

The Construction of a Homeland with Mobility in Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*

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Abstract

In contemporary society, with the expansion of human communication and the integration of diverse cultures, the homeland consciousness has also changed. The construction of homeland is no longer limited to residences in a geographical and spatial sense, but can be aligned with individual life experiences. In Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*, the protagonist Mia chooses a traveling living style and constructs a homeland with openness and mobility in different geographical spaces. Their life experiences of driving trips reflect the representation of the mobility of homeland. Mia and her daughter's experiences of diaspora are geographically dispersed. In the novel, the automobile, as a vehicle of mobility, integrates elements of body and technology, autonomy and mobility, creating a family space with mobility and enriching the meaning of "homeland". The construction of homeland with mobility also provides the possibility of realizing the ideal of "without a home anywhere, there is a home everywhere" for the diaspora group.

Keywords

Celeste Ng; *Little Fires Everywhere*; Mobility; Homeland; Automobile; Place.

1. Introduction

Celeste Ng is the representation of the new generation of Chinese-American writers who emerged from the American literary world in the late 1980s. She has received numerous attentions for her debut novel *Everything I Never Told You*. *Little Fires Everywhere* is her second masterpiece which was published in 2017. Compared with her debut novel, *Little Fires Everywhere* contains the author's greater literary expectations and deeper reflections. However, the studies on Celeste Ng's works still mainly focus on her debut novel. There is still a lack of research on *Little Fires Everywhere*. As for the existing research, most of the overseas studies are book reviews and interviews. As for domestic research, the number of relevant papers has increased significantly since the novel was adapted into the TV series, but both the quality and quantity still need to be improved. The protagonists of *Little Fires Everywhere* are two tenants of the marginalized group--a single mother Mia and her daughter Pearl. Driving the Volkswagen Rabbit, Mia travels around the world with her daughter. They never stay at one location for a long time. Their income comes mainly from the photography Mia sells, and when it is not enough to support their basic needs of life, Mia would find various part-time jobs. After the birth of Pearl, they have traveled through forty-six towns.

Mia and her daughter choose a traveling living style. Their experience of life is filled with fluidity. And their homeland consciousness is no longer limited to the fixed dwelling, but rather becomes in harmony with their individual experiences. Anne Buttimer once wrote in her essay, "Does 'home' always coincide with residence? Could a person be 'at home' in several places, or in no place? Could the gestalt or coherent pattern of one's life space not emerge from mobility as a kind of topological surface punctuated by specific anchoring points?" [2] Fei pointed out that "Home is not a simple natural object, but a 'subject imagination' constructed through a

series of representational symbols through the medium of 'power' ". [3] With the development of globalization, the way in which homeland occurs has shifted toward relying on individuals' experiences and adaptive choices in rapidly changing spaces, which has led to a new paradigm of mobility in the construction of homeland. The increasingly large diaspora groups have become practitioners and pioneers of this new paradigm. In Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*, Mia and her daughter's life experiences of driving trips exemplifies the representation of the mobility of homeland.

2. The Dispersed Trajectory of Diaspora: "Place" and "Homeland"

Mia's diaspora experience can be divided into two stages. The first stage is before the birth of her daughter Pearl. Mia learned of her brother Warren's death during pregnancy. She rushed home but was not allowed to attend the funeral. The night before the funeral, Mia left this sad place driving Warren's Volkswagen Rabbit. "She drove all night, through New Jersey and Pennsylvania, miles of highway whipping by in the dark. As the sun began to rise, she turned off the highway just outside Erie and drove until she found a quiet rural road." "All week she drove this way, as if in a fever: driving until exhaustion forced her to stop, sleeping until she was rested enough to drive again, ignoring the clock, the light and dark of each day." "Ohio, Illinois, Nebraska. Nevada. And then, suddenly, the teeming swirl of San Francisco, the Pacific churning blue-gray and white before her, and she could go no further." [10] Mia was born in Bethel Park, Pennsylvania in the east of the United States. In order to escape from her hometown, she drove as in a fever until arriving at the West Coast. After the birth of her daughter Pearl, driving was no longer an escape, but a way of life that they choose. The Provo is the first of the many stops they would make over the years. By Mia's count, they lived forty-six different towns. "We've been all over the place. Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska-" "We've even been out to California. A few times." [10] Mia's trajectory of diaspora is dispersed in geographical space. The map of it consists of countless points and lines.

The movement of an individual between two points in space forms the path. The point is the beginning or end of the movement. "Movement takes time and occurs in space, place is posited as a break or pause in movement - the pause that allows a location to become a centre of meaning with space organized around it." [13] In his book *Space and Place*, Tuan mentions how space is transformed into place. The process of space being given cultural meaning is the process of space becoming place. Place needs to be perceived with the emotions and feelings experienced by the subject. The connection one establishes with a space allows him to develop a "sense of place" [13]. Each town Mia and her daughter stay in constitutes a meaningful point on the map of their traveling. This point is merely fulfilled to get from one place to another, which is completely reverse of what happens with the sedentary. "Every point is simply a 'relay' and 'exists only as a relay'. The path, or the movement, is therefore not dominated by the point but it has an autonomy and a direction of its own." [1] During their trip, Mia and her daughter sometimes sleep in the car on quiet country roads, sometimes buy food as they pass through towns, and sometimes stay for several months in towns where they stop. "The real significance of the temporary dwelling, of the box house... I think it has always offered.. a kind of freedom we often undervalue." [5] Mia and daughter's stay at these points is all about being able to continue their trip.

If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause. Each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place. Places emerge from practices of "wayfaring", from movement along "paths". "Places have always been dynamic, in process, open to flows of people and things, and experienced by different groups in diverse ways." [9] Massey, British Human Geography scholar, envisages that "networks of social relations and understandings" occur beyond the now and the moment of a place. "These

'relations', 'experiences' and 'understandings' are actually constructed at a level and scale beyond the place of the home or the street." [8] From this perspective, the idea of the point as an important place is not just a temporary solidification, but a non-entity, because the point does not exist, it is just an idea. Places and meaningful activities are actually constituted through mobile practices along much wider and extensive networks of flows and mobilities. Seamon developed the concept of "place ballet". The daily movements of the body in space constitute the "body ballet". "By studying these mobilities, one should gain a picture of the stabilizing habitual forces of a particular lifeworld", "From this style of approach, these body movements may be blended into even larger collective forms of mobility that Seamon describes as space-time ballets". [1] The formation of place ballet is a "meaningful pause" formed by the intersection of people's space-time ballet. Such meaningful pause constitute concrete spaces in practice and cognition, which would be further transformed into substantive spaces at the psychological level through interpersonal interactions between people and places, an forms a collective meaning and symbol that endows people with attachment to their places. This indicates that there is not an essential place. Places are formed in the practices and flows. The distinctiveness of place does not arise in an endogenous process, but rather in an intersection with a wide range of social relationships. Based on her research on place and sense of place, Massey proposed a "global sense of place" on the basis of relational space. "Places are not 'closed off' or 'local', rather they are open to global flows. In this sense, academics must work towards a progressive sense of place characterised by a global sense of the local, a global sense of place that is attuned to the diverse ways people are positioned in these networks." [8] The above theoretical reflection breaks the dichotomy between "mobility" and "place". The rich connotation behind mobility can only be understood from the dialectical relationship between the two, which also brings about the new mobilities paradigm. In analyzing the social meaning of mobility, this paradigm considers the various cross-border behaviors and flows in society without avoiding the various immobile forces that accompany them, and contemplates the coexistence and interconstruction between mobility and immobility, namely the "place-space tensions" [11].

Places do not exist as absolute contained spaces or entities. Experiences, feelings or apprehensions of place are primarily related to senses of placing, siting, locatedness, architectural enclosure, or distinct senses of spatial and territorial attachment. "Experiences and sensations of place are emergent from distinctive rhythmic configurations of bodies, architectures, atmospheres, affects and circulating forces, with feelings of homeliness, disorientation, familiarity, placelessness, fear and excitement being experienced in particular situations and circumstances by some subjects and not others." [9] Social scientists have paid increasing attention to these affective, atmospheric, material and interpersonal qualities which coagulate and are assembled in places. These qualities are aligned and assembled with the unfolding of events. These studies are far from static, often reflecting upon embodied practices of mobility, they do provide important insights for research on the construction of place, "from the transitory territorialised assemblages of the railway carriage, and the fleeting social attachments generated through the visualities of car windscreens, to the more reflexive embodied practices, materialities and mobilities associated with the assembling of 'homes'". [9] At the same time, these studies provide inspiration for the construction of homeland. There is no fixed relationship between homeland and a certain geographical location. Homeland are generated by the interaction between subjects and places with mobility and openness. Tuan found for those on the move, anchorage and permanence could be instilled within things and objects. "This 'emotional anchoring' enables a mooring of meaning and subjective feeling towards 'wherever they happen to be'. In fact it is the process of travelling-with-others that enables feelings of place whilst on-the-move." [1] Mia developed a new emotional attachment after the birth of her daughter. She "thought suddenly, of home, as if home had never been a

place, but had always been this little person whom she'd carried alongside her." [10] Mia and her daughter have chosen a traveling lifestyle and are able to adapt to different places and spaces. Therefore, they are also able to build homeland with mobility and openness in different spaces. At the same time, this practice allows us to face the fact that diaspora groups are both migrants and settlers. Migration and settlement are two parallel themes in the spatial struggle of diaspora. The diaspora group has both the freedom to move on and the space to settle down.

3. Volkswagen "Rabbit": A Mobile Homeland

Mobility mediums play an important role for diaspora groups, as they can facilitate mobility and assist in settlement. At the same time, it can be used to reconcile the contradictions between migration and settlement, allowing diaspora groups to obtain a sense of "at home" without sacrificing mobility. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, the Volkswagen "Rabbit" assumes the role of the mobility medium, and at the same time is constructed as a mobile homeland. The United States entered the automobile era in the 20th century, and car ownership in the United States increased rapidly after World War II. With the prevalence of consumerism, a large number of road novels and films emerged. In the novel, the Richardson family, Mia's landlords, live in the Shaker Heights where order and regulation are regarded as the key to harmony. However, the younger son Moody, had always "daydreams about leaving school, traveling the country à la Jack Kerouac—only writing songs instead of poems. Mac's Books supplied him with well-worn copies of *On the Road* and *Dharma Bums*." [10] *On the Road* is a masterpiece of the 1950s that portrays the life of the Beat Generation's hobo life. The novel depicts the car traveling of the protagonists Sal and Dean. The publication of this book "marks the flourishing of American road novels" and "is extracted as a symbol of the pursuit of freedom that inspires countless people". [7] This kind of "itinerant, artistic lifestyle" [10] appealed to Moody. "Watching the Warrens live was like watching a magic trick." [10].

In the novel, Mia and her daughter "sometimes drove for just a few days, sometimes for a week, until Mia found a spot that felt right, and they would stop." [10] They were driving a Volkswagen "Rabbit", a car left by Mia's little brother Warren after his death, carrying their shared memories. The Rabbit is an entry-level hatchback manufactured in Germany by Volkswagen AG. It first debuted in Europe in 1974 as the Volkswagen Golf. In 1975, when it first appeared in Canada and the United States, it adopted the name of Rabbit. Within a short time after its launch, the demand of it grew rapidly. In just 10 years, 1.3 million sets were sold. Rabbit became a legend of entry-level hatchback in the North American market. The hot sales of Rabbit can be the result of its excellent quality and affordable prices. The fuel consumption of Rabbit is low, "it would get 38 miles per gallon". [10] The Volkswagen Rabbit is well suited to the needs of Mia and daughter for long-distance car trips.

"Motor cars have emerged as the predominant global form of 'quasi-private' mobility that subordinates other mobilities." [9] Unlike other transportation such as trains, the automobile provides a movable and semi-enclosed private space, and the term "auto-mobile" itself incorporates elements of autonomy and mobility, combining the body with technology. Automobile "facilitated new spatialised ways of being and sensing while on the move...the sense of moving-seeing-spacing-being with...vehicle, landscape, weather, other vehicle drivers, and more...While the forces, rhythms, vibrations, affective atmospheres, and spatialities of the vehicle and road become incorporated into the embodied sensibilities, capacities and ontologies of the driver." [9] Such a semi-enclosed, intimate space in automobile provides a place for family activities. In the novel, Mia and her daughter like to travel lightly, "In the summer, they drove with the windows down, for the Rabbit had no air-conditioning; in the winter, they drove by night, the heat cranked up, and in the daytime would park in a sunny spot, sleeping in the snug greenhouse of the car before starting again as the sun set. At night, Mia

pushed the bags into the footwells and laid a folded army blanket across them and the backseat, forming a bed that could just hold them both. For privacy, they draped a sheet from the hatchback over the headrests of the front seats to make a little tent. At mealtimes they stopped by the side of the road, feeding themselves from the paper bag of groceries behind the driver's seat: bread and peanut butter, fruit." [10] "Although not quite a building, the car is, in some senses, a room that moves around, with, in the other sense of the word, very little living room inside." [6] The private space of VW Rabbit assumes the basic function of a house, satisfying the basic needs of food, shelter and transportation for Mia and her daughter. It also isolates them from the outside world, making them more like a nuclear family, complementary to the open space of the road. The car, as a mobile private space, becomes an extension of the family space. Unlike a fixed residence, a car journey allows Mia and her daughter to enjoy the flowing scenery and create a shared life experience. Out on this world of roads, the traveller on a motor-car enters into possession of his country in a new way. In railway travel only two points are of real importance - the points of departure and of arrival. All the rest is but an accessory of the railway. It absorbs individuality. With the motor-car, if you would appreciate it, you must take it to the open road. And really to know all its virtues you must drive it yourself, become one with it, establish between it and yourself that sympathy which is perhaps the most enchanting of its qualities, and is really the secret of effortless control and mastery. "What is striking is the manner in which the senses merge and blur in such accounts of automotive perception, as motorists move-and-sense with vehicle, road, landscape, weather and other road users, and space and time are not positioned as the most important registers through which automotive subjects sense and experience the world. The thrill, excitement, shock and sensations which are associated with motoring are a reflection of what we might call, after Jonathan Crary, the 'mixed modalities' of automotive perception", "the art of driving a car has created another 'sense', that of observation, where one 'unconsciously' and 'automatically' watches and absorbs the events unfolding in 'the road and surroundings'". [9] The perception of the surroundings and the shared emotional experiences during the car journey become the faithful record of the trip, and these shared experiences and experiences become the bond that connects Mia and her daughter, serving to strengthen the family from the perspective of emotion.

For the automobile itself, it is a basic tool to meet people's needs for movement, consisting of different components. "These could include acetylene lamps, side lamps, rubber mats and mechanical aids such as jacks and funnels. But they could also include folding seats, picnic baskets and all manner of devices to ensure the comfort and warmth of drivers and passengers, including wind-screens, dashboards, rugs, cushions, gloves, muffs, heating devices, hoods, or enclosed bodies." [9] In the novel, Mia puts "a folded army blanket", "cups, plates and a handful of mismatched silverware" [10] in the car. She also set up makeshift beds in the back seat to make the enclosed space more comfortable and warm. "Comfort is variously constructed and presented as an 'objective capacity', an 'aesthetic sensibility', and as a 'specific affective resonance' circulating between and through both objects and bodies." [9] This sense of comfort helps Mia and her daughter feel the warmth of a family environment while on the road.

Another characteristic of automobile is visibility. At the beginning of the novel, Mia and her daughter leave their Winslow Road rental house at night, which is witnessed by Mrs. Richardson, the landlord. "But she had recognized the small tan Volkswagen of her tenant, Mia, its headlights shining.", "The passenger door opened and a slender figure emerged, leaving the door ajar: Mia's teenage daughter, Pearl. The dome light lit the inside of the car like a shadow box, but the car was packed with bags nearly to the ceiling and Mrs. Richardson could only just make out the faint silhouette of Mia's head, the messy topknot perched at the crown of her head." [10] The car functions as a visibility device that makes certain groups recognisable to those who are looking in from outside and to those gathered together inside. Even with a still image, from a quick glance we tell ourselves what we see: a family. "In such apparently easy

recognition, there are social typologies and categories being put to work." [4] "Think of observing others as they travel on the motorway. We look across at passing vehicles and their occupants and see 'a family', 'a couple'. The car displays co-occupants as a unit 'together' in a way that is quite distinct from a bus or a train or even pedestrians on a pavement." [4] This kind of visibility unconsciously strengthens the bond between fellow passengers, emphasizes the symbiosis of the group, and strengthens the family alliance that Mia and her daughter support each other.

Driving is not the only thing that happens inside a car. Drivers and passengers can listen to the radio, make phone calls, or engage in other work during the journey. Urry suggests that "the car has become 'home from home', 'a place to perform business, romance, family, friendship, crime and so on'". [14] The car's spatial arrangement facilitates particular kinds of conversations and hinders others. Because the car brings people into close contact with others, it provides an obvious environment that compels people to find topics to talk about. And for parents, the confined space of the car provides one of the few opportunities to have long discussions and conversations with their children, because in this environment they have their children's fullest - though perhaps not undivided - attention. There are two features of the automobile environment, "first, rather than being arranged face-to-face, in the car we sit side-by-side and front-to-back, second, the lack of movement available to those in conversation. Picking up on the latter, the car's internal immobility is in contrast to the relative mobility of speakers inside houses. In the car you cannot walk away from nor walk into a conversation with another speaker." [6] And this environment creates the conditions for long conversations. Moments of silence are common-sometimes awkward, sometimes comfortable-but the unfolding view, the spatial confinement, the side-by-side alignment, and the expectant temporalities of the journey enable and give rise to particular kinds of conversations. In addition, car travel is a place where conversations can be held on very serious topics. This conversation can lead to a pause, and it needs pauses. But the individual cannot walk away from the conversation, and the long silence brought about by the environment allows for slow and considerate responses to complex or thorny issues. Compared to telephone conversations, passengers can leave long gaps when talking, taking turns telling their troubles and stories, and telling their troubles as stories. In the novel, the night Mia and daughter leave the rental house, "Pearl had dropped the keys into the Richardsons' mailbox with a clatter and climbed back into the car and finally voiced the question that had been clinging to the tip of her tongue." [10] For Pearl, a secret space such as a car provides the opportunity for her to speak freely. Compared to a large space, a small space with touchable and private boundaries can deny access to bystanders and provide the possibility to keep the inner secrets while ensuring the individual's complete control, thus allows one to experience an unparalleled sense of trust and stability. So Pearl could ask her mother questions "clinging to the tip of her tongue". In this regard, automobile plays a role in maintaining family relationships as a "home from home".

Wellby wrote on "The car and culture" in *The Motor*, "the motor car was not only a technology that could aid the economy and the efficiency of business, but it was a great educator of mankind, and was foremost among those things that taught men to see, and enticed them into enjoying many of the varied beauties and the wonders of the world around them", "The motor car was framed as an extraordinary visual technology which could teach men to see, facilitating their travel to more-or-less distant places, bringing them into encounters with the tangible material culture and social and cultural practices constituting the nation's 'history, archaeology, geology, sociology'". [15] Mia drives the Volkswagen Rabbit to take her daughter on numerous unknown journeys and discovers the meaning of the unknown during the journey. The "Rabbit" is also built as a mobile homeland.

4. Conclusion

Homeland can provide individuals with comfortable and pleasant experiences, and is often regarded as the ultimate belonging of the self. There has never been a lack of cultural resources related to the study of home in Chinese and foreign literary history. However, with the development of globalization and mobility, the construction of homeland has been injected with new connotations, gradually breaking through the traditional pattern of "leaving home-homesickness-returning home", and getting rid of the solid relationship between the subject and the land. It also absorbs modern people's mental experience of "my homeland is where my heart is at its rest". As Professor Tong mentioned in his article, " 'homeland' is both the actual geographical location and the imaginary space. 'homeland' is not necessarily the place where the people return to their roots, but can also be the first stop on the journey of life." In Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*, Mia and her daughter build a homeland with mobility and openness in their experience of diaspora, which also provides a reference for the realization of the diaspora group's ideal of "without a home anywhere, there is a home everywhere". Only by affirming the differentiation of individual experiences and integrating the constantly changing life experiences can a sense of home be generated and maintained in an open space. The construction of a mobile homeland is to find a home that aligns with one's own life trajectory with an open mind.

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