritage, to which Rotheram replies, “Perhaps that doesn’t matter, the way I see myself, not compared to the way others see me” (227). Hess enriches this reply by clarifying, “Are we who we think we are, or who others judge us to be? A question of will, perhaps”? (227). Hess’s insistence that Rotheram is Jewish forces Rotheram to confront the conflict between his self-identity and society’s or the Nazis’ label for him.

In doing so, Rotheram gains an understanding that it is possible to both be Jewish, via his heritage and not be Jewish, via his beliefs; similarly, he is of German descent, and yet he has been made other in his own country. That Rotheram must reject the politicization of these identity groups is no coincidence but rather a demonstration that such politicization informs people’s actions up to the point where they realize the extent to which the groups they belong to has constrained their choices. As the scholar Jacobs notes, “[T]he Jewish solution to the question of identity within the context of the larger society appears to suggest not to rid oneself of it, but, rather to embrace that identity and its diversity of perspectives and options (religious, secular, Zionist) and to use it as the very ‘launching pad’ into societies willing to overcome their own past” (253). Still, not all characters have the same self-awareness, nor the sense of self-empowerment needed to choose for themselves. As Davies says in an interview with *Sampsonia Way*, “We all have different projected identities. Some are projected upon us. Some identities we

choose to project. And that is natural and human. Perhaps none of these identities are false. The entirety of them might be a kind of authenticity, through the combination of those things." In the same way that Hess's amnesiac state is verifiable only by himself, Rotheram understands that his own identity may be constructed according to his own choices, at least in part, and that he is not this thing or that, but is rather a combination of things knowable only to himself. Rotheram brings this new knowledge to bear near the end of the novel when he finally grasps the purpose of his British military service: "All this time he thought he'd been hunting for evidence against the Nazis, and really he'd been looking for his grandparents" (327). Having found them, and having overcome the politically constructed and enforced shame therein, Rotheram resolves to contribute to the reconstruction effort. From a narrative standpoint, the implications are clear: having freed himself of the unnecessary burden of his politicized religion, Rotheram is free to actively construct a different identity for himself.

Esther Evan's identity is informed by nothing so much as family, which expands over the course of the novel to include Rhys and Mrs. Roberts in addition to her widowed father and an English evacuee, Jim. The strength of her family's influence is largely due to the extent to which her family depends on her. Esther's primary struggle in the novel is her desire for escape contrasted with her sense of being entrapped by Welsh nationalism and her femininity, the latter of which is manifested in the pregnancy that results from having been raped by Colin, an English soldier. Entwined with her reluctance to betray her personal loyalty to her father is an even stronger thread of nationalist loyalty that inform Esther's reservations: "she doesn't want to tell the truth, that she's stepping out with an Englishman - a *Londoner!"* in what she describes as a "nationalist village, passionately so" (26, 27). Added to conservative views about romantic relationships in her community is the nationalist strand of identity in the novel that emphatically

rejects relationships between Welsh and English citizens for fear of contributing to the ongoing loss of Welsh culture. That Wales is part of the United Kingdom, and ultimately dependent on English forces, and that Esther's childhood friend Rhys has only just left the village to contribute to the war effort, are details not often recognized simultaneously by the novel's characters, as if to downplay the extent to which Wales is integrated in the conflict. The subjection of young Welsh men to the United Kingdom's draft demonstrates the relativity of nationalism as experienced by different communities; where British law is applied unilaterally to English and Welsh citizens, indicating national unity, the Welsh characters' superior regard for Welsh culture contradicts that notion of British national unity. This relativity, or subjectivity, of nationalism reemphasizes the pluralistic experiences of culture and identity depicted in the novel.

The notion of self-negation is an apt description of Esther's struggle in *The Welsh Girl*: she yearns for the freedom to transcend her provincial roots, yet she cannot bring herself to separate from the sense of purpose and identity that she draws from her family's dependence upon her. In fact, the desire she expresses for escape as a conduit for the freedom not afforded to her as the substitute mother in her household and the intersecting pressures of existing as a woman in wartime merit a feminist interpretation of her circumstances. As feminist scholars Leila J. Rupp and Verta Taylor note, "In every group, in every place, at every time, the meaning of 'feminism' is worked out in the course of being and doing," and disagreements over how best to define and enact feminism "show who is talking to whom and how understandings of feminism are unfolding" (382). Just as nationalism is culturally, societally, and temporally sensitive, so too is feminism. In addition, Rupp and Taylor indicate that "[v]iolence against women, like motherhood, had the potential to unite women across cultures" (379), which describes Esther's predicament well. Having been raped by the English soldier, Colin, Esther

discovers that she is pregnant and must subsequently choose between pursuing an abortion or confessing to a "private shame suddenly [becoming] a shared national one" (*Welsh Girl* 277). Esther's fears of being ostracized from her community for facing the tangible consequences of having endured an assault vividly depict both the misogynistic notion of victim-blaming characteristic of patriarchal societies and a deeply divisive nationalistic streak in her community that is all the more pressing due to the compounding issues of women's roles in wartime. Victoria Stewart's "Women at War" is a contemporary piece of scholarship that analyzes women's expected contribution to the war effort by maintaining the social order through childbirth. Regarding women's function as child bearers, Stewart writes that "the circumstances of wartime both precipitate the situations in which these protagonists find themselves and also dictate their responses, which often involve covert behavior," especially as this behavior relates to unplanned pregnancies (128).

Unplanned pregnancies need not always refer to nonconsensual encounters, as Stewart notes, but the limited options available to such women highlight the degree to which women's options with regard to their own bodies were and are constrained. As modern social scholars Urbinati and Zampaglione note, in "Differences and Identity Politics," "[Women's] social and political subjection will continue for so long as they are deprived of the authority of choice over the mastery of life, that is, over the reproduction of the species, in that context of power which is the most fateful in the construction of social roles" (163). This statement is especially salient in the wider context of identity-based discrimination, for which "equal laws and the courts applying them impartially are not sufficient" because culturally-dependent discrimination mandates superseding "the universalism of norms and procedures -- since a universalism of that kind does not enable us to see that it is in the non-recognition of difference that the cause of injustice lies"

(160). It is only by confronting the politicization of her female body that Esther is able to perceive its influence on her identity. For not only is restricting women's control over their own reproductive power a means of depriving them of equal social standing, but wartime places extra importance on resupplying a dwindling population as thousands of individuals die on the battlefield. So, when Esther visits Liverpool to procure an abortion, the doctor refuses on the grounds that saving wounded men far outweighs Esther's right to make decisions about her own life. Per Stewart's analysis, "The juxtaposition of [the doctor's] war work, attempting to save gravely injured men, with Esther's desire to have an abortion, also implies that preserving rather than curtailing life is more appropriate in wartime" (140). The implications of voluntarily undergoing an abortion in wartime specifically emphasize the culturally dependent politicization of certain actions, thereby strengthening or otherwise informing the expectations placed upon those who are considering them. The limitations enforced on Esther as a consequence of her womanhood also serve to limit the compass of the narrative, constraining its scope in direct correlation to the degree to which Esther's freedom is impinged.

Still, it would be reductive to consider Esther's experience of womanhood only through her reproductive abilities. Moving forward, it is practical to consider other ways in which Esther's identity as a woman inform and inhibit her options. Even before she becomes pregnant, Esther performs the role of mother to Jim, the English evacuee, and concurrently, that of stand-in wife to her father, Arthur, from whom Esther perceives perhaps the greatest and most vocal declarations of Welsh nationalism. Here, the entanglements of feminism and nationalism are pushed to the fore. Not only is the experience of womanhood politicized to simultaneously – and in contradiction to itself – encourage women to replace men in factories and to replenish the population deficit created by soldiers killed in war, but civic responsibilities are expanded to

include the sheltering of evacuated English citizens and the toleration of encroaching English soldiers in Wales in order to wage the war effort. Both literal and figurative family groups function as attempts to re-solidify the changing social structure of wartime Britain. Penny Summerfield's "Gender and War in the Twentieth Century" provides invaluable insight into the contradictory expectations placed on women such as Esther under these circumstances. Summerfield notes that recruitment literature from the British women's army of World War II described their responsibilities as, "The men will do the fighting, You must do the rest [sic]" (6). As this quotation suggests, women were precluded from serving as soldiers, which "reveals the tension between the mobilization of women and the wartime gender contract under which men fought for the protection of women who, in return, maintained hearth and home as 'the cornerstone' of the nation" (6). This disparity in opportunity is not lost on Esther. "[M]en's dishonor," she notes, "can always be redeemed, defeat followed by victory, capture by escape, escape by capture … But women are dishonored once and for all. Their only hope is to hide it. To keep it to themselves" (*Welsh Girl* 271).

Having been denied her request for an abortion, Esther cannot keep her pregnancy a secret for long, which ultimately forces her to grapple with the entwined civic and gender politics of her body. The introduction of Karsten, an escaped prisoner of war, to Esther's life complicates these questions of femininity and nationality, yet suggests a new means by which Esther can configure both her impending motherhood and her relationship to her nationalist community. Karsten's exclusion from that same community minimizes the threat of exposure he poses to her, and an unlikely friendship grows between them. In fact, Karsten goes so far as to ask Esther why she willingly helps him: doesn't she have any patriotism or, as he translates it, "fatherland-love"? (254). In response, Esther recalls a comment made by her former teacher the day the Germans

arrived in Wales and asks him, in turn, “And if it were called motherland-love?” (255). The question proves pivotal; Esther’s recognition of the deprivation of agency over her own body, as well as her recognition of how nationality has been politicized to an unreasonable extent, enable her to make decisions in defiance of convention. Her process is incremental; first, after having had sex with Karsten, Esther admits to herself that she had been “clinging to some shameful, superstitious hope of the German’s seed driving out Colin’s, of the war being fought in her womb” (275). By creatively re-fathering the unborn baby with Karsten, Esther takes a crucial step toward reclaiming the control of her body and her life. Her reclamation of power is fulfilled to the extent that she can reclaim it when, “having lied about who the father is, the baby feels finally, firmly hers now, hers alone” (309). Like Rotheram, recognizing the politicization of her body and her nationality enables Esther to act with an increased degree of freedom.

That Esther’s reclamation of that freedom is incomplete and, admittedly, somewhat less liberating than Rotheram’s – Esther’s baby and the lie she tells about the baby’s paternity more deeply transfix her in her community – demonstrate the ongoing politicization of femininity as an overarching tendency in patriarchal societies. By the same token that Davies’s realism induces Rotheram be met with anti-English sentiment upon his return to Wales and Karsten be endangered when traveling east of Berlin, so Esther’s liberation must operate within the realm of possibility given her sociopolitical context. Still, recognition and rejection of the politicization of her identity allow for a tenable compromise for Esther’s life. Her daughter is indicative of Esther’s transition from disempowered to self-possessed when she claims the Cilgwyn flock as “*My* sheep,” a statement of possession passed down from her mother, who in turn must necessarily have laid claim to her birthright in order to transmit it (331). On a structural level, the dramatic tension centered around Esther’s concealment of the truth is resolved by the assertion of

a lie that draws attention to the limitation of her choices and the sense of empowerment subsequent to the recognition of the politicization of her identity. Her compromised freedom undermines the common ground of all three narrative threads in the novel: her family's farm, *Cilgwyn*, while nevertheless reifying the constructive power of community to unite people across their differences.

If Esther's story is a figurative search for escape, then Karsten's story manifests that impulse. Caught between shame at having surrendered to Allied forces in order to save his own life and those of the men in his company and the slow-dawning realization that not to have surrendered would have caused meaningless deaths, Karsten grapples with a chagrin induced by his fellow prisoners of war. Like Rotheram, Karsten struggles with his German identity, but unlike Rotheram, he has not been ostracized from his community; rather Karsten signifies the trap of feverish nationalism. First distinguished by his natural soldierly abilities, Karsten's surrender precludes him from joining the "zealots, 150-percenters," his term for the prisoners of war who continue to practice battle maneuvers to no specific end while interred as prisoners of war (107). The shame of Karsten's surrender disenfranchises him from many of the camp's activities, which highlights the dissonance of his responsibility as an officer to protect his men and subsequently forces him to consider the outcome of war. As he points out to the men in the camp after having been recaptured: "You think it would have made a difference to fight to the death … Our deaths might have prolonged the Thousand-Year Reich by five minutes"; then, even more pressingly, he asks, "Before long they'll have all surrendered, all our countrymen. Will they all be traitors? Or just Germans?" (300). Karsten's nationality, age, and gender mandate that he join the war effort, not unlike how Rotheram's and Esther's circumstances calls them to contribute, too. But Karsten's struggle with his nationality is to become a question many

Germans must ask themselves, a question not uncomplicated by the fact that Karsten, like others, regrets having fought for the Nazi regime. Karsten recontextualizes his surrender as "holding up his hands, though now as if he were waiting for someone to grasp them and pull him out. Like a second birth" (301). Aided by a populist demagogic appeal and the widespread manufacture and distribution of German propaganda, the nationalism espoused by the Nazi regime is figuratively imagined as something from which Karsten must escape in order to live. His attempts at literal escape are, he discovers, doomed; as he tells Esther, "There is nowhere to go. But I tried" (264). Karsten, Esther, and Rotheram all attempted their own iteration of a literal escape from the circumstances pushing the politicized elements of their identities to the fore; Karsten by escaping the prisoner of war camp, Esther by seeking an abortion, and Rotheram by fleeing his country of origin. Still, as all three characters demonstrate, identity factors such as nationality, gender, and religion may be influenced by exterior stimuli, but they are all deeply internal, and thus cannot be left behind but can only be recognized and confronted in order to deconstruct them.

Encounters with the English evacuee Jim, Esther, and Rotheram enable Karsten to confront his own politicized identity. Karsten's introduction to the enemy begins with Jim, with whom Karsten trades magic tricks and toy planes for cigarettes and the comfort of conversation. Notably, in their study of World War II prisoner of war survival rates, Clifford G. Holderness and Jeffrey Pontiff note that trades, such as those Karsten and Jim transact, often enabled prisoners of war to survive their captivity. They write, "[Prisoners of war] often sought to trade amongst themselves and occasionally with guards and the local population" (3) and that "the established hierarchy often interfered with trades" (21). Both comments made by these scholars ring true for Karsten, for whom survival hinges as much on escaping from his fellow soldiers as it does escaping to freedom. Having been sent to kill Allied forces, Karsten is forced to reconcile

himself to the fact that he empathizes with them, calling into question the insistent patriotism of his enrollment in the German army. In addition, encountering Rotheram, first in disguise as Steiner and then in the interrogation room, drives home the notion that whatever distinctions are drawn by national boundaries and a politicized agenda are significantly more nuanced than propaganda attests. This point is best depicted when Karsten encounters Rotheram out of disguise. Karsten is most bothered by the fact that he cannot tell whether Rotheram is a German Jew (*Welsh Girl* 296). However, such a distinction is fallacious and, as Karsten finds, built not on substantive difference but the scapegoating of a group of people. As a result, Karsten's desire to prove himself in a nationalist sense shifts to neither "victory nor defeat, just peace" (299). To retain a soldier's mentality would only perpetuate the uniform politicization imposed on people by Hitler's Nazi regime. However, by far the most significant influence on Karsten's ability to recognize and confront his civic obligation to serve in the war results from his interactions with Esther. Their dialogue substantiates the concept that taking charge of their personal narrative, also demonstrated by the conversations between Rotheram and Hess, will allow each of them to creatively reconstruct their own identities.

Personal narratives form a crucial antithesis to the numbing insistence of unilateral politicization of identity formation. Writing on William Connolly's use of ethics in political theory, Paul Apostolidis states that "the basic problem with a universal imperative that individuals generously affirm the contingency of their ideas and identities is that following this ethos de-politicizes crucial arenas of struggle and re-entrenches inherited, structural relations of power," but, he counters, "it is possible to imagine fruitful, even symbiotic linkages between cultural strategies for cultivating more courageous and creative engagements with identity and direct political challenges to structural, institutionally anchored arrangements of power" (page

number?). The best means of doing so, Apostolidis goes on to write, is personal narrative, which "produces these infransensible effects, intermingled with the construction of conscious ideas regarding the identity of the narrator and the meaning of historical events". The restructuring power of personal narrative serves a dual purpose in Davies's novel. First, from a formal standpoint, it emphasizes the episodes of overlapping narration between the focalizing narrators. For the most part, the novel's entwined triple storylines brush up against one another without resulting in substantial communication. But when the characters, having achieved a certain degree of self-awareness finally meet, the narrative structure is such that the dramatic irony of the reader's knowledge that each character is multidimensional resolves. The narratives overlap, episodes are told and retold from multiple points of view, and the politicization-resistant function of dynamic identities becomes apparent. Second, these instances of overlapping narrative, of meeting and getting to know one another, form the turning point for each character.

In Karsten's and Esther's cases, neither has had much direct exposure to other people; Karsten is the first Nazi soldier that Esther has met, and the first German, besides. For Karsten, Esther is the first British citizen he has met and the first potential civilian casualty that war mandates the sacrifice of, and he finds himself questioning whether such sacrifices are worthwhile. Karsten notes, "he couldn't stop thinking about her, couldn't get away from the sense that talking to her was the closest thing to freedom he'd tasted since his escape" (260). His return after having failed to cross the channel between Wales and Ireland results in her comment that "I thought you wanted to get away. To... to – ... redeem your honor!" (264), to which Karsten responds, "You can't know what it is to lose your honor," but of course Esther can (265). What follows is a wordless transmission of confessions: Esther was dishonored by Colin's actions and, having finally admitted it, can accede to Karsten's comment that "[t]here is nowhere

to go" to restore his honor (264); both are trapped by what they have done, and what's been done to them. Their exchange of personal narratives over the course of a handful of meetings necessitates that each come to a deeper understanding of the so-called enemy who has been caricatured to each of them through handy mononyms: Jerry, Tommy, enemy. Recognition of their complicated situations requires both Esther and Karsten to more fully appreciate the context of each other's and their own situations. Recognition of Karsten's dishonor by means of surrender calls attention to the dangers of militarized nationalism, and Esther's acknowledgement about having lost her honor through a sexual assault invites a feminist critique that calls out the victim-blaming that often accompanies sexual violence.

In fact, feminist scholars echo Apostolidis's remarks on the value of personal narrative in countering the flattening effects of identity politics. Susan Bickford writes, "It is precisely the interaction of those two phenomena -- self and community, subjectivity and intersubjectivity -- that is the focus of some feminist rethinking of politics and identity," and she notes that "[F]eminist writers have begun to construct a conception of citizenship and identity that is adequate to this social and political context and to the aims of emancipation" (112-13). The rhetoric of freedom here is no coincidence. Unilateral prescriptions of identity, while ostensibly encircled to empower disparate identities, can just as often falsely characterize and inhibit an individual's full expression of the self, as is true for Esther, Karsten, and Rotheram. The prescriptive response, according to Bickford, is personal narrative that is "active, argumentative, and oriented toward change," and that "group identity is politically relevant to who we are as citizens. But that identity does not fix us and segregate us; identity is a personal and political force open to active re-creation through our words and actions" (124). Still, it is important to note that narrative in itself cannot change the conditions of their lives. When he asks Esther not

to abort her baby, Karsten urges her to keep it "[f]or me … Your prisoner" (269), but Esther is still a citizen of the United Kingdom, and Karsten is still a German prisoner of war. The realism of the narrative requires that characters and readers recognize this fact. Yet, the benefit of exchanging personal narratives lies in the sustaining power of having been recognized as dynamic individuals for whom terms such as "enemy" and "prisoner" ring arguably less than truth. As such, it is possible for Karsten to be both a person who loves his fatherland, and yet also a person who watches the denazification propaganda films and feels shame. "'To be fighting for that,' he shuddered. 'And I was ashamed of *surrendering*,'" Karsten says (326).

Interestingly, Davies positions these honest personal narratives in direct opposition to propaganda, which is a widely disseminated form of politicization in its simplest terms. In fact, propaganda supplies the opening image of the novel: Rotheram has secured a copy of one of Hitler's pro-war films, *Triumph of the Will*, for Rudolf Hess to review. Rotheram describes it as "ecstatic pageantry," moving due to its inclusionary power: "[h]e wanted to have even a bit part in this great drama" (4). And yet, checking the film himself before showing it to Hess, Rotheram notes that he had done so "afraid of being caught, as if it were pornography" (11). Both propaganda and pornography are impersonal, ultimately voyeuristic presentations of oversimplified scenarios that nevertheless bolster commercialized desires for power, one political, the other sexual. Later, Rotheram and Hess encounter propaganda again in the films the Allies show to Nazi prisoners of war to aid in the denazification effort. Hess confesses the desire to think the films "propaganda," and he comments that "At least ours was beautiful" (313). In contrast, "Rotheram knows the films are true, yet they're being *used* as propaganda" (315), which undercuts some of their effectiveness for him. Here, Davies seems to be suggesting the crucial difference between personal narrative that reveals the truth and propaganda that

oversimplifies it, imposing a false binary that presents one group as villainous and the other as heroic. The denazification propaganda films consist of real documentary footage of Nazi concentration camps, and yet they are antithetical to the function of personal narrative because, as Hess notes, the dispersion of this oversimplified politicization enables "those victories, that glory, the binding loyalty of war…all essential to carry the people with us" (*Welsh Girl* 317). Oversimplification is antithetical to humanity such an insistence against propaganda seems to argue. According to Bickford, personal narratives are made salient because they conceive of identity as "something *created*, constructed in this specific world, in the presence of complex others – and largely through words (speech and writing)" (122); as a result, recreation is possible through "recognition that group identity is implicated in power in multiple ways – ways that both perpetuate inequality and provide means to resist – and therefore that group identity is politically relevant to who we are as citizens" (124). Personal narrative enables the speaker or actor to address, deconstruct, and reconstruct his or her identity to the same extent that he or she is cognizant of its effects on him or her.

Of course, this is not all to say that the unifying effects of the politicization of nationality, gender, or religious belief are in themselves antithetical to a coherent sense of individual or group identity. Politics, in the most basic, policy-oriented sense merely tries to harness action from the will and desires of the people who are united by a social contract that substantiates culture and coalesces in a sense of group identity. In fact, the novel hinges on the value of community. Structurally, *Cilgwyn* is the sole setting where all three focalizing narrators are present and can accommodate the invaluable transmission of personal narratives between Karsten and Esther, and Esther and Rotheram. It is only through communication with others and the recognition of both similarity and difference that each of the three narrators can come to

terms with the politicization of his or her identity so that Rotheram's visit brings the narrative full circle and the reinvocation of *cynefin* gains additional resonance. Recognition and confrontation of the politicization of each character's identity enables all three of them to move, with differing degrees of mobility, within the circles of each other's lives. And, while the narrative's preoccupation with *cynefin* as a specifically feminine means of transmitting knowledge of one's sense of place from one generation to the next generation supports the idea that Esther will be unable to successfully escape, it also serves as a meaningful alternative to the deference placed on traditional heritage. In lieu of deference to either patrilineality or matrilineality is that given to "childland," which extrapolates the cultivation of individual identity into integral members of a much larger community. Esther coins the term "childland" herself, remarking, "Couldn't you love your country by loving your children? Weren't they your nation, at the last?" (*Welsh Girl* 309-10). Using language as her jumping-off point, Esther subverts the onus of politicization conveyed by nationalism's emphasis on tradition and, by extension, other cultural mores cultivated by living in a certain place at a certain time. She inclusively supplants the distant past with the near future, which liberates and mobilizes a community's identity in service of the childland.

As Kenneth Veitch notes, in "Social Solidarity and the Power of Contract," social contracts formulated on the basis of a group identity are able to "resonate with, and shore up, a powerful 'moral' vision of contemporary society, one which, as we shall see, succeeds in masking from view deeper structural issues" (196). Davies's novel plays this out to potentially devastating effect for his protagonists, were it not for their recognition of the political machinations leveraging their identities. And, while the nexi of these identities might shift from one society and era to another, feminism, social order, religion, and nationality remain matters of

significance in our own increasingly globalized age. As disparate cultures are tethered together by planetary forces as diverse as the Internet and climate change, Carroll's recommendation that "coalitions in which differences are acknowledged are more likely to achieve a united social movement seeking greater equality" continue to resonate (602). Recognition of difference, not non-recognition, actually facilitates the kind of exchange of personal narratives, driving the realization of the multiplicity of identities that resists offhand heuristics.

One of the most interesting things to consider with regards to this essay is the degree to which Davies's novel is structured by its characters' internalization of identity politics. Layering cultural criticism into our discussion of structural criticism, then, invites us to think about characters' identities as dynamic influences on the construction and interpretation of narrative. If characters are only liberated from the culturally-sensitive politicization of their identities to the same degree to which they are cognizant of that politicization, then perhaps authors and critics share a similar responsibility to recognize and address the specific forms of politicization brought to bear by writing or reading in any given age. This analysis of *The Welsh Girl* suggests that the main characters, as the driving force or carriers of narrative, are as significant and influential to the novel's structure as the author's intended formal structure. It may be possible that further analysis of structure and character relative to one another could provide insight into the cultural matrix that narrative and analysis spring from.

Chapter 3

The Fortunes

In his second novel, Davies both expands and deepens his engagement with the politicized identities of his characters. As opposed to *The Welsh Girl*, *The Fortunes* explores the lives of four focalizing narrators grappling with their status as Chinese-American individuals. Where *The Welsh Girl* obliged three disparate narrators to confront the depth and texture of each other's identities as a means of addressing the unrecognized depth of their own selves, *The Fortunes* separates its characters by means of time; the novel, spanning two centuries of Chinese-American history, denies these characters the benefit of direct confrontation. In addition, three of the narrators in *The Fortunes* are known to be true historical figures: Ah Ling, the young man who inspired a wave of Chinese immigration to America for work on the Transcontinental Railroad; Anna May Wong, the first Chinese-American movie star; and Vincent Chin's childhood best friend, who witnessed two white men commit Chin's brutal, racist murder. Although these characters are denied the opportunity to meet each other and exchange personal narratives in the same fashion as Esther Evans, Karsten, and Rotheram from *The Welsh Girl*, the fourth and final focalizing narrator nevertheless draws together their stymied lives and, in so doing, reifies the power of narrative to enable confrontation and liberation of the self in spite of the way the character's identities are politicized, or flattened in *The Fortunes*.

The first character Davies introduces in *The Fortunes* is Ah Ling, who has come to California in the 1860s as one of many individuals seeking their fortune in the Gold Rush. Drawing on little more than a footnote in history – Ling's section, titled "Gold," is prefaced by the American Titan quote: "Beset by labor shortages, Crocker changed one morn to remark his houseboy… And it came to him that herein lay his answer" (3) – Davies imaginatively restores a

rich and complicated life to Ling. Born to a sex worker and a white businessman client, Davies imagines that Ling was raised by an aunt and uncle who own and operate a brothel in an impoverished region of China. In addition, Davies writes that Ling's situation is further complicated by his family's class: they "were of that reviled tribe of sea gypsies known as Tanka" (6) and his fatherlessness: "[t]o be fatherless in China, he understood, was to be poorer than the hungriest peasant" (7).

Given that no biographical knowledge of Ah Ling survives save his name and the role he played in inspiring the wave of Chinese labor to America's first Transcontinental Railroad, Davies's decisions regarding his fictionalized telling of Ah Ling's journey are significant, and they become more significant as the novel cycles through time and focalizing narrators. Not only has Ah Ling's social status and mobility been impeded by the class to which he belongs, but he is also beset by the absence of his parents, one of whom is white. Davies himself offers an explanation for this narrative choice in an interview with Cindy Long for *neaToday*. Davies explains that "Chinese-Americans, but also other so called 'hyphenated' Americans – can feel divided. Such dual identities can sometimes imply a choice," which is, he says, a "lose-lose" situation. He concludes, "[W]e can reject the binary choice and see hyphenated identity as a third option." As a result, Davies's self-conscious notion of identity as a non-binary and, indeed, a multifaceted expression of the internal self calls attention to the identity he constructed for Ah Ling. The author's engagement with politicized identity has thus self-consciously deepened in this novel as compared to *The Welsh Girl* and suggests an arc for his characters that, though consistent with *Welsh Girl's* rejection of politicized identity, is nevertheless complicated by the specific identity politics affecting each character relative to the time and place in which they live.

These complications are redoubled by the author's construction of the narrative; for all that Ah Ling's identity has been complicated since birth, Davies foregoes a straightforward chronological telling of his life in favor of one that intertwines the past and the present that emphasizes the impact of the former on the latter. In the novel's opening scene, Ling is not in China but riding on a newly completed section of railroad with his employer, the railroad magnate Charles Crocker. In her review of the novel, Madeleine Thien writes for *The Guardian* that "[t]he depths of both [Ling's] Chinese and American selves seem to actively resist the narrative language," which certainly rings true of this introduction. Ostensibly, from Ling's point of view, the only characters permitted dialogue are the rich, white American Crocker, and the shopkeeper whose job it is to outfit Ling in Western dress appropriate for his role as Crocker's assistant. "Every inch a gentleman's valet," Crocker says of Ling's new, decidedly not traditional Chinese clothing, to which the shopkeeper replies, "Clothes make the man … Even a Chinaman" (4). Ling's narrative continues to move backward and forward in time as Davies fills in the gaps of his life story. The inclusion of flashbacks in his character's narratives is typical of Davies's writing style in both *The Welsh Girl* and *The Fortunes,* but it is the exposure of secrets and Ling's subsequent returning to the meaning of the events he recounted that distinguishes *The Welsh Girl's* narrative strategy from *The Fortunes.* For instance, Ling's initial conception of Little Sister's having been sold by her father to the laundry-owner Ng to be a sex worker instills a sense of pity in him. Upon finding out that Ng *is* her father, Ling questions his understanding of what families, and specifically fathers, do and are. Ling's similar realization that his uncle did not send him to California to find gold but sold him to Ng as an indentured worker is another shock that redoubles the themes of family and fatherhood, and how each impacts the formation of Ling's identity. To the extent that he sought redemption from his parents' identities as a

lower-class sex worker and an anonymous white man in order to secure himself a better place in the Chinese society of his homeland, the realization of truth causes him to abandon his quest and instead define himself not in relation to his biological family but to his hyphenated national one.

In short, the structure of Ah Ling's narrative in the text is representative of Davies's sublimation of the process of individual liberation from one spoken aloud, as seen in *The Welsh Girl*, to one achieved by action. Ah Ling's confrontation of previous knowledge with a new, sharpened understanding of how these events were formed enables him to take different actions; having become aware of the ways in which his actions are prescribed or curbed by societal expectations or stereotypes, he earns the ability to make decisions that contradict, directly and indirectly, those stereotypes. In turn, those decisions create the narrative that follows. As Beatrix Macias Gomez-Estern and Manuel L. de la Mata Benitez note, in "Narratives of Migration: Emotions and the Interweaving of Personal and Cultural Identity Through Narrative," "The evaluative and moral dimensions of narratives related to their social embeddedness link them with the emotional and affective life as it is accounted, interpreted, and experienced through the telling" (352). Having inspired Charles Crocker to usher over a wave of Chinese immigrants to construct the first American Transcontinental Railroad, Ling subsequently engages in the sharing of personal narrative with laborers on the railroad. But the author's means of getting him to that point is not to be dismissed; in fact, the disjointed narrative of the text functions as its own personal narrative, deeply affected by the narrator telling his own story. Thus, the significance of community is emphasized in ironic contrast to the oppressive weight of stereotype. Where stereotype, as both the unnamed narrator of Vincent Chin's case and John Smith are aware, flattens and oppresses individual identity, community is formed on the basis of recognition of difference, which is in turn enabled by the exchange of personal narratives. The unnamed

narrator of Vincent Chin's case and John Smith offer examples of stereotypes imposed on their identities, such as the notion that Chinese people are especially industrious, diligent, and short. Ling, whose strength inspires Crocker to hire thousands of Chinese laborers to build his railroad, experiences an existential crisis after being confronted with the gross generalization of Chinese men. At the prospect of returning to China he realizes, "if he did, he'd still be Tanka or Eurasian, the stains he'd hoped to wash away with wealth. On Gold Mountain, at least, they were all simply Chinese" (*Fortunes* 94). And yet, he asks a striking Chinese railroad laborer whose strike he and Crocker have come to break, "And you speak for everyone?" (83). At the laborer's affirmative, Ling replies, "'But don't you see?' he finally managed, his voice thick with despair. 'That's how it starts'" (83). Although both of Davies's novels grapple with the politicization of identity and its subsequent effect on an individual's experience of belonging to a community, in *The Fortunes* Davies explores both the positive and negative attributes of membership and non-membership; attributes that are too closely identified with each other allow others – specifically, the white occupants of California whose racist primacy is both *de facto* and *de jure* – to form stereotypes such as the ones that plague Ling and will continue to plague the other focalizing narrators in his novel. And yet, to not belong to any community leads to an inability to share personal narrative, which precludes lone individuals from the active construction and reconstruction of individual identities through their authorship of personal narrative. Ultimately, the formal structure of Ling's share of the novel reflects the restraint on his freedom to construct his own identity, thereby lending an inhibited, constrained shape to the novel's text.

Certainly Ling conveys his identity struggles throughout the novel, even if not primarily through the use of quoted dialogue. His narrative having been sublimated into the text of the novel, Ling conveys problems with his identity as a half-Tanka Chinese, a half-white person, a

Chinese-American, and a man. In fact, masculinity asserted by wealth plays a large part in Ling's narrative. While *The Welsh Girl* engages in a thoughtful exploration of womanhood during World War II, Ling's narrative explores the standards of manhood and masculinity as they differ from China to the California of the 1860s in which he lives. Thus, class, race, heritage, and gender are all aspects of his identity that Ling will experience as flattened under a broad, politicized stereotype of Chinese people that he helps codify by self-consciously setting such an admirable example of what it means to be Chinese: incredibly hard-working, loyal, and industrious. He attends a rally about "The Chinese Question" in the hopes of "show[ing] himself as an example" (56), and observes that the thousands of laborers now at work on the Celestial Railroad "were judged by his standard" (58). Having been forced to operate within the preexisting social structure of America and having been deprived of the means by which to contextualize himself within the racist politics of the United States, Ling is unable to break with stereotypes imposed on him, which both impedes his attempts to attain membership to other communities and hampers his ability to play an active role in constructing his own identity.

Ling is, however, able to recognize the influence of others' stereotypes on his identity; he consequently characterizes his "whole life [as] an invention of others" (*Fortunes* 82). As with *The Welsh Girl*, Davies does not permit his focalizing narrators an unrealistic amount of freedom, even after they achieve the limited liberation offered to them by gaining the recreational power of personal narrative. Little Sister, the woman sold into sex work by her father, emphasizes the intersectional nature of politicized identity by commenting, "*Chinamen* only brought their womenfolk here so someone could be lower than them. So they'd have someone to look down on. You left us the only job you couldn't do for the ghosts [emphasis original]" (30). Still, having confronted the politicization of his identity in America – Eurasian,

Tanka, orphaned, yet viewed inevitably as singularly Chinese – Ling is permitted the recourse of quitting his job as Crocker's assistant and hiring on as a laborer for the railroad, then working as a bone collector. His fate is self-consciously not a happy one or even a just one, but that seems to be Davies's point. In fact, having been reunited with Little Sister at the end of his narrative, Ling realizes that her children are half-white, to which she replies, "But *their* children will be more white than not. They'll be something. Storekeepers. Teachers!" (98). Little Sister's diction suggests that she is substituting the term "white" for the term "American" as a means of deracializing her children and their children after them. The substitution of "American" for "white" is an imperfect fit not least because anti-Asian racism remains a fact of life for the rest of the novel and for our own history. Still, because Davies continues tracing Chinese-American experiences across the next century and a half for the next three focalizing narrators, the false conflation of "white" with "American" and the narrators' subsequent interrogation of it, lead to a thoughtful questioning of the nature of the American dream.

Davies's second focalizing narrator in *The Fortunes* is Anna May Wong, the daughter of Chinese immigrants, who rises to fame as a movie star. As opposed to Ling, Wong's story is told in a string of chronological vignettes that retrospectively detail her successful film career and the many instances in which she was overlooked or mistreated due to her race. However, like Ling, her narrative is centered around a specific historical context; where Ling grappled with the wave of Chinese immigration he inspired, Wong confronts the miscegenation laws that codified racial segregation by criminalizing interracial marriage and sex. Davies situates the reader in this context in only the second vignette of Wong's life: "What can't they? she wonders. See her kiss" (104). It's an ironic and painful fact of a career inspired by the desire to be liberated from the restrictions imposed on her due to her status as a Chinese-American; while watching movies with

the rest of the largely white audience, "[n]o one, not even she, could tell the difference. It was the first place she felt like an American" (*Fortunes* 105). Of course, the real irony is not that Wong's bid to be an American over a Chinese-American is met with such opposition from the film industry. The irony is that her Chinese heritage and appearance place restrictions on her liberty at all, a tension that Wong confronts, as her narrative continues, with increasing directness. Having renamed herself Anna May Wong, she describes her new name as "Me," and later explains that, "she changed the spelling from M-A-E to M-A-Y to give myself permission…[for] everything!" (108, 110).

As with Ling, the chronological but retrospective structure of Wong's narrative permits her to reveal anachronistic information to the reader that emphasize the strength of the limitations society imposes on her film career as a Chinese-American woman. Wong's role as a mere extra for a Hollywood production composed "one of the very few times she'd make more than white performers" (114), a detail that she as an aspiring young child actress could not have known. Cognizant of the intersection of gender and race in identity construction, the narrative notes that a director fifteen years her senior would be her first lover. She imagines a witty tagline for this period of her life as a "sepia intertitle"; the intertitle reads, "It ain't rape if he's a director…It's your big break!" (115). Ruminating on this further, she thinks, "It ain't rape…if he's white" (115). "She could be Butterfly or Dragon Lady, it didn't matter much in the end," Wong further reflects in another anachronistic retroflection on the path of her career (116). Extending this false conflation of the notions of American and white, another lover, Tod Browning, is later quoted saying, "She never wanted to be just famous. She wanted to be white. I told her she was going to have to settle for being famous for being Chinese" (125). Wong's success could thus never be unqualified; while she may rise to fame as an actress, she will

always be designated a specifically Chinese actress, which offsets her from her white colleagues. That is, no matter the extent to which Wong is embraced for her acting, she will never have the privilege of not being treated as other due to her Chinese heritage. The anachronism of these after-the-fact observations reinforce the reader's understanding that for all of her beauty and talent, Wong will not be exempted from the foreshortening of opportunity caused by racism. And, since the narrative consciously shifts from past tense to present tense about halfway through Wong's narration, her narrative may be read as a retrospective in which she confronts the politicization of her identity as a Chinese-American woman. The resignation she exhibits in her narrative is indicative of her acceptance of her Chinese-American status, and while American culture never views her without the caveat of her family's nation of origin, the fact of her acceptance suggests that she has successfully divorced the notions of American and white in her mind. There remains a privileged relationship between the two, of course, but in re-centering the focus of the narrative from the limitations imposed on one woman's success to her acceptance of herself and her ability to articulate her story, the acquisition of one's individual identity thus takes precedence over her pursuit for homogeneity and whiteness.

The narrative catches up with Wong in her present on a ship en route to China: having been snubbed for a coveted Chinese role, Wong attempts to take control of her own narrative by filming her actualtrip to China and the authenticity of her Chinese self. Her attempt to do so, however, is promptly beset by a dissonant truth: "She speaks Cantonese…but no Mandarin or Shanghainese," so she requires a translator (134); is asked, "[c]an you read Chinese?" by the "so-called Empress of Cinema" (139); and inadvertently "insults the delegation that comes out to welcome her" in Hong Kong (146). Wong's narrative thus calls to the forefront a source of cognitive identity dissonance not unlike that which Ah Ling experiences due to a hyphenated

(biracial) identity. In his interview with Long, Davies notes, "All our identities – young or old – are a kind of negotiation between an inner self (the way we see ourselves), and an outer self (how we're seen, and how we project ourselves to others)." As an actress and a person acutely aware of her exterior appearance, Wong serves as a conductor for racially-charged stereotypes. For instance, in her response to her father's comment that she looks like a "whore," she replies, "No. They all look like *me!"* In addition, the narrative asserts, "She is fast becoming a type herself, a type unto herself. 'The Anna May Wong type'" (144, 145). Image, especially stereotypical racial factors, like the color of her skin and the shape of her eyes, limit and drive Wong's narrative. Ultimately, her self-concept moves from "There I'm Chinese, here I'm American" (158), to "It's not that she represents the Chinese badly, she thinks. It's that she represents something else entirely. Chop suey! *Chinese-American"* (173). And just as her career is significantly, undeniably impeded by the Hays Code that applies miscegenation laws to film production, the connotations of politicized Chinese identity reorient her to her own identity: "what's finally made them Chinese-American," she reflects, is a revolution in which Chinese forces overcame the "American-backed government of General Chiang," and which causes "all of them [to become] Chinese-American now, not just because America has finally, begrudgingly allowed them to be, but because China has closed to them. The closest she'll get is a newsreel …" (175). No one, the text suggests, is in control of their exterior image nor of the politicized implications that image is saddled with.

Just as Davies's narrative and structural choices with regard to the real-life figure Ah Ling draw attention to and emphasize those choices, so too does the way he presents and builds up Anna May Wong's character. In her article, "When the Subaltern Finally Speaks: Personal Narrative as a Means to Identity and Voice," Jyothi Bathina observes, "the narrative

representation of groups, cultures, and races as 'other,' often as exotic, different, and inferior, paved the way to the colonization, subjugation, and oppression of entire continents and races, and facilitated the rise of political and cultural imperialism" (28). And yet, in a peculiar way, Wong's race is both what renders her other and that which she attributes as having permitted her to get her foot in the door of the motion picture industry: "The first Chinese star, they call her, and it's the qualifications that are crucial. First. Chinese. A star may play only him- or herself, but she is supposed to play a race" (150). Although Davies does not use the term explicitly, the phenomenon he seems to invoke in describing the distance between genuine representation and a caricature of that representation is tokenism. This text thus defines tokenism in contradistinction to true representation; tokenism is but a hollow gesture toward the recognition of difference, whereas true representation embraces difference as a means to embracing one's true identity. The difference between tokenism and representation is especially relevant in this paper's wider discussion of the use of personal narrative, of which representation is a function. In contrast to *The Welsh Girl,* which pits liberating personal narratives against the falsehood and uniformity of propaganda, *The Fortunes* is concerned with representation and tokenism, which both Ah Ling and Anna May Wong express their concerns about. How is one individual to represent an entire race? The answer, the text suggests, is that they are not. The attempt to view one individual as representative of an entire group is to form stereotypes whose insistence on a false uniformity allow for the troubling existence of tokenism that may benefit an individual to a certain extent but only reifies the stereotype by providing an exception. Stereotypes and tokenism, as well as the deeply ingrained, political, and historical structures that codify miscegenation laws and impose the Hays Code are indicative of the extent to which individuals within those systems lack personal agency. As with the limited compass of Esther Evan's

choices as an unwillingly pregnant woman in 1940s World War II Wales, Davies's realism with regards to Ling and Wong's freedom calls attention to their politicized, oppressed identities in an effort to draw forth personal narratives that eke out a degree of personal freedom and that notify the reader of the ways in which their own entrenched, often subconscious biases influence them. As a result, the sublimation of Wong's personal narrative in the text of the novel deepens the hyphen between Chinese and American as a fuller understanding of her identity and the self-interrogation she undergoes through motion pictures precludes separating one from the other.

Davies's third focalizing narrator is a childhood friend of Vincent Chin's, a real-life figure who was murdered after a confrontation with two white men, a father and his stepson, on the night of his bachelor party. In her review, Thien notes that the narrator is unnamed, but at one point in the narrative, Davies writes "our boys' names, even in English, often echoing the two syllables of a Chinese name: Roland or Robin, Henry or Melvin, Eddie or Peter, like me" (*Fortunes* 185). Since I cannot be sure whether the focalizing narrator is referring to the name Eddie, or Peter, or another name entirely, my analysis presumes that the narrator is indeed unnamed. At any rate, in this third quarter of the novel Davies again takes up an achronological telling of events; over the course of his section, the narrator reveals the circumstances surrounding Vincent Chin's murder, and the subsequent effect it had on uniting Asian-American populations. Where the last two sections of the novel were concerned with tokenism, the third and fourth sections of the novel are preoccupied with confronting other ironies of stereotype, or the differences in cultural habit and manner that have been cultivated and that are in the process of developing due to the coeval emergence of politics and politicized Chinese-American identity.

The galvanizing aspect of Chin's murder, the narrative impresses upon us, is not just that he was murdered, but that he was "beaten to death in Detroit by two white auto workers who

mistook him for a Japanese" (*Fortunes* 180). In the next paragraph, the narrator insists on clarification: the victim was "actually a Chinese-American named Vincent Chin" (180). The specifics of his friend's identity and the racist fallacy that result in his death weigh heavily on the narrator. He explains that Chin was mistaken for a Japanese person by two white auto workers who blamed the Japanese people for white, American layoffs and that the judge's lenient sentence was sufficiently unjust to bring together disparate Asian-American communities in order to seek justice: "[T]heir coming together – Chinese and Japanese, those old enemies, as well as Korean, Vietnamese, Filipino – marked the start of a pan-Asian political movement" (189), the ultimate consequence of which, he suggests, constituted the first notion of a unified Asian-American identity and, more to the point, the beginning of an American assimilation of hyphenated Asian identities. At the end of his section, the narrator visits a strip club, meets one of the dancers, and asks her if she is Chinese or Japanese. When she answers that she is American, his reaction is, "[i]t felt like something to cover ourselves in, that word, its warm anonymity" (204). The over identification of Chinese-American and Asian-American identities, as well as the fallacious conflation of the two, constitutes a gross oversimplification of generations of immigrants' experiences, but, again, that seems to be the narrator's point. It matters that Vincent Chin was a Chinese-American, not a Japanese-American, and that he was murdered by two white men who never served a day in prison for their crime. This section of the novel, then, grapples with the irony of having wrung a social justice victory out of tragedy, only for history to flatten the intricacies and specific circumstances of the people involved by making them an anonymous component of the monolithic and overarching term, "American."

The third section of the novel also follows Davies's pre-established pattern of sublimating the liberation resulting from personal narrative into the narrative itself. The third

section of the novel is conveyed in a confessional mode partly for factual reasons: the unnamed focalizing narrator runs away from Vincent Chin's murder and feels guilty for having abandoned his friend. The other layer of confession at work regarding this section, however, is the role that the unnamed narrator plays in the social justice events subsequent to Vincent's murder. After Chin's case results in an insufficient verdict, the narrator observes that, "a lot of the people in that room also wanted justice for themselves. Me too, I suppose. I had run, but maybe there was still something I could do" (190). The narrator later informs the reader that he testified at the federal appeal of Vincent Chin's case and that Chin's last words were "[i]t's not fair," spoken to the narrator "in Chinese, while I cradled his ruined head" (186). A federal appeal based on Chin's case leads to stronger federal hate crime legislation and perhaps a modicum of justice for Chin's family. And yet, the narrator confesses that he made Chin's last words up: "Vincent's last words? Heard only by me, spoken in Chinese so no one else could understand, never mind that his head was already stove in, jaw shattered, and people wonder how he could even have retained consciousness, let alone spoken…What did I do? What would you have done?" (195). The narrator confirms his lie later in the text: "But it's too late for truth now. You can't say all this stuff at an unveiling, in a documentary or an interview" (198). Like Ah Ling and Anna May Wong, this focalizing narrator's confrontation with the politicization of his identity – he and Vincent's having been mistaken for Japanese men by racist white men – occurs within the narrative of the text itself. The fourth and final section makes the desire for liberation in these personal narratives explicit, but much can still be said for the extent to which the narratives express and press up against the limitations placed upon them by having been thought of as a hyphenated Chinese-American texts. "The truth is we're often made up of these competing influences," Davies reiterates in an interview with Liz Hoggard. By means of narrating who they

are, the characters in *The Fortunes* reassert the competing influences they are encumbered by, as well as their unique voices in confronting them.

The fourth and final focalizing narrator of *The Fortunes* is John Smith, a half-Chinese, half-white Chinese-American author who has traveled to China with his wife to adopt a baby girl. The narrative begins by self-consciously asserting the adoptive baby's individuality; "[today] is the day they'll get their baby. Mei Mei, he reminds himself" (208). As Thien observes, "In the last chapter, set in China but in no way a homecoming, the mirroring worlds of all four stories meet, as names or small details from the lives of Ah Ling, Anna May Wong, and Vincent Chin resurface"; Mei Mei was indeed Little Sister's real name. This narrator, in contradistinction to the others, is not offset from his story by any abstraction or warping of time; he is not privileged the perspective of one looking back, so his share of the narrative of the text gains an immediacy and urgency that the other sections of the novel did not necessarily have. As a result, his narrative sometimes feels harried, or on the verge of a crisis. He is, in fact, struggling with what Xiaowei Shi and Austin S. Babrow, in "Challenges of Adolescent and Young Adult Chinese-American Identity Construction," would probably call "the authenticity dilemma," or the sense that "they are neither *real* Americans nor *real* Asians" (320). John Smith's problem is, then, one of identity; his problem is one of how to raise a Chinese daughter without feeling settled in a hyphenated identity himself.

John Smith calls attention to his authenticity dilemma, although he doesn't seem to have the language to identify this dilemma. He recounts having given a reading of a new book and feeling embarrassed when a student pointed out errors in his Chinese grammar, and "feeling like a fraud, or worse – a minstrel show" in faculty meetings (*Fortunes* 210). Having come to China to adopt a daughter compounds his sense of alienation from his mother's and, by extension, his

Chinese heritage; he and his wife and the rest of the adoptive families are "here to adopt not just children but a whole culture" (222) about which he later realizes, "[t]he whole 'culture' thing, for John, is a defense against racism, an anticipation of it, but also perhaps in some obscure way a perpetuation of it. 'If even their parents see them as other, what hope do these babies have of assimilating?'" (231). Notably, Davies offsets John's opinion between commas in a qualifying phrase as if to suggest that a rejection of sociocultural identity falls short of a satisfying resolution to the problem of identity, and indeed the character's wife quickly rebuts his question. Still, Smith's question, rather than rejecting identity altogether, does emphasize the politicization of identity beyond the means of individuals to liberate themselves by shaping their own stories. What Smith comes to understand is that "he and others like him are somehow their descendants: Mongrels and bastards, orphans and warphans" (245). Cultural heritage is as much a fact of life as the circumstances that enable him and his wife to travel to China to adopt the baby girls that Chinese people, under the reproduction laws that limit population growth, do not or cannot keep.

Davies resolves the issues of representation (and its negative inverse, tokenism) and authenticity by reasserting the necessarily individual identity of the baby John Smith and his wife Nola hope to adopt. Having come to China to adopt Mei Mei, the couple realizes that the orphanage director is trying to pass another infant off as their baby. Upon confronting her, the director confesses that Mei Mei has died from fever. So, prior to cultural knowledge, to language, to the means by which to access personal narrative, the squirming baby that the director hands them still has her own identity. She doesn't have Mei Mei's birthmark nor "the set of the mouth, the nose" (255). Rather than the primacy of individual identity isolating people from community, the text argues the opposite. Individual identities actually enable a politics of difference, wherein recognition of difference empowers conscientious justice. To reiterate the

feminist scholar Bickford's observation, "group identity is implicated in power in multiple ways – ways that both perpetuate inequality and provide means to resist … But that identity does not fix us and segregate us; identity is a personal and political force open to active re-creation through our words and actions" (124). John's assertion not only of his own personal narrative and identity through the text but of his adoptive daughter's reifies both a preexisting sense of self and the recognition that identity need not be fixed; one need not be one thing or another, such as Chinese or American: "To be one and represent many, and inevitably imperfectly… There, gleaming darkly is the germ of inauthenticity" (259), the text warns. However, representation itself, or the assertion of identity through personal narrative that allows for and, indeed, hinges upon internal conflict and the resolution incumbent on that acknowledgement permits what the text describes as "a literal act of representation," "a self-portrait" (263, 264).

The structure and form of the text confirms this interpretation through John Smith's invocation of prior focalizing narrators. In her review, Thien contends that John Smith's portion of the novel "presents earlier chapters as the unfinished work of the writer," which is certainly one interpretive possibility. The other possibility suggested by the strength of these internalized narratives, as well as by Smith's self-conscious allusions to having never finished those writing projects, is that his lack of access to those narratives nevertheless does not retroactively silence them. Whether a reader chooses to interpret Smith's invocations of the prior narrators as Smith having written them and appended his narrative to the end, or whether a reader chooses to believe that the text confirms that such individuals lived and influenced Smith's life in ways he could scarcely have imagined is not material. Both interpretations reinforce the centrality of identity. Either Smith successfully presentstheir restored voices through his own story in order to shape the text and, in so doing, confirms the differences of identity that each narrator expresses,

or the internalized personal narratives reflected in the text reaffirm their own individuality while simultaneously confirming a community of shared experience. Regardless, the novel seems to argue, these stories are true; they exist.

The Fortunes demonstrates Davies's ongoing engagement with the contradictions inherent to identity and the need for expression and self-reflection as a means of personal liberation from the limitations imposed by artificial bounds of community, such as the stereotypical expectation that Chinese-Americans be particularly diligent students. By longitudinally studying the Chinese-American immigrant experience through the eyes of four distinct narrators spread across one hundred and fifty years of Chinese-American history, the text reveals that the politicization of identity is an ongoing process that overextends representation into stereotype, but also that stereotype can be resisted by means of personal narrative. As Megan M. Dickson notes in "American Experience," "Personal experience narratives are an unprecedented way of exploring the visceral core of the individuals that make up our nation" (66), wherein, as the social scientist Marta Tienda observes, in "Demography and the Social Contract," "the changing composition of the population evolved into civic hierarchies that undermine the commitment to values of inclusiveness and egalitarianism" (592). Taken together, these scholars, as well as the text of *The Fortunes*, argue for the centrality of the immigrant experience in American history as a consequence of the preeminence of hyphenated identities as representational not of stereotype but of the complexity and contradictions inherent to all identities.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Who are you? That is the fundamental question evoked by the study of identity. As this paper attests, answering that question is no mean feat. Every individual's identity is formed at the intersection of historical institutions of power, public events currently underway, and his or her own private life, all of which are subjectively internalized and rendered outwardly according to contemporary mores. Answering the question of identity is made both easier and harder with careful consideration of the overarching machinations of political and socio-cultural events and discourses that determined where and how a person grew up. Davies's novels engage that historical tradition in order for his characters to come to terms with their identities, both subjectively and as externally represented, while at the same time offering his readers a glimpse at the institutional ideologies and stereotypes affecting them, and their view on themselves and on other demographic populations. As he observes in his novels, propaganda and stereotypes are grossly oversimplified, shallow, and all too easy to facilitate the proliferation of misrepresentations and biases; true active recreation of identity requires thought, care, and most importantly, a community with which to engage.

The importance of Davies's novelistic structure is most apparent after having studied both texts. For the most part, *The Welsh Girl* and *The Fortunes* are similarly structured; both engage questions of identity by narrating from the perspective of a distinct focalizing narrator whose identity contrasts sharply with the identities of his or her fellow narrators and yet bear an underlying similarity that enables them to engage in the personal narrative that enables identity recreation and, ultimately, liberation from the stereotypes and expectations that shape their politicized identities. But there are a few key differences between the two novels. Where *The*

Welsh Girl features three protagonists whose lives and narratives are entwined and occasionally cross over in order to give each narrator the opportunity to relay events form his or her own unique perspective, Davies only deals with hints of relationship in *The Fortunes*; even the matter of whether or not John Smith has collated the other narrators' experiences is subject to interpretation. And yet the characters of the *The Fortunes* are not loosely bound together in a short story collection but driven forward by the single motion of the novel – due, not least, to the novel's contents. In an essay titled "Only Collect: Something About the Short Story Collection," Davies writes that certain collections feature "an acknowledgement of the fragility or temporary nature of the whole which harkens back to the idea of collections as a means of preservation … Collections finally don't, can't, contain an entirety, and yet they invite us, the reader, to imagine it" (65). This, then, seems to be the organizing principle that allows Davies to lift his characters out of the unity of time and yet to retain their narrative force. Unlike *The Welsh Girl*, which privileges the characters access to one another, *The Fortunes* transcends the need for direct contact through the invocation of personal narratives sublimated into the text, as if into the fabric of the other characters' lives. The success of this tactic traces itself back to the question of true representation as opposed to stereotype or propaganda; Ah Ling's attempt to represent Chinese people well will surely exceed even his wildest expectations and have an indelible effect on successive generations of Chinese-American immigrants to come. Anna May Wong's quest to represent herself onscreen contributed to a tradition of hyphenated Chinese-American actors and the striking of the Hays Code; and Vincent Chin's murder and subsequent federal appeal wins stronger hate crime legislation and mobilization of a united Asian American faction. None of these events may have directly impacted the others; but they certainly have an *indirect* impact on each other as part of the same canon of socio-cultural events and history that politicized

identities are drawn from. By drawing a line from Ah Ling to John Smith, Davies successfully places *The Fortunes* as a novel that enables John Smith to reconstruct his own identity in witness of a community he laid claim to.

None of the narrators in either *The Welsh Girl* or *The Fortunes* are granted lives beyond the compass of their means, but each is able to eke out an actively constructed sense of self as a result of awakening to the politicization of their identities and their own subsequent internalization of that politicization. Both revealed and created by the community-building experience of personal narrative, the liberation from the stifling influence of politicization nevertheless enables each narrator the chance to situate himself or herself within the pageant of human history that will continue to march on long after each of us is gone.

Davies's novels suggest a number of areas of further consideration for the modern reader, too. Davies's novels allow us to consider the impact of identity on the construction of narrative. If characters internalize politicized identities to such an extent that they are only subconsciously aware of them, then perhaps the same holds true for the reader, too; and if this is the case, then it stands to reason that authors and critics share a similar responsibility to speak to the specific forms that the politicization of identity takes in any given age. Finally, the current insistence on the validity of hyphenated identity as an expression of the complexity of an individual's sense of self helps to mount a convincing argument for the recognition of pluralistic identity even between characters who are not given the benefit of directly exchanging personal narratives.

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