

## **‘ A Terrible Deal for the Western Parent’ : Maternal Memoirs, Mother-Shaming and Neoliberal parenthood.**

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As many sociologists and cultural theorists have noted, the neoliberal drive towards individualism, marketisation and financialisation has profound implications for all aspects of human relationships and social groupings. In the US and UK in particular, family life has become a specific focus of state and media concern regarding the suitability of certain parenting styles and their capacity to ‘deliver’ in terms of turning out productive, high-functioning and mentally robust future citizens, workers and consumers (Quiney 2007; Gillies, 2007, p 2-10 ; Jensen, 2011, McRobbie, 2013, Macvarish; 2016).

Given these expectations, it is not surprising that the preferred neoliberal parenting model is an impossible blend of therapeutically influenced, post-Bowlby ‘child-centred’ approaches (which place great emphasis on fostering the child’s sense of well-being and emotional security) and intensive, round-the-clock regimes of education and skill development (what Annette Lareau refers to as ‘concerted cultivation’) (Lareau, 2013). As neoliberalism tends to co-exist with a rhetoric of neotraditionalism in family life, this parenting model places undue pressure on mothers, who are still regarded as primary carers and educators, regardless of whether they are in full or part-time paid employment. As Val Gillies’ study of working-class mothers demonstrates, the competitive ethos and culture of performativity that surrounds modern mothering causes particularly psychological and emotional problems for poorer mothers. Unable to access the raft of privatized health and educational services required to produce successful offspring, such mothers are doomed to fall at the first fence of the neoliberal mothering race (Gillies, 2007, p. 19-69). Wealthier mothers also dominate the ‘mommysphere’ (Doktor, 2016) and the more general culture of public motherhood through forms such as *mumsnet*, ‘mommy’ blogs/vlogs, broadsheet lifestyle columns, mum’s lit comic novels and maternal memoirs. Nevertheless, as my analysis of the latter form shows, those that stray from proscribed path of neoliberal ‘good’

motherhood can still find themselves at the sharp end of the more general culture of ‘mother-shaming’ (Caplan, 2007; Reimer and Sahiagian, 2015, p.1-13).

This chapter comprises a feminist-historical materialist analysis of two high profile Anglo-American maternal memoirs produced by two such mothers: Amy Chua’s *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, 2011 and Julie Myerson’s *The Lost Child*, 2009. Both works are of particular interest as they were greeted with spluttering outrage and accusations of child cruelty that were clearly unjustified by anything revealed in these candid autobiographical works. Bearing this in mind, the chapter proposes that the public mother-shaming endured by Chua and Myerson was not provoked by concern for their children – who can hardly benefit from being placed at the centre of such inflammatory accusations - but by contradictions the memoirs expose in the current, socially-validated neoliberal mothering model.

### **Tiger mothers, ‘Chinese Parenting’ and Neoliberal Parenting Culture**

Chua’s memoir was preceded by a *Wall Street Journal* article with the more provocative title, ‘Why Chinese Mothers are Superior’ (2011). This was accompanied by a photograph of Chua smiling triumphantly while her teenage daughters display their musical talents. The piece selected only the most controversial extracts from the book i.e. those in which Chua argues that the ‘Chinese’ parenting style (a style which, even in the article, she points out can and is adopted by parents from a range of ethnic origins) is superior to what she castigates as the flabby and weak-willed ‘Western’ parenting model. Chua’s central argument is that the Chinese model assumes the mental strength, rather than susceptibility, of their offspring and therefore has no qualms about demanding hard work and high achievement.

She puts forward a nurture rather than nature model of child-rearing that shuns sleepovers, team games and the idea of innate talent and fixed ability in favor of competitiveness, self-discipline and the long term rewards accrued through sustained effort and tenacity. Following the *Wall Street Journal* piece and the subsequent publication of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, Chua received death threats and was vilified in the press and on-line mothers forums as a cruel and

unfeeling mother who had inflicted extreme psychological and emotional damage on her daughters (Sahagian, 2015, p.188-203). She was invited to defend herself on various talk shows and her elder daughter, Sophie, felt compelled to write a companion piece in the *New York Post* entitled ‘ Why I Love My Strict Chinese Mother’ (Chua, 2011). Perhaps in response to this onslaught, later editions of controversial memoir appeared with the following comment emblazoned on the cover:

This is a story about a mother, two daughters, and two dogs. This was supposed to be a story of how Chinese parents are better at raising kids than Western ones. But instead, it's about a bitter clash of cultures, a fleeting taste of glory, and how I was humbled by a thirteen-year-old (Chua, 2012).

As the above suggests, far from being a tub-thumping endorsement of fiendish forms of oriental child-cruelty, *Battle Hymn of The Tiger Mother* is a highly contradictory and fragmented piece. The censorious response to Chua's memoir drew on a longer history of East Asian ‘yellow peril’ stereotypes and more recent sino-orientalist assumptions and prejudices. In his recent analysis of the latter, Daniel Vukovich argues that the older form of overt racism, in which<sup>i</sup> Chinese immigrants were viewed as inscrutable, driven and reluctant to assimilate, has shifted towards a more subtle narrative of ‘becoming like us’ in the wake of China's increased adoption of Western economic practices and the introduction of post-Maoist social and political reform.

Vukovich suggests that the dominant western view of contemporary Chinese culture is one in which the ‘Chinese mind’ is still deformed by dogma but is striving to evolve from ignorance, cruelty and a hive-mindset towards a US model of ‘freedom’ (equated with individualism). The Western endorsement of ‘becoming like us’ is primarily a response to the increase in non-state owned industries in the PRC but is also signified and reaffirmed through the Western interest in and approval of certain dissident Chinese artists, writers and filmmakers.<sup>ii</sup> (Vukovich, 2012 , p. 127) There are many aspects of Chua's bestselling text which echo this privileged narrative in which backward and dehumanizing views of the human subject – associated primarily with

Maoist china – are rejected in favor of respect for the individual child and their innate talents and qualities. For example, Chua begins by posing the following question:

A lot of people wonder how Chinese parents raise such stereotypically successful kids. They wonder what these parents do to produce so many math whizzes and music prodigies, what it's like inside the family, and whether they could do it too (p,3).

However, as she later acknowledges, indeed had already acknowledged in the *Wall Street Journal* piece, given the intense cultural interest in childrearing methods, parents of all ethnic backgrounds cannot fail to be aware that controlling and results-driven parenting styles can produce high achieving children. The key reason that most parents refrain from employing this approach (aside from other obvious factors which the wealthy Chua gives little attention to, such as time and financial resources) is that the current 'therapeutically' influenced parenting model regards such methods as potentially psychologically and emotionally damaging.

The lingering cultural distaste for *overtly* pushy parenting, even amongst middle-class parents, was evident prior to the publication of Chua's text through the circulation of perjorative terms such as 'hothousing' or 'helicopter mothering'.<sup>iii</sup> Only a page later Chua herself concurs with the mainstream view, stating of her elder daughter, 'I also wanted Sophia to benefit from the best aspects of American society. I did not want her to end up like one of those weird Asian automatons that kill themselves after coming second in the national service exam' (8). This dizzying shift in perspective is typical of Chua's tendency to promote then denigrate a broad and highly stereotypical aspect of Chinese culture.

Chua's justification for raising her children 'the Chinese way' is based on her view of the immigrant experience. This is understood as one in which the first generation struggle, the second achieve and the third (her own daughters) 'born into the great comforts of the upper-middle class' become 'pampered and decadent like the Romans when their empire fell' (23). Aside from playing directly into post-recession fears concerning the global status of the US through the Roman allegory, Chua's theory of generational decline contradicts her prior analysis of the immigrant experience. In her previous book, *World on Fire* (a searing critique of the

global imposition of US neoliberal economics which, unlike her views on motherhood, caused little controversy) Chua consistently foregrounds the problems of universalizing immigrant groups. Her analysis of racial and ethnic hierarchies in a number of countries emphasizes that the narrative of struggle and reward is far more difficult for some immigrant groups and individuals to achieve as it is strongly dependent on prior skills, resources and the level of preexisting prejudice that the group is subject to (Chua, 2004).

These factors clearly play a particularly important role in Chua's own family story. Although her parents were first generation Chinese immigrants, she also reveals that her father was born into a wealthy family and was highly educated, moving to the US to take up a studentship and rapidly progressing through academic hierarchies to become a physics professor. Perhaps more significantly, far from endorsing 'Chinese' parenting, the memoir's narrative arc conforms to the standard pattern of self-abnegation which is common to both the cycle of recent Anglo-American maternal confessions and Vukovich's 'becoming like us' sino-orientalist narrative. Chua eventually rejects many of the parenting practices she has previously identified as Chinese. Indeed, Chua's heavy-handed narrative style foreshadows her younger daughter's rebellion, a screaming public meltdown in which Lulu accuses Chua of being 'a terrible mother' at every opportunity (205). The detailed descriptions of practicing schedules and music recitals which make up much of the text are peppered with ominous hints that a Lulu-led mutiny is inevitable:

I believed that the only way for Lulu to get out from the shadow of her high-performing sister was to play an even more difficult, even more virtuosic instrument. That's why I chose the violin. The day I made that decision –without Lulu, ignoring the advice of everyone around me, was the day I sealed my fate (41).

or 'I had underestimated Lulu, not understood what she was made of, she would rather freeze to death than give in' (13). Chua appears to relish the role of pantomime villain, recounting incidents such as that in which her younger daughter pleads with her to 'stop hovering over me' .. you remind me of Lord Voldemort . I can't play when you are standing so close to me' (66). This admission is accompanied by a family photograph in which Chua stands with her arms folded looking disapprovingly at the young Lulu's attempts to master a difficult violin piece. If readers haven't yet twigged that Chua is playfully and consciously presenting herself as a 'bad mother' (rather than actually being one) the passage is accompanied by the caption 'Lulu and

mean me in a hotel room'. Her self-satirizing approach is reinforced by contrite reflections on what she dutifully comes to regard as invidious 'Chinese' parenting practices, ' (41) such as, 'I now know that favoritism is bad and poisonous' (43)

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Like other writers of maternal memoirs, Chua was naive in assuming that her clumsy adoption of this tongue-in-cheek tone or her final capitulation to the approved model of 'Western' (i.e. neo-liberal mothering) would shield her from a public culture of mother-shaming. Lighthearted claims of 'bad motherhood' that do not incur serious stigma are permitted only within a shared culture of privileged white, middle-class motherhood (Garrett, 2013). Even then, failure must be confined to sloppy housekeeping methods rather than touching on the more controversial realms of child discipline or intergenerational conflict. As stated above, although the accusations of child abuse – by any recognised historical or legal standards – are clearly bogus and fuelled by racial bias, there is certainly much in Chua's memoir that effectively pierces the Western ideology of socially-validated motherhood. One of the most telling absences in the memoir is that of sexual politics, or indeed, any kind of overtly gendered perspective. This is particularly surprising given that fairly on in the text Chua makes the bold claim that:

Like every Asian-American women in their late twenties, I had the idea of writing an epic novel about mother-daughter relationships spanning several generations, based loosely on my own family's story' ..

She later states that she attempts to write such a novel but discovers,

that I had no talent for novel writing, as Jed's polite coughs and forced laughter while he read my manuscript should have told me. What's more, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan and Jung Chang all beat me to it with their books *The Warrior Woman*, *The Joy Luck Club* and *Wild Swans*. (p33)

Like the many contradictions in Chua's parenting philosophy, her literary ambitions and use of allusion was ignored by critics eager to find only evidence of maternal cruelty, yet it could be argued that these novels and memoirs do indeed cast a long shadow over Chua's narrative. For example, the relationship between Chua and Lulu closely reworks many of the themes explored in Tan's bestselling novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, particularly those articulated in the stories of the

child chess prodigy or the budding pianist who turn on their proud, overinvested mothers. Chua's stated desire to contribute to the established canon of Sino-American female writers is evident even in her choice of title. *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* alludes to both *The Woman Warrior* and *Wild Swans* in its attempt to offset the 'china doll' stereotype of passive, oriental women. As the battle Chua refers to is one that involves badgering her daughters to practice violin and piano in order to win competitions - as opposed to the overcoming deeply embedded gender, class and racial prejudice – there is also, once again, an element of self-parody. However, reading Chua's apparently gender-blind memoir in the context of both her stated interest in female authored, Asian-American autobiographies and the current neoliberal mothering role, is useful in understanding the importance placed on Chua's figuration of herself as a 'Tiger Mother' and the hostility inspired by the memoir.

Chua states that 'the tiger, the living symbol of strength and power, generally inspires fear and respect'. The memoir also consciously draws on a lexicon of warlike images and metaphors to describe her parenting methods, such as 'Chinese mothers get in the trenches' (53). Significantly, these characteristics and tactics are the antithesis of the malleability and submission demanded by the current 'child-centered' mothering model (Quiney, 2007; Hardyment, 2009; Reece, 2013; Macvarish, 2016). The neoliberal endorsement of 'positive parenting' or, what Helen Reece refers to as the 'be nice' approach, urges mothers to constantly doubt and question their own judgment and applauds meek submission to the voice of the childcare expert. Mothers are encouraged to respond to virtually any behavior short of outright villainy with a constant stream of apparently spontaneous praise and to interpret poor behavior as a mirror of their own parental shortcomings. As Reece puts it, 'it is the parents behavior that must be scrutinized and unpicked to discern the ways in which a negative model was imparted to the child'. (2013, p47) The neoliberal mothering model is thus a particularly stress-inducing and awkward blend of high levels of individual culpability and expectation coupled with a deep suspicion of maternal authority. In a similar vein, Chua notes that 'Western' mothers are increasingly held wholly responsible for their child's level of academic and social success but are made fearful of damaging their child's self-esteem by exerting pressure or appearing disappointed by mediocrity, bluntly stating that, 'this seems like a terrible deal for the western parent' (53)

As her daughter's jokey reference to Lord Voldemort suggest, Chua's own parenting practices cast her in the more empowering role of decision maker and authority figure. Chua's construction of herself as a tough, resourceful and resilient 'Tiger Mother' (at least initially) wrestles power away from patronising child-centered professionals and back towards those at working at the coalface: mothers. By doing so, Chua's critique touches on the contradictions at the heart of the neoliberal parenting script. Not only is it insulting to mothers, in whom no trust is expressed and little credit awarded, but the 'be nice' approach clearly conflicts with the broader economic and social imperatives to produce offspring who are can survive and thrive in the increasingly brutal skills market place created by neoliberal economic policies. Chua's choice to focus on drilling her daughters in classical music 'the opposite of laziness, vulgarity and spoiledness' (22) may seems oddly superfluous to their future career choices, but her desire to inculcate the transferable skills of determination and mental toughness is attuned to the specific economic and social pressures placed on young women in competitive, neoliberal societies.

One of the more ironic aspects of the media mother-shaming that Chua endured is that during the same period, Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandburg was feted and applauded for producing the famous 'lean in' videos. Sandburg's promotional videos (later to be followed by the bestselling *Lean in: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, 2013) urged young American women to accept the poor deal offered to them by neoliberal gender regimes and overcome corporate sexism through individual effort rather than collective protest.

The 'lean in' philosophy advocates that young women cultivate precisely the kind of dogged determination and tenacity that Chua's parenting model is designed to produce. Viewed in this context (rather than one of mother-shaming and redacted 'yellow peril' cultural paranoia) *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* is less an endorsement of outdated and brutal Chinese parenting practices than a defiant and pragmatic reaction to raising two daughters within the socio-political context of contemporary neoliberal, neo-traditionalist US culture. This is not only one in which even affluent and privileged mothers are patronized, undervalued and exploited, but also a culture in which women in general have been permitted to enter higher education and the



workforce in higher and higher numbers, but are still offered no state childcare or maternity benefits and are repeatedly told that they must work much harder and longer to achieve the income and level of success readily granted to their male counterparts.

### **Julie, Jake and the Lost Mother**

If many critics willfully misread Chua by ignoring her self-parodic approach and final capitulation to the social validated mothering model, the critical eagerness to condemn mother-writers went a step further in relation to Myerson's *The Lost Child*. Prior to publication, *Times* reviewer, Minette Marin was so keen to strike the first blow for good motherhood that she published the following erroneous criticism of Myerson's autobiographical work, mistaking it for a *roman à clef* rather than a maternal confessions:

For a woman to cast out her adolescent son and then to write a novel about it, and then to announce to the world that the troubled, destructive boy in her so-called fiction is in fact her son, is a comprehensive betrayal. It is a betrayal not just of love and intimacy, but also of motherhood itself. (Marin 2009).

The vituperative “review” led to the rush publication of *The Lost Child* and a further round of media commentary, culminating in a trial by television interview with the notoriously abrasive political journalist, Jeremy Paxman, on BBC's *Newsnight*. This centred on the question of whether Myerson was right to evict her seventeen-year-old son (a decision she makes after concluding that he is a drug addict who needs to reach “rock bottom”) and to reveal intimate details of their family life. The uproar was exacerbated by the revelation that Myerson was the author of an anonymous *Guardian* lifestyle column entitled “Living with Teenagers” that also explored the more challenging aspects of modern family life, albeit in a more light-hearted manner (Myerson 2009).

As with Chua and other maternal memoirs, critical evaluation of *The Lost Child* was conflated with an assessment of Myerson's parenting skills and choices. Despite the obvious ‘mother-

shaming' that she was subjected to, Myerson's account of her parenting style and philosophy suggest that she initially veered strongly towards the post-Bowlby influenced, indulgent, 'child-centred' approach scoffed at by Chua. In their haste to condemn her, few critics registered this, or even bothered to mention that *The Lost Child* is only partially concerned with Myerson's own family troubles. It is a convoluted blend of biography and autobiography, in which Myerson's account of her quest to recover information about Mary Yelloly, an early- nineteenth-century female artist, takes up as much of the text as her account of the breakdown of her relationship with her teenage son. Journals, letters and notes belonging to the Yelloly family, a selection of Jake's poems and glimpses into Myerson's own troubled childhood are also a significant (if lesser) presence. The neglected Yelloly sections are highly significant from a feminist/historical materialist viewpoint, as they are indicative of Myerson's shifting class identification and her growing ambivalence towards socially validated notions of good motherhood. Myerson initially attempts to link the two strands of the narrative through the theme of the "lost" child. At several points she compares twenty-one-year-old Mary Yelloly's death from tuberculosis (in 1838) with Jake Myerson's drug use and subsequent eviction from the parental home at the age of seventeen. This is implied in the section in which Myerson and her husband arrange a rendezvous with another affluent couple whose sons have drug-related problems: "Out there, all over the country, plenty of families are dealing with this, says the woman, flicking a look at the London skies. Far more than anyone realises. Seriously, it's a whole new way to lose your kids. I look closely at her face and I recognize the weight of grief behind her eyes. Her face, but also mine. *A whole new way to lose your kids*" (140).

By any standards, the analogy between the truculent behavior of a twenty-first-century teenage drug user and the tragic and untimely death of a promising early-nineteenth-century artist (along with no less than five of her siblings) lacks credibility. Such a far-flung comparison makes sense only when looked at in the context of Myerson's initial investment in the hyperprotective, intensive mothering role. The cover photo of *The Lost Child* indicates Myerson's prior self-identification with this role. Presumably taken in the early 1990s, it shows a young, blonde, pretty, slender Myerson laughing unselfconsciously while holding the infant Jake. As Douglas and Michaels have pointed out, the early 1990s were a turning point in the cultural representation

of high-profile media mothers (2004, p.125–133). The new maternal ideal—associated with the late Princess Diana’s carefully crafted image of laid-back, easy-going “fun” motherhood—spurned formality and authority, establishing itself in opposition to what was increasingly presented as the stuffy, emotionally inept mothering of the previous generation. It was, and continues to be, a model of motherhood that is most compatible with babyhood and infancy, and the romanticised world of the nursery. The work of Rachel Cusk (2001) Naomi Wolf (2001) and other writers of baby and infancy memoirs questions and critiques this highly sentimentalised view and the expectations it projects onto pregnant women and new mothers. Rosikar Parker’s (1995) study of maternal ambivalence also explored the way that the cultural desire to invest in unambivalent motherhood is projected most forcefully onto mothers at the very stage when they are struggling to renegotiate their social role, and when the demands made of them—physically and emotionally—are at their height. In contrast, Myerson’s begins by following the approved script in which good mothers desire to prolong this period indefinitely and bitterly regret that their innocent, dependent babes grow into what Virginia Woolf’s literary ubermother, Mrs Ramsey, describes as “long-legged monsters”.<sup>v</sup> Myerson states:

We had our babies too fast, too easily. I didn’t think it at the time but it’s what I think now. I think we were having much too good a time of it, taking for granted how easy it all was, just jumping in there without much thought or fear. We were so young. We thought we were perfect. We didn’t know that bad things could happen. We didn’t look down. But I’m looking down now, from the dark churning centre of my middle-aged anxiety (87).

When asked about her offspring by a mother of young children, she pulls a face and describes them as “horrible teenagers” (56). Similarly, when advised by a drug counselor to rally Jake’s extended family and friends into confronting him about his persistent drug use, she dreamily states: “all I could think of were the poppers on his Babygro, the way he used to shriek when I kissed his tummy” (65). As suggested above, given that the Bowlby-influenced end of the neoliberal mothering script strongly endorses the creation of an entirely “mummy-led” world of wholesome, family-orientated activities over parental attempts to foster independence, it is not surprising that the optimum period for successfully embodying this role is in the early years.

However, Myerson's wholly conventional nostalgia for her children's early years and her accompanying aversion to modern teenagers is given particular force as it is mirrored by her interest in a contrived vision of early- nineteenth-century English country childhoods. Her intense psychological and emotional investment in Mary Yelloly, whom she refers to throughout as "you", strongly suggests a textual desire to preserve her own lost moment of childhood innocence and unambivalent maternal feeling by relocating it in the distant and much mythologised world of post-Regency era rural gentility. After describing a particular uncomfortable scene with her defiant, angry teenage son, the subsequent passage begins: "You are first put into my hands on a shrill spring morning in Mayfair, in a sun-flooded room that smells of beeswax polish" (5). The passage refers not to Jake's birth (as the reader is led to expect) but her first encounter with the watercolor portraits of family life produced by the young Mary Yelloly. There are no images of the portraits included in *The Lost Child* but Myerson describes them in the following manner: "Over two hundred paintings of what appears to be a made-up family—the Grenvilles. You've written out their full name and ages, you've told us how they spent their days. Reading, doing lessons, dancing, painting, watering flowers, visiting the sick and the poor. Scene after scene of grand country houses and dappled English countryside [...] Bonnets and shawls, stripes and frills—kittens frolicking, dark gleaming wood furniture, china silver, curls and bows" (7).

Myerson later comes across a number of family sketches, journal entries and letters:

Dear Mama,

I hope I shall be good and practice my dancing and I hope I shall do it well and command my temper (naughty thing) not to get the better of me for I am determined I will master it...

Your Very Dutiful Daughter, Sarah Yelloly.

Dear Mama,

I will try to be good and do my lessons well and I will try and please you dear Mama and I will not quarrel with my brothers and sisters at all.

I am my dearest Mama your affectionate daughter,

Jane D Yelloly

(126).

The Yelloly textual remains evoke a genteel, feminised world of adoring children and triumphant motherhood. It is a view of family life which is far removed from Myerson's account of her own conflict-riven urban nuclear family, in which Jake—who at one point strikes her—is presented as having more in common with Lionel Shriver's "monstrous" teen protagonist (Kevin) than the loving and obedient Yelloly daughters. As described by Myerson, the Yelloly family portraits seem familiar to modern readers, drawing on the visual rhetoric associated with Charles E. Brock's illustrations of Jane Austen's novels, or the later images of Regency childhoods produced by the famous children's books illustrator Kate Greenaway. Myerson chooses to interpret these family portraits and the formalised Yelloly letters and journals as a transparent window into the lost world of this "numerous and united" family: a family tragically destroyed by an external foe (tuberculosis) rather than internal conflicts and tensions. Such an interpretation is highly problematic, given the constructed nature of such images and the pervasive influence of the Romantic discourse of childhood innocence and the increasing cult of domestic life in the early nineteenth century. In fact, the privileged lifestyle enjoyed by such families was being questioned and challenged by an increasingly vociferous group of public commentators and activists at this moment. Yelloly's short lifespan (1816–1838) coincides with a key period of English social and political reform. This was a response to the social upheaval produced by the industrial revolution, in which poorer children—those excluded from Yelloly's family portraits—became particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. The first major Factory Act (1833) and the Reform Act (1834) were indicative of a shifting society in which class relations and the dynamic between country and city were being rapidly reconceptualised. This broader cultural history is neglected in favour of a series of polite encounters with Yelloly descendents. These follow the format established by television programmes such as *Who Do You Think You Are?*. *Personal* is preferable to *social* history and digging into the family past results in the unearthing of previously hidden family trinkets and secrets which are then treated with awe and reference.

In the course of her research Myerson encounters a number of well-mannered, affluent, rural dwellers that would not seem out of place in the BBC radio drama serial *The Archers*. She visits a Yelloly descendent and we are told that his wife, Bryony, “is serving lunch out of the Aga” (98). When Myerson and a younger Yelloly descendent pay an unexpected call on a family living in a restored part of the old Yelloly mansion they also “have Sunday lunch laid out on the table—a low beamed kitchen, an Aga” (148). A visit to another, grander former Yelloly property results in “tea out of Cath Kidston cups in the homely kitchen at Narborough Hall” (55). While Myerson’s descriptions of these encounters linger over the families’ faux-rural accoutrements, the Yelloly sections slide into pure speculation. For example, the opening scene depicts Mary’s sister inside the carriage in which Mary’s coffin is carried and is described in the following way: “Suffolk, June 1838. A day so hot the air is glass. Splash of poppies in the hedgerows. Cow parsley high as your shoulder. Above it all, the soaring summer sky” (1).

Myerson later returns to the scene and reimagines it: “Suffolk, June 1838. The road to Woodton. But who’s to say it’s such a perfect summer’s day? Maybe it’s tearing down with wind and rain—one of those grim, wintry June days we’ve had so many of recently, days when the whole world has a tighter lid of darkness” (25).

Myerson’s investment in Yelloly culminates in a fantasy encounter with Mary in the churchyard, in which she reassures Myerson that her son “will come back to her” (314). Yet addressing the reader, rather than Mary, she later states:

Mary is gone. She lies under the church floor at Woodton, her bones dissolved to nothing, her brief, unknown life turned to dust [...] It makes no difference that I found her, that I know where she is, that I wrote this book, or that you chose to read it. I never met her, and neither will you [...] nothing I think or feel will bring that young girl back to life [...] but I know now and I think I can live with it. I’ve learned to live with so many other things” (314).

Myerson’s moment of existential crisis also marks the point at which her fantasy of an entirely benign, unambivalent and all-powerful motherhood begins to strain. As the narrative progresses, Myerson’s doubts about the biographical project are echoed by disclosures which undermine her

earlier assertions regarding her own children's "perfect" infancy. Significantly, she discloses that her father (who is portrayed as a selfish, demanding character) committed suicide on the night her second child was born, causing her to fall into a "fog" of depression. There are also more general hints that her memories of Jake's untroubled preadolescent years may be clouded by her strong desire to conform to an aspirational fantasy of middle-class family life:

My boy at five years old. Five and a half. Summer mornings before school we have a little routine... breakfast outside in the garden together—French breakfast!—him drinking hot chocolate and eating baguette, me drinking coffee and reading aloud... I am entirely happy. I think these days will go on forever, that is how life will be from now on, will always be. I think I will have this same experience with his brother and sister, that I will go on having it, that I have got it all to come. But in fact that was it. I didn't do the same thing with them. And it was just that one summer... In fact, I say summer but it was probably just a few weeks of warm weather that particular term. It might not even have been weeks. It might have been days (31).

*The Lost Child* concludes with a mawkish scene in which Myerson weeps as the stropky Jake sings her a self-composed song about "being lonely in the rain", but the acknowledgements end on a more pragmatic note—one which challenges the basic tenants of the intensive, neoliberal, mothering role: "you can't make them safe, you can't choose how their lives turn out" (326). Myerson's convoluted narrative journey thus not only calls into question whether it is possible for "good mothers" to shield their innocent babes against the toxicity of the modern world (the surface premise of *The Lost Child*) but, more subversively, whether this particular mode of neoliberal self-congratulatory, middle-class parenting might actually be an aspect of the contemporary culture from which it is advisable to shield children.

## Conclusion

Like Chua's memoir, *The Lost Child* is an unruly mess of conflicting reflections on maternal feeling and behavior that draws heavily on prior cultural fictions and in which resistance to the intensive mothering role is glimpsed briefly then snatched away. Nevertheless, Myerson's failed biographical quest and Chua's dubious assertion of 'Chinese' parenting, probed and prodded dominant parenting norms enough to incur the wrath of a range of self-appointed childcare experts and self-validated internet 'good mothers'. As suggested above, the neoliberal

mothering model combines two central and incompatible approaches: a Bowlby-influenced, ‘child-centred’ philosophy that views children as highly susceptible to damage and attempts to place the mother and child relationship beyond the boundaries of nasty, competitive neoliberal societies, and the more pragmatic approach (that is either overtly or covertly encouraged by anti-welfare state rhetoric) which promotes ‘concerted cultivation’ and intense parental competitiveness under the guise of ‘doing the very best for ones child’. Although presented as a matter of individual choice, the parenting practices described in *The Lost Child* and *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* here are undiluted versions of these conflicting tendencies within neoliberal parenting culture i.e. the ‘be nice’ (Myerson) or ‘be tough’ (Chua) approaches. As the accounts demonstrate, these philosophies cannot easily be combined and both flounder in the face of adolescent rebellion. The failure recounted in the texts is thus as much ideological and cultural than individual. Neoliberal parenting culture attributes too greater level of individual culpability and control to mothers ignoring both the socio-political context mothers they parent and the rather more obvious fact that – however carefully mothers adhere to the intensive, neoliberal parenting script - malleable children tend to grow into truculent teens

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## Notes



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<sup>i</sup> The ‘yellow peril’ stereotype emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century along with the rising power of Japan and the influx of Asian immigrants to the US.

<sup>ii</sup> Such as conceptual artist Ai Wei Wei , filmmaker Chen Joanne and writer Chung Jung (who Chua references later in the memoir).

<sup>iii</sup> As Ruth Cain, Meyer and Milestone have pointed out, mothers are

<sup>v</sup>. “Oh, but she never wanted James to grow a day older! or Cam either. These two she would have liked to keep for ever just as they were, demons of wickedness, angels of delight, never to see them grow up into long-legged monsters. Nothing made up for the loss” (Woolf [1926] 1977, 56–7).