

***Maybe it's Wanchai?* A narrative (and medicalised) response to the question: ‘Where are you really from?’**

I was born in Hong Kong to “Overseas Chinese” parents. The question of where *their* ancestors are from is the focus of *Maybe it's Wanchai* [灣仔]?, a creative work best described as a fictitious third person memoir or put simply, a novel.

‘Dying’, an extract from the novel that I will be reading today, was originally written as a prologue but it is also a stand-alone piece.

In my abstract, I mentioned that this work is a narrative and medicalised response to the question many visibly “ethnic” Australians are familiar with; ‘Where are you *really* from?’ This is a question I asked myself when, upon a second cancer relapse, the doctors told me that I was running out of options and, potentially, my only cure was a bone marrow transplant (aka an allogeneic stem cell transplant). I knew that my odds of finding a match were lower than a so called ‘white person’ of ‘European’ descent because of lower donor rates and greater genetic diversity in groups that fall outside of this category.<sup>1</sup>

My all too public search for a DNA match highlighted the problematic ways individuals and institutions define and categorise race, ethnicity and culture. ENSC (Emily Needs Stem Cells) is the website an American friend from my online cancer group set up for me when I wailed into cyberspace. Another friend made downloadable posters about my plight and people were encouraged to put these posters up in Chinatowns around the world and/or approach anyone who looked as if they could be related to me. My story made local, national and international news, and it soon became a game of ‘spot the Asian who looks as if they are related to Emily!’

The question for today is ‘where is your Asia?’

In 2013, *my* Asia was embodied in someone with whom I shared at least 9 out of 10 human leukocyte antigen (HLA) codes.

After I moved on from this harrowing period, I started a research project about the cultural capital of reading which led me to ask my mother why she was denied an education even though her maternal grandmother graduated from teacher’s college. I expected her to respond with a late

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5965695/>

19<sup>th</sup> century/ early 20<sup>th</sup> century riches to rags story but instead, she presented the following facts: Her great grandfather was a scholar who cried when the officials took away his books, he was from a non-pork eating minority group, and her uncle looked like a *gweilo*. Then in her usual manner, she quickly moved onto another topic; her cooking plans for the next day.

This morsel of information was tantalising.

I wanted to find out more about my nameless great grandmother's family. Which non-pork eating group did she belong to? Was she from a Muslim or Jewish family? How did they get to China or had they always been there? Where were the state borders when they were non-pork eaters? Were they multi-ethnic or were they simply a family that did not like pork? And, if my great grandmother was so highly educated why did she marry someone who wasn't, and how did she feel when she was forced to sell her daughter to Vietnamese family just because a fortune teller told her that the daughter, my grandmother, was a curse on the family.

Then my thoughts turned to my cancer years and I wondered whether my search for a donor had been a complete waste of time given that I'm more of a genetic hybrid than I'd originally thought.

Months later, when I asked my mother to tell me more about her maternal ancestors, she said that she confused the non-pork story with that of another relative. Her flustered distancing from the story made me wonder why no one wanted to tell this story, yet the one about another relative who was born a monkey and bounced into the forest within hours of his birth was not taboo.

*Maybe it's Wanchai?* is drawn from my lived experiences and my search for a point of origin but it is not a work of non-fiction for reasons beyond the scope of this very brief presentation. The narrative weaves together the present and the past, and the chapters alternate between the contemporary "cancer story" and an imagined past. It is also an exploration of how individuals narrate their identities into being, and how these identities are shaped by external socio-cultural and political forces.