

### Sexuality, Space, and Subjecthood in *Sour Heart*

For children, the world is a bewildering, unknowable place with only a few sites of comfort. In *Sour Heart*, by Jenny Zhang, uprooted immigrant children, pulled between Shanghai and New York City, are often left to rely solely on their families and homes for the formation of their identities. How, then, do these migratory children take on subjectivity in an area distinct from the home, such as sexuality? In the short story “Why Were They Throwing Bricks?”, Zhang explores related ideas of enclosure and domesticity, while in “The Empty the Empty the Empty,” physical barriers allow for discrete spaces, geographical exploration, and spatial expansion. Through the use of space, Zhang creates a theory of developing sexuality for these transnational subjects.

In “Why Were They Throwing Bricks?”, Zhang considers familial proximity through the worries of the story’s narrator, Stacy, about the intimate nature of her younger brother and grandmother’s relationship. Although their parents are not concerned, Stacy knows that her brother’s attachment to their grandmother will, over the course of time, impede his development. If Allen continues affixing his being to his grandmother in lieu of forming his own sense of self, Stacy foreshadows, “One day, he’d be sixteen and still cowering underneath our grandmother’s dress, clinging to her before she woke him up, waiting for her to make lunch or clear away dinner, curled up next to her like a pair of twisted vines in the living room” (246). Unable to be separated or distinguished, Allen and his nainai interlace like vines; for Allen, a child in the midst of his own development, this entwinement means an utter obliteration of an independent selfhood. Regarding her little brother’s identity formation, Stacy’s primary concern centers on the progression of Allen’s sexuality in the presence of nainai.

Zhang foregrounds anxieties over the dormant incestuous formation of sexuality within the home by focusing on the potential consequences of nainai's overbearing companionship. Stacy imagines asking her younger brother in the future, "Don't you want more than this?... Don't you want to make friends and kiss someone you aren't related to?" (246). Allen's anticipated response, "No, I just want nainai," marks his grandmother as a sexual alternative to kissing someone to whom he is not related (246). In Stacy's imaginings, Allen remains dependent on his grandmother to be "next to him" in the domestic space they inhabit together (246). Sleeping next to each other at night and waking up in the morning in their bedroom, waiting for her food in the kitchen, and embracing each other in the living room, Allen's grandmother forms their home into an enclosure. By conjuring the image of a teenage boy, "sixteen and still cowering underneath [his] grandmother's dress," Stacy emphasizes the abjection of a child who never extricates himself from beneath his nainai, forcing his sexuality to develop in close proximity to the family. Her latent dread of incest, therefore, does not reflect a belief that Allen and nainai will physically have sex with each other; instead, she fears that their grandmother will eclipse the role of a romantic partner in developing Allen's sexuality in a space distant from the home. In "Why Were They Throwing Bricks?", therefore, the incestuous nature of sexual emergence creates a deep anxiety about children's continued confinement to the domestic enclosure. The development of sexuality inside of the family home, therefore, becomes a concern about location; if Allen remains with his grandmother in their house, Zhang says, he will never be able to go anywhere else. Never wanting "more than this," he will never become more than the dependent child he is now (246).

Unease about the physical constraints of the family home consequently manifests as a mandate from Zhang: in order to reach the external world, the children of *Sour Heart* must

materially separate themselves from their families and have sex beyond a familial romance. In “The Empty the Empty the Empty,” however, sexually and geographically distinguished children become untethered from not only their home but earth and reality. As geographic and planetary space expands in “The Empty the Empty the Empty,” Lucy’s fear of abandonment challenges the portrayal of a suffocating familial enclosure in “Why Were They Throwing Bricks?”

When Lucy’s older brother, Eddie, explores his pubescent sexuality, sexual and spatial exploration necessitate a physical barrier that can separate him from his family. He, therefore, “shut[s] the door” before “staying hours and hours in [his bedroom] with his new girlfriend” (65). Unlike Allen’s shared bedroom, this autonomous space allows Eddie to explore his sexuality with people other than his family members, in places other than their communal rooms. The closed door demarcates the line between the household and Eddie’s bedroom, a site of independence even within the home. He threatens to kill his sister if she enters, emphasizing the seriousness of this boundary. The “new[ness]” of his girlfriend highlights her nonfamilial distance, her “tits the size of Kansas— no the whole Midwest, no the entire continent of North America, no make that the continent of Asia, no Asia plus Antarctica, no actually the whole Milky Way galaxy”— serving as Eddie’s site of geographic expansion (65). Zhang writes, “Her tits were out of this world. Literally” (65). The psychological and physical boundary of his closed door and the ensuing private space of his teenage bedroom allow Eddie to transcend the enclosure of family, prompting sexual and geographic expansion into his girlfriend’s breasts. Through her “tits,” “Kansas” is left behind, insistently cut off by the assertion, “no the whole Midwest” (65). Subsequent interjections include the entirety of North America, then Asia, then Asia and Antarctica, finally extending to the Milky Way galaxy. This expansion from regional America to the continents of North America and Asia reflects the unsettled migration pattern of

all the characters in *Sour Heart* as they immigrate, resettle, relocate, and return between Asia and America. The shift from both continents to include Antarctica and expand into the Milky Way galaxy seeks to move beyond this uprooted, impermanent movement of immigrants, aiming for universality. Through sexually developing into the cosmos, Eddie transcends not just the confines of his home, but also his material, earthly self as a transnational subject.

Transcendence, however, is certainly not a guarantee. While Eddie traverses the sexual cosmos in his bedroom, Lucy bemoans: “Everyone I knew was living on a different planet from me and I was the only person left on earth, wandering around dumbly, and it was possible I would have to stay there forever” (65). Unable to transcend her earthly surroundings, she protests the unfairness of having to be herself forever “while other people [get] to be other people” (65). Since sexual development results in planetary ascension, Zhang accordingly presents Earth as the space of presexual childhood and familial enclosure. What was once a suffocating relegation in “Why Were They Throwing Bricks?” becomes a barren land for Lucy in “The Empty the Empty the Empty.” Unlike Allen’s ever present company of *nainai*, Lucy’s childhood planet is barren, unpopulated by members of her family. Lucy dwells on being completely alone, introducing a new spatial sexual fear to the anxiety of not developing outward. That is, Zhang proposes an addendum to Allen’s directive for Lucy. The children of *Sour Heart* face desertion, not suffocation, in the familial space. If they do not enter the galactical formation of sexual development, therefore, they will be left behind, unable to ever become someone else or someone more.

In response to this injunction, Lucy immediately attempts to become a sexual being. Entering a facsimile of the sexual world, Lucy “put fingers in [her] vagina, wriggled them all the way in deep until it hurt, and then wiped [her] fingers on Eddie’s door” (65). With her “mouth

pressed up against his door,” she threatens her brother; “Don’t worry Eddie... even if you don’t come in my room, I’ll still freaking kill you” (65-66). This warning echoes her older brother’s earlier threat to kill her if she entered his room. This inversion of the threat, however, her insistence that she will still kill him even if he does not enter her room, reflects an unspoken desire to once again share familial space with Eddie. Even though this desire is antithetical to how he has been able to expand sexually and geographically, Lucy wants the boundaries between their spaces of home and his bedroom to blur so that she is not left behind. Wiping her vaginal fluid on Eddie’s door is another way of attempting to extend across the barrier of sexual development that separates them, reaching the cosmos alongside him.

Isolated by her undeveloped sexuality, Lucy does not receive a response to her provocations. Still worried about abandonment, she recalls: “I walked back into my bedroom, locked the door, collapsed onto my carpet, put my fingers back in my vagina, and waited for my mother to get home” (66). This moment underscores her yearning for development and her continued inhabitation of a desolate childhood planet. She seeks to create her own space for sexual transcendence, vis-a-vis Eddie’s bedroom, by locking her door and performing a sexual act upon herself. But she remains unmoored, ultimately awaiting her mother’s arrival, both from her job and into the long-awaited fulfillment of her motherly role, in an increasingly empty home. Lucy feels a profound sense of abandonment, intensifying her desire to transcend the limitations of her current existence.

In “The Empty the Empty the Empty,” failing to reach geographic, planetary, and sexual expansion risks being stranded in the isolation of childhood. A child’s efforts to develop sexually, however, may exceed their ability to make sense of the world outside their family.

When Lucy finally sexually engages within the private space of her room, she experiences what she describes as

...the moment when I could detach from myself again, when I could hover in that space above reality where I sometimes saw myself for who I really was, only this time, I would let it happen, I wouldn't struggle at all, instead, I would allow myself to see what was really there down below me" (75).

Instead of experiencing a broader understanding of the galaxy and world, she detaches from herself altogether. Lucy now exists in the small space between transcending the self and a complete disconnection from everything, separating not just from the physical space of her family's home but from the substance of reality itself.

Finally, Zhang disrupts her mandates. In "Why Were They Throwing Bricks?", Allen exemplifies the necessity for sexually developing outside of the home; meanwhile, in "The Empty the Empty the Empty," Eddie transcends his spatial limits through sexual experimentation, moving past the burden of a false China and America dichotomy. Lucy's ordeal, however, warns against a hasty maturation period. Instead, Zhang introduces the possibility of transnational subjecthood. In Lucy's untethering from sex and family, she presents a way to think about identity without either a fixed point of location or a binding commitment to either inside the familial home or the entire outside galaxy. Being able to view herself for who she really is and "what was really there down below," Lucy provides a glimpse into a possibility of the transnational subject.

#### WORKS CITED

Zhang, Jenny. *Sour Heart: Stories*. Lenny, 2018.