

Rationalized Discrimination: Analysis of “Our Missing Hearts” Based on Foucault’s Discourse Theory

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Abstract: “Our Missing Hearts”, Celeste Ng’s latest novel, has garnered widespread attention since 2022 release. The novel unfolds in a fictional American society, conceiving the Preserving American Culture and Traditions Act (PACT). This act, which deems anyone with minimal Asian ties a potential threat and mandates removals of children and books, functions as a mechanism for the white authorities to restrict freedom of speech and practice racial discrimination, under the guise of protection and security. From the perspective of Foucault’s discourse theory, this paper analyzes the discursive manipulation strategies employed by the white authorities to rationalize their discrimination against nonwhite groups in the novel. Firstly, it examines three exterior procedures of discursive exclusion on which the white authorities rely to prohibit anti-PACT discourse, reduce it to the invalid madman’s discourse, and make the truth of sanctified PACT permeate the whole American society. Secondly, it explores the institutionalized surveillance of citizens’ discourse, which is orchestrated by the authorities, neighbors, and even the citizens themselves. By intertwining these mechanisms, the white authorities construct a self-reinforcing system where discriminatory practices are framed as rational and necessary.

1. Introduction

Celeste Ng, also known as Wu Qishi, has risen from relative obscurity to become a prominent figure in contemporary Chinese American literature, achieving global recognition and popularity. Her personal experiences with the Chinese American identity have provided her with valuable insights into the challenges faced by Chinese Americans in a predominantly white society, which has greatly influenced her writing career. However, she hopes that the writings of ethnic authors can be appreciated beyond their ethnicity. Ng’s inclination for this type of writing is evident in her assertion that “The problem is with being seen only as an Asian American writer”[1].

“Our Missing Hearts”, published in 2022, marks Ng’s latest novel that took her eight years to complete. The novel unfolds in a fictionalized, increasingly white authoritarian America, governed by the Preserving American Culture and Traditions Act (PACT) which deems anyone with even a minor Asian connection a potential threat to the nation and mandates removals of children and books. Central to the narrative is a Chinese American boy Bird, motherless due to this law. In his quest to find his mother, he uncovers the dark realities covered by PACT. The work profoundly reveals racial

discrimination based on skin colour, as well as the underlying oppression in social education and daily life. Under the guise of protection and security, the white authorities restrict freedom of speech and practice racial discrimination. As Christian House observes, “Her fiction often deals with how Asian-Americans fit into close-knit white American communities, but in her new novel she pitches that experience into the storm of a nationwide moral panic”[2]. Similarly, Shelbi Polk remarks that “Ng’s latest is a departure from her previous work and explores a dark but familiar world”[3]. In her latest novel, Ng gradually delves into broader, darker themes.

Michael Foucault, a prominent philosopher and historian, has his efforts mainly aimed at philosophy, society and politics while he has been greatly commented and cited in the field of literary critical theory of the twentieth century. Foucault’s theory of discourse posits that discourse is not merely symbolic expression but a practical activity permeated with power, shaping social reality through the production and dissemination of knowledge. In Foucault’s opinion, the orientation of language and discourse is different. Language refers to thoughts while discourse turns to desire[4]. In “The Order of Discourse”, Foucault puts forward a famous hypothesis: “In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its power and dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality”[5]. Based on this hypothesis, Foucault summarizes three exterior procedures of exclusion. The first is the prohibition that contains three procedures: the taboo on the object of speech, the ritual of the circumstances of speech, and the privileged or exclusive right of the speaking subject. The second is the opposition between reason and madness, namely division and rejection. The third is the opposition between truth and false. Moreover, Foucault’s introduction of panopticon underscores the institutionalized surveillance behind knowledge production. According to Foucault, Bentham’s panopticon is a special annular building. The captive in the peripheral area of the panopticon can merely be gazed at by the gazer from the central tower, but cannot see anything by himself[6].

From the perspective of Foucault’s discourse theory, this paper attempts to explore the discursive manipulation strategies employed by the white authorities to rationalize their discrimination against nonwhite groups in “Our Missing Hearts”.

2. White-Authority Restraint on Discourse

2.1 Prohibition of Anti-PACT Discourse

In “Our Missing Hearts”, three types of prohibition are effectively utilized by the white authorities to constrain discourse to align with PACT values.

Firstly, there is a taboo on anti-PACT discourse which encompasses expressions of sympathy for China, insufficient anti-China sentiment, doubts about America, ties to China, and questioning of PACT. Such discourse has reached a point where “speaking about PACT was complaining about PACT, which would only prove their disloyalty”[7]. One of convincing evidences is the petitions to purge all of Asian texts which are “not just those from China and Japan and Cambodia and other places, but those about them, too”[7], and politicians fret “might contain anti-American sentiments or even coded messages”[7]. There is a pervasive phenomenon where people “shied away from discussing PACT at all”[7], further underlining the severity and pervasiveness of this taboo.

Secondly, citizens should appeal to specific rituals of speaking in certain circumstances concerning PACT, so as to adapt to their surroundings. When confronted by the police, citizens must demonstrate their loyalty and gratitude towards the white authorities. This is evident in the statements made by Bird’s father to the police who questioned the loyalty of his family.

That woman is no longer part of this family, he said brusquely. We have nothing to do with her...And we have absolutely no sympathies for the radical stances she supported, his father went

on...Noah and I both know PACT protects our country, he went on. If you doubt my sincerity, just take a look. I've made steady donations to security and unity groups for the past two and a half years. And Noah is a straight-A student. There are no unpatriotic influences in this house...There are no questions about loyalty in this household, officer...We're very grateful to folks like you who are protecting our security, he said. After all, if it weren't for you, who knows where we'd be[7].

Thirdly, the privileged or exclusive right of the speaking subject is demonstrated by the collections of universities which, however, are inaccessible to ordinary citizens: "It's possible some library might have a copy of that cat book still stored away. A big library, like the university's. Sometimes they can get away with keeping things we can't. For research purposes"[7]. In addition, white Americans are afforded the privilege to curse and assault individuals with foreign features at will and get away with accusation or punishment: "The perpetrators were seldom caught and even more rarely charged: it was hard to prove they'd acted because the victim was—or was thought to be—Chinese. The average American, one judge ruled, cannot reasonably be expected to visually distinguish between various varieties of persons of Asian origin...The persons of Asian origin, conversely, were scrutinized thoroughly"[7].

Through the enforcement of these three types of prohibition, the white authorities have effectively managed to restrict and shape the discourse of the populace in a manner that aligns seamlessly with the values espoused by PACT. This strategic constraint not only solidifies the supremacy of white culture, traditions and social status but also systematically silences and marginalizes the voices and values of other minor groups.

2.2 Rejection of Anti-PACT Madness

This section focuses on the opposition between the rational discourse espoused by the white authorities and the crazy discourse represented by anti-PACT protesters in "Our Missing Hearts".

In "Our Missing Hearts", people opposed to PACT are diagnosed mad. It is evident in the sentiments expressed towards them, from Ethan Gardner's comment, "Crazy people...Real lunatics" to the social media descriptor, "lunatic protesters", given that "PACT was common sense". People protesting PACT are branded as "Seditious subversives. Traitorous Chinese sympathizers. Tumors on American society"[7]. Just like lunatics, their discourse is deemed as madness, hysterical and dangerous. Overturning PACT is believed to be unreasonable, and "if you acted there would be consequences"[7]. Hence, critics of PACT are perceived as madmen, patients posing threat and bound to get some necessary treatments.

One illustrative case is the forced removals of children from their homes by the white authorities into foster care, ostensibly to shield them from environments promoting harmful views. Parents opposing PACT, akin to Sadie's parents, are deemed unsuitable caregivers, their children consequently taken into foster families. These parents are presumed to have engaged in dangerous activities, whether through their actions or words, rendering their children susceptible to harmful influences at home, or even compared to molesters and child abusers unworthy of parental rights [7].

A similar disdain for anti-PACT discourse as madness is evident in the censorship of books deemed dangerous and thus removed from public access. This book banning is justified by the need to protect people from exposure to harmful ideas which deemed to foster dissent against families or the American nation. Asian-language books are particularly scrutinized by politicians, fearing that they may contain anti-American sentiments or coded messages[7].

The third example of rejection of un-American discourse involves financial penalties against those deemed as a member of it. A reporter was fined for his statement that PACT encouraged discrimination against those of Asian descent, which was accused by the authorities of drumming up sympathy for people who might be dangerous to public stability. His station paid almost a quarter of

its yearly budget in fines[7]. Similarly, another station had its license revoked, coincidentally, after broadcasting segments critical of PACT[7].

In the United States portrayed in the novel, any discourse that diverges from PACT is labeled as the madman's discourse and suppressed to ensure its inaccessibility. By filtering and expelling madman's discourse from rational discourse aligned with PACT, and employing measures such as child removals, book banning, and financial penalties, the white authorities successfully homogenize the voices of ordinary citizens, maintaining a highly uniform discourse in line with their ideology.

2.3 Truth of Sanctified PACT

The white authorities endeavor to assert their dominance over discourse through the propagation of the sanctified truth of the PACT. This truth manifests in the fact that PACT is common sense: "PACT has been the law for over a decade, passed with overwhelming majorities in both House and Senate, signed by the president in record time. Poll after poll still shows huge public support"[7]. To safeguard their control and delineate the boundaries of citizens' discourse, the white authorities have established a multifaceted discourse system that encompasses education and media regulation in everyday life.

On the one hand, education, as a discourse practice, functions as an effective tool for rulers to exert control over the populace and reinforce the shackles of discourse. In "Our Missing Hearts", the educational content and assignments in schools are meticulously aligned with PACT, with the objective of supporting its ideas. Students, including those in kindergarten, study PACT in school every year[7]. To ensure acceptance of PACT and quell protests, students are repeatedly instructed about the Crisis in school:

During the Crisis, disruptions happened all the time; they've learned this over and over in school, for as long as he can remember. Everyone out of work, factories gone idle, shortages of everything; mobs had looted stores and rioted in the streets, lighting whole neighborhoods ablaze. The nation paralyzed in the turmoil. It was impossible, his social studies teacher had said, to lead a productive life... That, young ladies and gentlemen, is why you are fortunate to be living in an age where PACT has made disruptive protests a thing of the past[7].

The daily homework in school, whether essays or math, is also designed to promote PACT and warn against foreign threats, exemplified by Bird's assignments:

English assignment: In a paragraph, explain what PACT stands for and why it is crucial for our national security. Provide three specific examples... math... Suppose the GDP of China is \$15 trillion and it increases 6% per year. If America's GDP is \$24 trillion but it increases at only 2% per year, how many years before China's GDP is more than America's? If a Korean car costs \$15,000 but lasts only 3 years, while an American car costs \$20,000 but lasts 10 years, how much money would be saved over 50 years by purchasing only American cars?[7]

On the other hand, the white authorities perpetuate the sanctified truth of PACT through media control. A pertinent illustration involves a snowy security camera footage showing a grainy, hoodie-clad figure attempting to shoot a hawkish Texas senator, renowned for his fiery calls for sanctions against China and polemics on the perceived threat of Chinese industry. News outlets repeatedly aired the clip, fostering the perception that "though the face of the man in the hoodie was too blurry to identify him, it was clear enough to show that he was East Asian—based on the context, analysts concluded, likely Chinese"[7]. Consequently, police departments and social media are inundated with reports of the suspect; however, "this the shooter would never be apprehended, no one would ever be charged, and every Asian face would always remain a suspect—of the shooting, or of secretly sympathizing with it"[7]. Editorials comment that it is "not just an attack on the physical person of one senator, but an outright attack on our government, on our very way of life"[7]. This justifies

discrimination against those of Asian origin in America:

Suspicion spread like ink on wet cloth, bleeding outward until everyone was tinged. It was the same dirty tint that would be used, used, for years to come, to justify the sidelong glances at anyone who might seem Chinese, to excuse the refusals of service and shouted slurs and spat-in faces, and later on, the baseball bats, the booted feet[7].

The mass media supports PACT by fostering public vigilance and condemning unrest. For one thing, prominently displayed on front pages are newspaper headlines like “SHARP EYE OF NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH FOILS POTENTIAL INSURRECTION IN DC”[7]. For another, regarding an anti-PACT case where ski-masked figures poured a dump truck filled with ping-pong balls, each adorned with a miniature red heart and the words: end PACT, into a river, “news reports calculated the gasoline wasted, the carbon monoxide released, the economic cost of those lost hours...police released a photograph of a duck they said had choked, gullet bulging with tumor-like lumps”[7].

With the assistance of the sanctified and established truth of PACT, which is disseminated through education and mass media as pivotal external forces, the white authorities fortify their discourse and systematically exclude any alternative perspectives.

3. White-Authority Surveillance of Discourse

3.1 Official Supervision and Neighborhood Watch

To bolster their control over discourse, the white authorities have meticulously crafted a societal framework resembling a panoptic prison, leveraging both the official supervision and the neighborhood watch.

On the one hand, the white authorities wield their statutory right to scrutinize the discourse produced by citizens. This involves the monitoring of communication channels and the examination by the police. Firstly, the systems and mechanisms used for conveying or disseminating information, such as mail, telephones, and the internet, are subject to surveillance by the white authorities. For instance, the postal authority possesses the statutory right to monitor citizens’ mail in accordance with PACT. This is exemplified by the letter Bird received at the outset of the novel, which was slit and resealed with a sticker, examined by the post office, ultimately deemed harmless and sent on its way: “of course, as all their letters are: Inspected for your safety—PACT”[7]. Secondly, the police conduct relentless patrols across the country, ensuring everything remains within their control and attempting to identify citizens with anti-PACT values. Numerous scenes in the novel depict police cars gliding silently through streets, scanning the area with suspicion: “at the corner, a police car glides by, lights off, nearly silent”; “A police car approaches slowly, on the prowl. The silhouettes of the officers inside: foggy blurs through the tinted glass...The car glides closer, suspicious. Scans the area”[7]. Moreover, for anti-PACT protesters or reported suspects, the officers carry out “a full investigation into the family”; “Someone would appear on your doorstep. Someone called, they’d say...Just our duty to check”[7].

On the other hand, the neighborhood watch serves as an effective strategy for the white authorities to monitor the production of the ordinary citizens’ discourse. One of the three pillars of PACT requires all citizens to report potential threats to the society[7], sniffing out persons whose views and mindsets might be divided: “United neighborhoods are peaceful neighborhoods. We watch out for each other”[7], which is advocacy of the neighborhood-watch groups. Consequently, there is always someone watching[7]. Citizens are constantly under scrutiny, with their words and actions meticulously monitored by their neighbors. As demonstrated by Bird’s experience: “All his life, there have always been others nearby, watching, listening. Even if you couldn’t see them, you knew they were there: just through the window, just on the other side of the wall, just out of sight around a

corner”[7], the white authorities succeed in transforming American society into a panoptic prison, effectively enforcing surveillance over citizens’ production of discourse. This pervasive surveillance creates an atmosphere of constant vigilance, where individuals are always scrutinized and judged by someone.

Both the official supervision and the neighborhood watch are instruments used by the white authorities to manipulate discourse. This external gaze is omnipresent, creating a web of surveillance that no one can escape.

3.2 Self-Monitoring of Subordinates Exemplified by Bird

In some cases, the bearers monitor themselves in words and wills beyond their own control. Here and there exist the scenes where what ordinary citizens subconsciously think or say corresponds to the white-authority discourse.

In most situations, Bird keeps an eye on himself, knowing which kind of words or acts can avoid attention and troubles. Having been taught about PACT every year over and over, he knows what he should write in the essay assignment of explaining what PACT stands for and why it is crucial for our national security with specific examples[7]. Although he did not know the reasons, Bird had understood it was better not to ask questions and simply follow what his father told him[7]. Before he leaves for London to find his mother, Bird leaves some messages for his father in case it’s overwhelmingly worrying for his father not to find him at home. Even though left for his closest father, Bird’s messages are intentionally not specific at all, simply consisting of a short and obscure note: a brief promise and reassurance to his father about his return, his mother’s cat drawing and note writing: New York, NY, torn off the specific address, and a box of matches, an indication of his father to burn these messages[7]. It is for the best sake of his family because he knows that any mention of his mother would put them in danger. Besides, when a police cruiser parked by the roadside where the bus he was in was driving along, it occurred to Bird in his mind to stay away from policemen, a rule his father kept asking him to obey. And Bird immediately tugged the visor of his hat a bit lower, shading his face, as the bus whipped by[7].

In Chinatown, the residents speak either in English, or not at all, casting quick glances at one another but saying nothing in streets. Only when they duck into a shop they may sometimes speak the low murmur of another language. Everyone there seems cautious and edgy, scanning the sidewalks and the street, checking over their shoulders and poised to run[7]. Such alertness appears on almost all the faces among the ethnic minority communities, which can be conducted from the repeated scenes where an alertness in a foreign face reminds the another one: “the alertness of her posture, the quickness of her eyes”[7], something about the way an East Asian woman holds herself, reminds Bird of his mother.

In the panoptic society, citizens undergo an internalization of the gaze, gradually losing their voices and turning into mute victims or accomplices of the white-authority discourse.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, this paper has manifestly examined the discursive manipulation strategies employed by the white authorities to rationalize their discrimination against nonwhite groups in “Our Missing Hearts”. On the one hand, the authorities utilize three exterior procedures of discursive exclusion. Within the context of the novel, any discourse that violates PACT is deemed taboo. Furthermore, individuals who protest against PACT are labeled as lunatics whose discourse is perceived as mad, dangerous, and consequently deserving of disregard. In addition to suppressing discourse that opposes PACT, the authorities actively propagate the sanctified truth of PACT, thereby maintaining white supremacy and justifying their discrimination against nonwhites through the utilization of education

and mass media. On the other hand, by leveraging the institutionalized surveillance from the authorities, neighbors, and citizens themselves, the white authorities have successfully implemented ubiquitous gaze over the discourse of ordinary citizens. By intertwining these mechanisms, the white authorities construct a self-reinforcing system in which discriminatory practices are framed as rational and necessary, creating a cultural and ideological milieu that perpetuates inequality and oppression. The analysis presented in this paper highlights Ng' s intention of creation: to uncover the rationalized discrimination and oppression under discourse manipulation.

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