

Performing Coastal Space as Ethnic History:

Vancouver's Chinatown in Wayson Choy's *Paper Shadows*

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As space is at the centre of many textual constructions in Chinese-Canadian literature, Wayson Choy's autobiography *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Memoir* (1999) evokes the interpretive exchange between ethnic history and coastal geography via an overt affiliation with WWII Canadian modernism. This paper delves into how Choy's *Paper Shadows*, a discursive and cultural production of Vancouver's Chinatown, generates new possibilities for the elucidation of Chinese diasporic culture in mid-twentieth-century coastal Canada. It critically considers the way in which the nature of an urban place resonates with the lives of those who dwell in it. Choy's childhood memory of the 1940s — Chinese opera, food, festivals, family relations, and other cultural practices — indicates that the everyday collective performance deployed by Chinatown inhabitants who are not in positions of power affords them some control over the space of their daily lives. Informed by Michel de Certeau's concept of "spatial stories," emphasizing the interdependency of textual narratives and spatial practices, this paper maintains that Choy's narrative transforms the institutionalized racial urban place, Chinatown, into individualized in-between spaces that empower Chinese coastal denizens — racially segregated — in the urban alienation of Vancouver. Through Choy's evocative literary tour brimming with vividly detailed itineraries, coastal Chinatown is no longer a passive locus of social relations (Lefebvre), but one that spatializes everyday activities, facilitating a re-imagining of an active and legitimate community that fosters multicultural integration. Ultimately this paper argues that Choy's *Paper Shadows* performs coastal space as ethnic history, and offers a central consideration of generative "Costal" aesthetics in Canadian literature.