

*International Journal of Korean Humanities and Social Sciences*  
vol. 7/2021  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14746/kr.2021.07.02>

## **BITTERNESS AND RECOGNITION: ROOM FOR OTHERS IN THE NOVELS OF STEPH CHA<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract:** The novels of Steph Cha posit two key characteristics for openness toward others: bitterness and recognition. The thesis of this paper is that both characteristics must be present together in order for openness to occur. Cha's Juniper Song detective series (2013-15), as well as her stand-alone novel *Your House Will Pay* (2019), foreground the role that bitterness and recognition play in an openness of Korean-Americans to other American people of color. Following the work of Jacques Rancière and Axel Honneth, bitterness is seen

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<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by the Seed Program for Korean Studies through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the Korean Studies Promotion Service of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2018-INC-20180060).

as a characteristic that keeps recognition from falling into the oppressive traps of one group only recognizing the pre-established modes of identity of another. Cha's novels insist on moments of bitterness within scenes of recognition, thus showing how both characteristics, together, form an essential way for a positive openness to another to be possible. Other Korean-American authors discussed include Cathy Park Hong, Caroline Kim, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.

**Keywords:** Steph Cha; Korean-American literature; openness; recognition; bitterness.

### 괴로움과 인식: 스텝 차 (Steph Cha) 소설 속 타인을 위한 공간

**초록:** 스텝 차 (Steph Cha)의 소설은 타인에 대한 개방성의 두 가지 핵심적 특성, 즉 괴로움과 인정을 사실로써 상정한다. 이 논문의 주제는 개방성이 발생하기 위해서는 두 가지 특성이 함께 존재해야 한다는 것이다. 스텝 차 (Steph Cha)의 *Juniper Song* 탐정 시리즈 (2013-15)와 독립소설 *Your House Will Pay* (2019)는 다른 유색인종인 미국인들에게 한국계 미국인의 개방성에 있어 괴로움과 인식이 차지하는 역할을 전면에서 보여준다. 자크 랑시에르 (Jacques Rancière)와 악셀 호네트 (Axel Honneth)의 저작에 따르면, 괴로움은 한 집단의 억압적인 함정에 빠지지 않고 다른 집단의 미리 설정된 정체성 양식만의 인식을 유지하는 특성으로 간주된다. 스텝 차 (Steph Cha)의 소설은 인식의 장면 내에서 괴로운 순간을 역설하며, 이 두 가지 특성이 함께 다른 사람에 대한 긍정적인 개방성을 가능하게 하는 본질적인 방법 형성을 보여준다. 또한 본 논문에서는 다른 한국계 미국인 작가들인 캐시 박 홍 (Cathy Park Hong), 캐롤라인 김 (Caroline Kim), 그리고 테레사 차학경 (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha)에 대해서도 논의된다.

**핵심어:** 스텝 차; 한국계 미국문학; 개방성; 인식; 괴로움.

### CIERPIENIE I ŚWIADOMOŚĆ: PRZESTRZEŃ DLA INNYCH W POWIEŚCIACH STEPH CHA

**Abstrakt:** Powieści Steph Cha umiejscawiają dwa główne założenia otwartości na innych: cierpienie i świadomość. Artykuł ten przyjmuje, że oba te założenia muszą współlistnieć by zaistniała otwartość. Stworzona przez Cha seria detektywistyczna z *Juniper Song* (2013-2015), a także jej samodzielna powieść *Your House Will Pay* (2019) uwypuklają rolę, jaką cierpienie i świadomość odgrywają w otwartości Amerykanów o koreańskich korzeniach na pozostałych Amerykanów o pochodzeniu mieszanym i o innych kolorach skóry. Zgodnie z pracami Jacquesa Rancière i Axla Honnetha, cierpienie jest postrzegane jako cecha charakterystyczna, powstrzymująca świadomość od przekształcenia się w opresyjne pułapki jednej grupy, uznając jedynie

wcześniej ustalone sposoby tożsamości Innego. Powieści Cha skupiają się na chwilach ukazujących rozgoryczenie wśród scen uświadamiania, pokazując tym samym jak obie te cechy wspólnie kształtują podstawowe podejście do pozytywnej otwartości na drugiego człowieka. Inni omawiani autorzy koreańsko-amerykańscy to Cathy Park Hong, Caroline Kim i Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Steph Cha; literatura koreańsko-amerykańska; otwartość; świadomość; cierpienie.

## 1. Openness to Others in Korean American Literature

In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova mentions Korean literature almost randomly, saying that it is an example of *the small literatures* (Casanova 2004: 191), meaning, in the words of Jongyong Hwang, “a literature created to serve the cause of nation and people,” thus occupying “a dominated position in the international world order” (Hwang Jongyong 2010: 50). Although there may be an element of truth in this statement, perhaps in relation to writers responding to a perceived need to define language, state, and identity, some of the literature written by Korean diaspora in America does much to counter this claim.

The thesis of this work is that the diasporic nature of the novels of Korean-American writer Steph Cha allow for an openness to the issues, places, and people of non Korean-American immigrants. In other words, put far too bluntly and much too simply here at first, there is something about being in the position of an immigrant that creates an openness to other immigrants. Initial arguments against this thesis might be based on the isolation to which certain diaspora (especially women) might be subject (Cho 2008: 2-3). Disagreement can also come from the violence enacted by one minority group on another, for example on Asian Americans in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, initial support for the thesis might be based on an “ethic of collaboration” (Nkhoma 2008: 96) that has been especially developed by the oppressed. However, a more specific route is taken here in order to delineate the mechanics of such an openness to the other. The novels of Steph Cha are taken as a model because they portray Korean-American characters who are inspired and angered by events

affecting other American minorities outside their immediate situation. The manner in which this openness is expressed is by coupling the characteristics of *bitterness* and *recognition*.

In other words, when the diaspora are oppressed, this is not only traumatic, but also a potent position from which to enact change. This argument is similar to one found in Cathy Park Hong's collection of essays, *Minor Feelings*, in which she takes the immigrant's "unmastering of English" as a rallying cry, finding inspiration in those who use their lack of mastery of the language as a mode of questioning. She is interested in those "who queer" the language,

twerk it, hack it, Calibanize it, other it by hijacking English and warping it into a fugitive tongue. To other English is to make audible the imperial power sewn into language, to slit English open so its dark histories slide out (Hong 2020: 97).

A powerful example of this can be found in "Mr. Oh," the first story in Caroline Kim's collection *The Prince of Mournful Thoughts and Other Stories* (2020). Told in the first person, Mr Oh is an immigrant who speaks in a stereotypical Asian-English, as seen in the story's first sentences: "The doctor say he no can help me. He don't find any problem. He say:" (Kim Caroline 2020: 3). Yet despite being at a linguistic disadvantage when talking to his American doctor about his neck pain, Mr Oh does not give in to pressure to accept a psychological reason for it

No, I shake my head. I know what he talking about. He don't believe this pain in my neck. Almost, I can no longer swallow. He think I'm crazy, have some kind of mental problem. What he know anyway? Doctors, they just suppose to find place where pain start and fix it (Kim Caroline 2020: 3).

This is what Mr Oh thinks at the beginning of the story, and it is also what he thinks at the end. At least in part it is Mr Oh's "unmastering of English," in Hong's words, that allows him the stubbornness to insist on his pain and expose the weakness of a medical system that will not take the time to examine the real cause of his discomfort. There are other examples of a similar theme in Korean-American literature<sup>2</sup>, and the books delineated below also engage in

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<sup>2</sup> A key example is Chang-Rae Lee's first novel *Native Speaker* (1995), in which even the main character, who has lived in the US since he was a child, and who speaks

such a linguistic hacking, although using various narratological techniques.

That said, first there should be a note on methodology. My argument will not be historiographical, although some references to history will be made. What I will not argue, for example, is that the novels under discussion mirror a current reception of the historical relation of Korea to its immediate neighbors of China and Japan, say beginning in the early years of the Three Kingdoms, thus arguing that the country's relative independence or dependence on its neighbors (Hwang Kyung Moon 2017: 13-4) has had an influence on narrative strategies. Instead I approach the texts of Steph Cha and a few other Korean-American writers from a narratological perspective, noting how *textual space* is made for one minority within another.

Examples of an openness to others is of course found in Korean literature as well, yet within an immigrant experience the stakes of such an openness are sometimes different, as shown in a number of works from some of the most prominent Korean-American authors. For example, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's experimental novel *Dictée*, from 1982, published just days before the author's tragic murder, not only features stories of Cha's childhood, her mother's forced immigration, and a biography of activist Yu Guan Soon, but also the stories of Joan of Arc and Demeter and Persephone. The book also includes non-textual elements: family photographs, newspaper images, medical illustrations, and handwriting. In addition, the way the text is presented is also full of interruptions. For example, in the part on Joan of Arc, some pages end abruptly, mid-sentence, only to continue on pages later. It is up to the reader to piece the elements together. It is as if the narration had to be torn apart in order to make room for the other to enter. Or, in Juliana Spahr's words,

By destabilizing reading practices that seek to conquer or master, a reader-centered work like *Dictée* calls attention to – rather than elides

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English fluently, can still be identified as a non-native speaker: "You look like someone listening to himself. You pay attention to what you're doing. If I had to guess, you're not a native speaker" (Lee Chang-Rae 2013: 13). Although there is a minor character called Mr Oh in Lee's novel, it bears no resemblance here. Another example can be found in Cathy Park Hong's first collection of poetry, *Translating Mo'um* (2002), which is in part concerned with the various ways the word *mother* can be translated into different linguistic contexts.

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– all that is least assimilable about a reader's connection to a work, making it an integral part of what must be 'read' (Spahr 1996: 24).

And there are other examples. The poetry of Cathy Park Hong, who was mentioned above, reverberates with both a Korean-American experience and many others outside that experience as well. Her second poetry collection, *Dance Dance Revolution* (2007), is both centered on the 1980 Gwangju Uprising and, although written in English, contains words from over 300 emigré language groups. In her most recent book of poetry, *Engine Empire* (2012), the horrors of American Manifest Destiny and the greedy indulgence of China's voracious construction industry are also given prominent roles (cf. Willems 2020). In a more recent example, Don Mi Choi's National Book Award winning collection of poetry *DMZ Colony* (2020) features a similar openness to multiple forms, including oral history, scribbles, memoir, and translation, although all with much more of a focus on Korean-American relations.

The novels of Steph Cha, the main writer under discussion here, both fit and do not fit into the above examples. Formally they are not as experimental. Cha's first three novels are quite standard detective stories, and her last book is more of a historical reconstruction. However, some of her work features interruptions by others just the same.

## 2. Early Cha

Cha's first three detective novels form a continuous series, all featuring the main protagonist Juniper Song (whose Korean name is Yoon-Kyung, although only her mother uses it). Song is a young woman in Los Angeles who accidentally gets involved in a murder investigation, which turns her into a budding detective. Although all of the novels feature a wide variety of themes and topics, from the perspective of this work, as the series continues, the novels gradually begin to incorporate more and more issues outside of Korean- or Asian-American concerns, until Cha's most recent novel (as of this moment), *Your House Will Pay* (2019), is both not a part of this detective series and is equally divided

between Korean-American and African-American issues. A discussion of this novel will take up the largest portion of this essay<sup>3</sup>.

Looking back at Cha's detective fiction however, the first novel in the series, *Follow Her Home* (2013), is the most "internally focused." It tells the story of how Song became a detective. She is obsessed with Raymond Chandler and his Philip Marlowe, and when a friend of hers suspects his father of having an affair with his employee, Lori Lim, Song is more than ready to try and find out the truth. However, when Song is attacked outside of Lori's apartment, and then later finds the dead body of one of Lori's colleagues in her car trunk, her career as a bonafide detective truly begins.

Most of the social issues addressed in the novel relate to the manner in which Asian women are sexualized, as in this passage about Lori and Song's dead sister Iris:

Over the city was the miasma of sexual predation, with submissive young Asian women as it eroticized target. Iris with her small feet and long, almond eyes was a fetishist's snack, and dollish Lori suited similar tastes (Cha 2013: 126).

Later in the novel, when an erotic photograph of Iris is discussed, a similar comment is made: (Cha 2013: 238). While both of these passages highlight some of the strengths of the story Cha is telling, they do not explicitly refer to an other outside of an Asian-American experience:

'She was so young, and she was putting herself on display as this Asian-schoolgirl archetype. It made me feel sick, as her sister, of course, but I felt like it reached and grabbed on to the Asian girl in me, too' (Cha 2013: 238).

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<sup>3</sup> Of course Cha is not the first Korean-American author to deal with such issues. Younghill Kang's *East Goes West* (1937), which is generally considered to be the earliest example of Korean-American literature, features many African-American characters, and Leonard Chang's *The Fruit 'n Food* (1996) and Yongsoo Park's *Boy Genius* (2002, as well as his other works) are just a few other examples of novels which deal with Korean-American and African-American relations. From an academic standpoint, Claire Jean Kim's *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* is essential, as is Jeehyun Lim's 2013 article "Black and Korean: Racialized Development and the Korean American Subject in Korean/American Fiction".

Cha's second novel, *Beware Beware* (2014), is somewhat similar. Now working as an apprentice in a private investigator's office, Song is starting to take on actual cases. A woman named Daphne Freamon calls asking for a tail to be put on her boyfriend who is a Hollywood screenwriter. While this novel does include a number of aspects of the Los Angeles movie industry, it is not until the third Song book that we really start to find the mechanism of incorporating the other into a text which is already about a diasporic situation.

### **3. *Dead Soon Enough***

The novel that will take up this third section, *Dead Soon Enough* (2015), features the two main characteristics for openness to others: bitterness and recognition. The novel also introduces two of its major themes in the first chapter: motherhood in an Asian-American context and the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. Song is in trouble financially and she sees an Article in the *New York Times* that seems promising. It is about

Asian-American egg donors. Apparently, our eggs commanded high premiums for rarity on the market – Asian-American women waited longer than average to have babies, chasing those professional dreams with their biological clocks ticking softly in the background. It was like a help wanted ad singing my name (Cha 2015: 2).

Yet the solution to Song's financial problems do not lie in donating her eggs, although this is not so far off the mark. At the same moment that she is reading the paper a new client walks through her detective office door. Rubina Gasparian wants Song to check up on her cousin Lusig, who is the gestational surrogate mother for Rubina's child and seems to be leading a less-than-restful life. It is in this initial get-to-know-you session that the first textual strategy for the intrusion of otherness appears: *recognition*. Song wonders why adoption is not an option for Rubina and her husband, but then realizes that her new client's last name gives the game away: Gasparian. " 'You're Armenian,' I said. Armenian names were almost as easy to spot as Korean ones" (Cha 2015: 4). Yet this is not just a moment of the recognition of the origin of a name, but rather the recognition, in "Armenian names" being

“almost as easy to recognize as Korean ones”, of the position of a minority in one group by another.

This scene represents a moment of solidarity that is on the one hand similar to Grace Kao’s call for thinking strategies of solidarity in America outside the politics and the history of the white oppression of native peoples (Kao 2015: 121). It also showcases an awareness of what Juliet Hooker calls “racialized solidarity”, meaning “how the social fact of race shapes the practice of solidarity and the challenges this poses to the project of achieving racial justice” (Hooker 2009: 4). The first technique that Cha’s novel posits for such solidarity is *recognition*.

And recognition is at the heart of the role of the Armenian Genocide in the novel. The Ottoman Empire’s murder and deportation of Armenians during and then after World War I has been recognized by many countries, although Turkey remains an important exception, and there the event is often viewed quite differently (Suny 2009). In Cha’s novel, Lusig, who is Rubina’s surrogate mother, does not lead the quietest of lives since she is an activist for the Turkish recognition of the genocide. The character of Tanner Kaymak, an assistant professor of history at the University of Southern California, is a rare Turkish supporter of the recognition of the genocide:

“This word – “genocide”,” the professor says, “ ‘it was coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1943, to describe what had happened to the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire. It’s fascinating that there’s a question today about whether this term defines the phenomenon it was conceived to define (Cha 2015: 207).

Yet the question then becomes, to put it quite crudely, what is the question of the Turkish recognition of the genocide ‘doing’ in a detective novel that is also about Korean-American issues? In an interview with the author, when asked why she was interested in such an event, Cha says:

Two of my good friends are Armenian Americans, and my husband and I ended up getting into a long conversation with them about the genocide during a weekend trip to Lake Arrowhead. The genocide happened a hundred years ago, but it has yet to be recognized by the Turkish government or, for political reasons that have nothing to do

with truth or justice, by the United States.<sup>4</sup> I'm Korean American, and despite being born well after World War II and having never lived in Korea, every now and then, I get extremely angry about Japan's denial of its war crimes. I know the feeling of rage in the blood, and I guess this conversation just called something out of me.

Later, when I interviewed them about their experiences growing up in Armenian immigrant households, I was struck by the parallels in our upbringing. The emphasis on education and family, the obsession with food, our truly exemplary mothers (Pochoda 2015).

Here Cha is referring to the Japanese killing of hundreds of thousands of Koreans after it annexed the country in 1910 (Hwang Kyung Moon 2017: 129-137), although this was not the first time Japan had invaded Korea<sup>5</sup>. Two failed attempts during the late 16th and early 17th centuries, which, according to historian Kyung Moon Hwang, were the beginning of “a poisoning of relations with Japan that would never disappear” (2017: 68).

Thus we reach the second textual strategy for incorporating the other into an already decentered position: *bitterness*. And bitterness, coming from the Old English *biter*, meaning *to bite*, resonates with the Cathy Park Hong quote mentioned above about the immigrant's ability to queer and hack the language they use in order to expose the dark sludge underneath. The inclusion of the Armenian Genocide in Cha's novel thus strikes a resonance with the Korean-American experience: both foster a need to bite back.

And there is some bitterness in *Dead Soon Enough*. For example, Song mentions the “bitter truths” (Cha 2015: 46) that came out in relation to her sister's death (her sister committed suicide after becoming pregnant as a teenager), and Song wonders a number of times if she is becoming a “bitter” old hag. But more importantly for this discussion, in the conversation with Professor Kaymak quoted above, when he expresses the uncommon view for a Turk to support the recognition of the genocide, the word bitter has an important role to

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of the novel's writing the United States did not recognize the Armenian Genocide, although President Joe Biden did so in April of 2021. This interview was given in 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Probably the most famous example of treating the theme of the Japanese annexation of Korea in Korean-American literature is Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* (2017), which begins in 1910.

play. Discussing the how pro-Turkish supporters show up at almost every Armenian rally for recognition, the professor:

laughed, loud and bitter, opening his mouth wide to a view of mashed batter and onion. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Of course of course of course! It’s like the Turkish government has a Google alert for the phrase “Armenian genocide”. And whenever it pings, they get their people ready’.(Cha 2015: 210).

Although the word ‘bitter’ is not foregrounded in this passage, it does indicate the anger of someone in opposition to prevailing opinions, much like both Korean- and Armenian-American immigrants in relation to those who oppress them.

Thus both *recognition* and *bitterness* stand as the first two characteristics which are necessary for the inclusion of the other in a narrative. It will take more time to develop the other strategies in play in this novel from Cha, as well as those found in her next and most important novel, *Your House Will Pay*.

#### **4. *Your House Will Pay***

On March 16, 1991, 15-year-old Latasha Harlins was shot and killed by 51-year-old Soon Ja Du in Du’s convenience store in Los Angeles. Harlins was African-American and Du is Korean-American. Du’s light sentence of paying funeral expenses and 300 hours of community service enraged many (Stevenson 2013: 18), and coming only 13 days after the videotaped abuse of Rodney King, it was influential in starting the 1992 riots in LA (Stevenson 2013: 278). While Cha’s first three novels form a continuous story following Juniper Song’s development as a private detective, her fourth novel, *Your House Will Pay*, deviates from that trajectory by presenting a stand-alone story that lies outside of this series. In fact, it fictionalizes the murder of Harlins as well as the ramifications of this event on both African-American and Korean-American communities in 2019. This multi-generational story addresses the concepts of both reception and bitterness in the recognition of others within the potentially violent relations between various minority groups.

The first chapter of the novel takes place in 1991 and tells the story of a day one week before the murder of Harlins, who is given the name Ava Matthews in the novel. Ava, her brother Shawn, and their cousin Ray are waiting to get into the first-day showing of the film *New Jack City* (1991). As they wait in the crowd they begin to feel something strange: “There was something new and heavy in the air” (Cha 2019: 7). The movie gets cancelled because an uprising is starting, but the kids do not know what it is about

‘Didn’t you hear about Rodney King?’ “ a man nearby asks, and “Shawn nodded like he knew all about it,” but not really. “Rodney King – he did know the name. A black guy the cops beat on last week or something (Cha 2019: 8).

This “or something” is an indication of the distance between Shawn and the concerns of the African-Americans around him. This is a distance that will be crossed through the combination of bitterness and recognition. Coming back to this scene, Shawn and his sister and cousin are more worried about seeing the movie than the riots, although when people begin breaking storefronts Ray does get a nice stereo.

Actually, it is in the breaking of glass of one of the storefronts that we get a description of one of the most important elements of the novel, that is of *a breach*. Shawn had

seen glass break plenty of times before, but never a pane so large and clean, so invisibly solid. This was a breach between worlds, a pried-open passage to another dimension (Cha 2019: 10).

The breach between worlds is one of the key aspects of the book. It will be seen in the Korean-American characters struggling to truly emphasize with the Black Live Matter movement and with Shawn’s eventual niece and nephew trying to comprehend fully the murder of their cousin Ava, who died long before they were born. This division between worlds is all the more difficult to cross because it is both invisible and solid, thus *a prying open* is necessary, a violent penetration of one world into the other, here symbolized by the breaking of storefront glass in what is often trivialized as mere looting, but now taking on a more important dimension.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In the scene describing Ava’s murder, a glass partition which is not broken is a symbol of worlds which remain estranged from each other. Accused of stealing some milk she probably intended to pay for, Grace’s mom reaches across the convenience store counter

In 2019, Grace Park is with her sister Miriam at a rally protesting the police shooting of a young black man named Alfonso Curiel. Miriam has been estranged from her and Grace's mother for years. Grace does not know that this is because Miriam has learned that their mother, back in 1991, was the woman who shot and killed Shawn's sister Ava Matthews. When their mother was let off with a light sentence, that, along with the aftermath of the Rodney King beating, lead to the LA Uprising of 1992. Yet since their mother had changed her name and kept a low profile, her identity was kept secret for years, at least until a day in 2019 when she is shot and killed outside the pharmacy where she works with Grace.

As mentioned above, this story is based on the real-life murder of Latasha Harlins. Although names and a number of details have been changed, the basics of the story have remained. One of the reasons that Cha chose this tragedy as the basis for her novel is that it directly addresses the violent tensions that can exist between immigrant groups in the United States, and between African Americans and Korean Americans in particular. As Cha has said in an interview about the novel

I'm Asian American, and I feel solidarity with people of color in this country. But I'm also aware that it's not the same struggle. And I think there's an impulse to consider it the same struggle, or part of the same thing, but the reality is that Asian Americans are treated differently from black Americans. It certainly shows up in the criminal justice system (Chang Ailsa 2019).

The task here is to develop the narrative strategies for incorporating such otherness in her novel.

The first chapter ends with Grace getting drunk after the Curiel memorial and having to be picked up from the bar by her parents. On the car ride home Grace's "head hurt, pounding with shame and gratitude, bitterness and love" (Cha 2019: 31). Here it seems that perhaps if love was not enough to enact an openness to others, indicated by Grace losing the initial rapture she felt at the memorial, bitterness might be the missing ingredient that could, when coupled with love, make the connection with another last. This idea is given some support by the end of Chapter Four. Grace knows that there is something

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and grabs Ava's collar: "She pulled her like she might drag her over the barrier between them, the wall of glass and plastic that was supposed to keep them safe, one from the other" (Cha 2019: 107). The glass barrier here is a false barrier, separating two groups of people while keeping neither of them safe.

unsettling about her mother's past, but she does not know what it is. Her sister Miriam has been estranged from the family, after having a fallout with her mother, but there has been no really satisfactory answer as to why (they last had a quarrel when Miriam brought home a black boyfriend, but Grace does not feel like that is the whole story (Cha 2019: 58)). At the end of the Chapter Grace does not get any truth out of her mother. Instead, her mother tries to console her with food, in fact, even feeding Grace like a child in order to keep her quiet. Grace consents: "She opened her mouth and received the sweet bite" (Cha 2019: 61). Here the key descriptive detail is the word *sweet*, which is the opposite of *bitter*. If bitterness is supposed to be one of the necessary components for getting at the truth, then sweetness here is being posited as its opposite, as a means for concealing, hiding, smoothing over a hard truth that needs to come out, in this case that Grace's mother is a murderer.

#### **4.1. *Distance and Forgiveness***

However, before we get to the role of bitterness and recognition in the novel, a number of other characteristics are put forth which are considered a hinderance to openness to the other. One of the most important, as seen above, is that of *distance*<sup>7</sup>. One reason that Grace has

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to showing the inadequacy of forgiveness, in the first part of the book Cha shows another problematic strategy for connection. Grace is listening to the speeches at the Curiel memorial, one of them given by Shawn's Aunt Sheila. At first, Grace is filled with a feeling of connection: "Her heart swelled with wretched humility and righteous, motivated passion. It was a familiar feeling, one she knew from her church days, the feeling of Christian revival. She was full of love, abundant and pure and impersonal, enough to reach every fallen soul, to take part in the sorrow of all" (Cha 2019: 19). Initially this seems like a perfect quote for an article on the way in which openness to others is enacted in fiction, with its "reach every fallen soul" and "to take part in the sorrow of all". The mechanisms for this openness would then be humility, righteousness, passion, Christianity, and impersonal love. Yet we should not move so quickly. This is an example of Cha setting up some assumed characteristics for openness only to shut them down, which can be seen just a few pages later, when Sheila is giving a speech: "It took an effort" for Grace "to make sense of her words over the noise of the crowd, and after a minute, Grace stopped trying. She couldn't find her way back to her rapture; she was already starting to forget the feeling. It was like trying to fall back asleep to dream the rest of a promising dream" (Cha 2019: 14). Grace not being able to go back to the rapture that was caused by humility, righteousness, passion, Christianity,

a hard time keeping up her anger about Curiel's murder is that she never met him:

she couldn't force herself to keep caring about this boy she'd never met, not with any passion, not when it seemed like the rest of the world was moving on (Cha 2019: 53).

The same issue happens with Shawn's family. Dasha and Darryl, Shawn's niece and nephew, are angry about the death of their Aunt Ava, but Shawn feels that their anger comes from too far a distance:

Darryl and Dasha were angry, sure, but their anger was inherited, abstract and bearable. They could indulge it without getting burned (Cha 2019: 69).

The issue of distance comes to the fore when Grace's mother is shot outside of her pharmacy and it is learned that Darryl is the one responsible. In confronting his nephew Shawn asks,

'She was my big sister... When she died, everything I knew fell in on itself. I used to dream about finding that woman, making her look at me. Humiliating her. Killing her. Are you gonna sit there and tell me you wanted that more than I did?' (Cha 2019: 260),

thus showing that the closer connections to father and uncle are the real causes of the violent act, rather than a sense of justice for a young woman who died many years before Darryl was born.

Yet the difference between positive and negative characteristics in relation to openness toward others really comes to the fore in the two moments in the novel when Grace and Shawn meet. The first time is 'unsuccessful' because it is based on a false characteristic for openness: *forgiveness*. The second is 'successful' because it is based on bitterness and recognition, the combination of characteristics outlines in Cha's early detective novels.

The first time Grace and Shawn meet, Grace seeks Shawn out. Grace's sister Miriam, who had previously learned about their mother's past, reached out to Shawn and his family but they did not take her up on it. But that means that Miriam had their address and Grace used it to come over unannounced once she also learned that their mother killed

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and impersonal love, shows that those are not the characteristics that lead to a lasting openness.

Ava. But Shawn is having none of it. He does not understand why she has come. He is not angry at her because she has nothing to do with what her mother did. On the other hand, just as Shawn knew Darryl shot Grace's mother because of his relationship to his dad (who just got out of prison) rather than Ava, Shawn also knows that Grace's visit is not what it seems on the surface. " 'You want me to forgive you, don't you? That's why you came' " (Cha 2019: 191), Shawn says, but when Grace says that no, she just came over to help, Shawn says " 'You did me no wrong, and I have no reason to forgive you' " (Cha 2019: 191), thus indicating that forgiveness, even if it is something that Grace feels she needs, is not the correct path to connection. Forgiveness here is problematic. It is, in the words of Jacques Derrida, "addressed from the top down, it confirms its own freedom or assumes for itself the power of forgiving, be it as victim or in the name of the victim" (Derrida 2005: 58), and Grace is quickly shown the door.

## **4.2. In Defense of Bitterness**

The second meeting between Grace and Shawn takes place the day after Grace buries her mother. She goes to City Hall where there is a protest against the arrest of Shawn's brother Ray for the murder of Grace's mother. Grace knows that Ray did not do it. She has video showing that it was Ray's son Darryl. However, she has not gone to the police. Ray seems to be taking the blame in order to keep his son out of jail.

It is here that Grace and Shawn have their final interaction, and it is the scene in which the characteristics for being open to another are finally given form.

Grace is the one who wanted to come to City Hall, but the reason is not to ask for forgiveness, or to prove that Ray is innocent: "She wasn't here to set him free. She was here for the boy. He had to be here" (Cha 2019: 285). The boy is Darryl, and the whole reason Grace came is to see the young man who killed her mother. Not to put him in jail, but just to see him.

And see him she does. He is standing in front of the crowd with his uncle Shawn and great-Aunt Sheila. Aunt Sheila. is speaking to the crowd, and the first thing she does is offer forgiveness to Grace's mother

(Cha 2019: 290), but this is not the end of the scene. It is not really what connects Grace and Shawn.

Shawn sees Grace in the crowd. Shawn's main motivation is to protect Darryl. He comes down and meets Grace. He says he is sorry about the death of her mother, Grace's sister says she is sorry about the death of Shawn's sister. But this is not the point. Grace says that she wants to talk to Darryl, otherwise she will submit the evidence she has that he killed her mother to the police. Shawn freaks out. He goes down on his knee to beg Grace for mercy, even though he is incredibly angry (Cha 2019: 292). Grace is not sure that this is what she wants:

She remembered the way he'd denied her before, withholding his forgiveness, turning her away. Was that what she'd wanted? To make him cough it up, now that she had the power? Now that she'd finally been wronged? 'No,' she said. 'Please. Get up. This isn't –' (Cha 2019: 292).

This is a scene of *recognition*. Darryl comes down and Miriam asks him if he knows who they are and he does, first using the name of their mother at the time that she killed Ava, and then the name she used when she change it after: “ ‘You're Jung-Ja Han – voice cracking – Yvonne Park's daughters, Miriam and Grace.’ He nodded at each of them as he said their names” (Cha 2019: 294). Miriam then follows this with a statement about how her mother still, until her death, misrecognized Ava:

Miriam nodded. 'One thing that's haunted me since I found out about my mom – she wrote a letter to the judge, and she got your aunt's name wrong. 'Anna Matthews,' she called her. And she said she felt sorry for her mother' (Cha 2019: 294).

Grace's mother, despite being sorry for what she had done, never really recognized what had happened, she did not even properly learn the name of the young woman she killed. This, in the final scene between Grace and Shawn, puts recognition at the heart of being open to another.

The etymology of recognition means to know something again, to recall someone or something to mind. It means that you have met or seen someone before, and now, seeing them again, you remember that person. This is the strength of Grace's request to *see* Darryl. She saw him briefly at Shawn's house when she came to visit, and she saw him again in a blurry video from the CCTV of her pharmacy's security

system when he shot her mother. And now here, at the rally in front of City Hall, she wants to see him again. Not to accuse him, or put him in jail, but to recognize him.

And it is not that Grace felt any sympathy for Darryl, she is full of bitterness:

Grace hated him. This fragile, pathetic, sobbing boy who'd had strength enough to shoot to kill. Sixteen years old. The age his aunt had been when she died. When a weak, frightened, angry woman, a woman who'd never aimed a gun before, had landed the shot of her lifetime (Cha 2019: 295).

Yet when the crowd realizes who Grace and Miriam are and move in to attack, Shawn protects them (Cha 2019: 298). Recognition, combined with bitterness, seems to be the reason why.<sup>8</sup>

## 5. Recognition

Yet recognition is a very heated concept. It encodes and disguises a number of important assumptions. One way to approach this is through the thought of Jacques Rancière, who puts “the denial of recognition experienced by the dominated” (Deranty 2003: 137) at the heart of his thought. This falls in line with Rancière’s demand for his particularly pragmatic demand for a universal principle of equality, which, for example, “confronts the discourse of the bourgeois denying the workers the right to express their rights with the universalistic discourse of the declaration of human rights” (Deranty 2003: 145), demanding that this inequality be addressed. For example, the philosopher describes the way that the common notion of recognition emphasizes “a relationship between already existing entities” (Rancière and Honneth 2016: 83). This is where the “re-” of recognition comes into play, since recognition in this sense is about both “the coincidence of an actual perception with

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<sup>8</sup> An example of Korean-American literature that has a different view of bitterness is seen in the title of Yongsoo Park’s essay collection *The Art of Eating Bitter*, in which part of the immigrant experience is swallowing the bitterness of life: “In hindsight, I can’t help but marvel at my parents’ willingness to do without. They readily ate the bitterest bitter without complaint. My mother rarely spent money on herself. She didn’t shop for pleasure or simply to have something to do. She didn’t wear jewelry, and she and my father wore out clothes until they were literally threadbare” (Park 2018: 145).

a knowledge that we already possess” as well as being a response “to the claim of other individuals who demand that we treat them as autonomous entities or equal persons” (Rancière and Honneth 2016: 84). At first this seems to be where this final scene from Cha’s novel lies. Grace wants to confirm that Darryl is the young man she saw in the video, Miriam wants to apologize for her mother not remembering Ava’s name.

However, Rancière goes beyond this position, and I will argue that Cha does too. For Rancière, recognition has another meaning, a philosophical one, which “focuses on the conditions behind such a confirmation” (Rancière and Honneth 2016: 85). In this sense recognition is “not the confirmation of something already existing but the construction of the common world in which existences appear and are validated” (Rancière and Honneth 2016: 85). Philosophical recognition is something which comes first, not after. It is about two entities meeting and making sense to each other, not recognizing each other from a previous meeting. Philosophical recognition is when someone addresses me and I actually respond, rather than my knowing this person from a previous encounter. Philosophical recognition “is what allows us to know, to locate and identify anything in the first place” (Rancière and Honneth 2016: 85), rather than being a confirmation of an identity previously understood.

Here Rancière finds himself in the company of many others who have taken the concept of recognition to task. For example, the quotes from Rancière are from a dialogue he has with Axel Honneth, German philosopher and recent director of the Institute for Social Research, for whom recognition is central to moral philosophy and any thought on power (through his readings Michel Foucault and others). In *The Struggle for Recognition* from 1992, Honneth seeks a way to retain individual self-realization within the broader need to recognize different groups in the development of an ethical life, mainly through readings of Hegel and George Herbert Mead (Honneth 1995: 175). However, in his later dialogue with Rancière, Honneth calls for a need to go beyond Hegel in the construction of an idea of social recognition, in which it is no longer enough to extend the same notions of freedom in the same way to every member of society, but rather there is a need for individuals to be

equally able to participate in the institutionalized spheres of reciprocity, that is to say, in families and personal relations, in the labor market, and

in the process of democratic decision-making (Rancière and Honneth 2016: 175-6)<sup>9</sup>.

On the one hand, Rancière and Honneth aim to uncover some of the important underpinnings and assumptions involved in the politics of recognition, and these can have serious consequences. As argued by Glen Sean Coulthard in *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*,

in situations where colonial rule does not depend solely on the exercise of state violence, its reproduction instead rests on the ability to entice Indigenous peoples to identify, either implicitly or explicitly, with the profoundly asymmetrical and nonreciprocal forms of recognition either imposed on or granted to them by the settler state and society (Coulthard 2014: 25).

In the Korean context, recognition can also be seen as a political tool, as North Korea to this day refuses to recognize the country South Korea, considering the whole peninsula to be under its own jurisdiction.

Just like her previous detective novels, this second scene between Grace and Shawn is not just about recognition, but also about bitterness. This is important because bitterness is a characteristic that keeps recognition from falling into the oppressive traps outlined by the thinkers above. Bitterness, meaning to bite, is an essential coupling with recognition because it foregrounds the connection between what Rancière called the common and philosophical meanings of recognition. Remember, the common meaning was both remembering something or someone from before and a demand to be treated as an equal to someone or something else, while the philosophical version was about being able to make sense with someone else at all in the first place. Bitterness is a way to see how the common and philosophical definitions of recognition are not so far away from each other. Bitterness abstracts the common definition into something more fundamental, while at the same

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<sup>9</sup> Both Rancière and Honneth are in dialogue with a classic text on the issue, Charles Taylor's *The Politics of Recognition* from 1992, in which he divides recognition into three main types, a universal recognition of all people, a differential politics where only one aspect of an individual is recognized, and a recognition of concrete individuality (Taylor 1994: 25-73). However, Rancière takes issue with the manner Honneth defines recognition in terms of an individual's ability to contribute to society when that society is hierarchical (cf. Deranty 2003: 151).

time grounding the philosophical definition in something more real. And it works like this:

Grace is bitter because her mother is dead. No matter how terrible an act her mother committed, Grace still hangs onto the fact that she can mourn. She hates Darryl, as quoted above: “Grace hated him. This fragile, pathetic, sobbing boy who’d had strength enough to shoot to kill” (Cha 2019: 295). Yet at the same time, she reaches out to Darryl:

She reached both arms out toward the weeping boy. She found his hands and took them in her own. They were warm and wet, and she felt the life pulsing through the meat of his palms. She wrapped her fingers around his and waited for something to happen, for some indication of how she was meant to go on (Cha 2019: 296).

The combination of bitterness and recognition turns Grace’s feelings into a kind of “politicized anger” (Coulthard 2014: 110), they become part of a “ ‘social struggle’ ”(Fraser and Honneth 2003: 199). This is not bitterness as failure, such as Albert Camus, through his reading of Scheler and Nietzsche, sees it, meaning a “resentment against oneself” (Camus 1991: 18). In Cha’s work, bitterness has a different function. It keeps recognition real, so to speak, meaning that it keeps the oppressive and colonialist aspects of recognition in play. Bitterness functions as a “breach”, as described above, or an intervention into the potentially destructive aspects of recognition.

This is similar to the manner in which Cha herself describes how *Your House Will Pay* works. In an interview the author conducted in mid-2021, she stresses both bitterness and recognition. She says first that

‘I imagine [conflicts between Korean and Black communities] will continue wherever Black people are thrown into close quarters with Korean people, especially when Koreans are praised as a model minority in order to shame Black people,’

and then she says that

‘I also think there’s a lot of solidarity between Black and Korean Americans, especially among the younger generation. It’s not all ugly, and it’s not all good’ (Choi Jae-bong 2021).

When we read Cha’s novels this combination of bitterness and solidarity does not come as a surprise, but is rather shown to be a

necessity. It is an essential way for a positive openness to another to be possible.

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