Dystopian Reparations: Autonomy and Dissent in Hon Lai Chu's _Mending Bodies_

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In Hon Lai Chu's *Mending Bodies* (Two Lines Press, 2025), published originally in Chinese in 2010 as□□□□ (“Sewn Body”) and now translated into English by Jacqueline Leung, the city remains unnamed, yet its contours are unmistakeable as Hong Kong. Once celebrated for its hybrid identity—where colonial legacies coexist with mainland mandates—it has metamorphosed into a site of surgical conformity. In the world of the novel, the authorities have put forward the Conjoinment Act, a policy designed to counteract social alienation and perceived moral decay by surgically fusing individuals into lifelong pairs. This procedure is promoted as a civic duty and moral good, and is incentivised with financial and social rewards. It is framed as a necessary response to the fragmentation of society—a desperate remedy for disconnection between people. Some citizens participate willingly, others reluctantly, but the act quickly becomes a pervasive tool for governing not only bodies but also minds.

The Conjoinment Act is not a metaphor that conceals its violence. Rather, it is a form of dystopian reparation, a grotesque attempt by the authorities to “repair” a fragmented populace by enforcing bodily union. In this schema, the trauma of political fracture is addressed not by mending communities, but by violating the autonomy of the individual. As a politician opposing the Act argues, it is a “political ploy to make citizens forget… the city's independence,” leaving people “too much in physical pain to go to protests.” It becomes a literalisation of a political project: to render dissent anatomically impossible.

The protagonist, a university student researching the history of conjoined humans, embarks on a path of quiet resistance. Disturbed by the city's escalating campaign for conjoinment—with its promotional imagery, moral appeals to sacrifice, and the subtle ostracism of those who remain unjoined—she hesitates. Her academic advisor, Professor Foot, urges her to simulate the procedure for research purposes, while peers cast her reluctance as selfish or immature. Around her, the infrastructure increasingly enforces a logic of pairing, privileging the fused in policy and space. Over time, she

consents to conjoin with Lok, a therapist she had first encountered in an earlier phase of her life. Her decision is motivated in part by a desire to better understand her research topic through lived experience, yet it is also shaped by the cumulative weight of social, institutional, and emotional pressure—a complex mix of scholarly curiosity and reluctant concession to a system that increasingly renders autonomy unsustainable.

Post-surgery, she experiences a profound sense of dislocation. Her body, previously her own, is now bound to another, to Lok's rhythms and needs. Her academic work is sidelined; Lok's presence dominates. The promise of fulfilment through fusion proves hollow—instead of connection, she finds constraint. When her former roommate May arrives for a visit, now conjoined as well, the narrator confronts a disquieting mirror of her own transformation. May, once distinctly individualistic, now speaks in the plural—"We go further when we plant our feet firmly on the ground"—her tone softened by the ideological embrace of fusion. In that moment, the narrator recognises how the surgical seams inscribe not merely a bodily reality, but a regime of enforced intimacy and political docility.

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This novel unfolds against the backdrop of a real-world context in Hong Kong where the boundaries between individual autonomy and centralised control have become increasingly blurred. The narrator's experience mirrors this encroachment. Her personal choices are subsumed by an agenda—political or otherwise—that demands conformity. Her body becomes a battleground, her autonomy traded for the illusion of unity. Authorities frame conjoinment as reparation—an attempt to mend social division and restore a sense of collective purpose. The narrator's experience reveals that such healing is deceptive. Rather than repair, conjoinment produces a new wound—justified in the name of harmony.

Yet, amid this failed collective reparation, the novel traces the emergence of another path: the attempt to repair the self. Aunt Myrtle, formerly a proponent of conjoinment, chooses surgical separation after years of discomfort. Her decision is radical—an act of agency that defies normative expectations. She also opens a support centre for others seeking to undo the fusion, offering a space for those silenced to find their voices. Myrtle's empty sleeve becomes a symbol of self-reclamation—a testament to the possibility of healing through rupture.

In the face of the government's insistence on conformity, the novel makes space for ambivalence. The narrator does not become a martyr. For a while, she continues to conjoin, to compromise, even as her mind drifts toward other possibilities. Here, reparation is not a singular, restorative act, but a process shaped by fracture, doubt,

and persistence. It unfolds unevenly, requiring not the erasure of wounds but their recognition as sites of survival.

This vision of reparation resonates with broader contemporary rethinkings of justice and recovery. Cultural and political theorists increasingly challenge institutionalised paradigms of redress, which focus solely on restitution or closure. Instead, they emphasise relational and affective practices that accommodate pain, ambiguity, and the complexity of lived histories. According to this view, reparation is not about returning to a prior state of purity or coherence, but about building conditions in which damaged lives and bodies can continue—together and apart.

These acts, though quiet, are powerful. They reflect a different vision of reparation—one that is not administered from above but co-created through shared vulnerability and resilience. Like Myrtle's support centre, they are spaces where pain can be acknowledged without being instrumentalised. In such frameworks, healing emerges from within the wound itself—not as a conclusion but as an ongoing relation to what has been broken.

The novel suggests that true reparation cannot emanate from systems that demand sacrifice. It cannot be imposed through policy or simulated through symbolic compliance. Instead, it must emerge from those who have lived the consequences of harm. What *Mending Bodies* critiques is not only the violence of imposed reparation, but the paradox of needing to heal from a failed act of healing itself. The authorities' vision of unity—embodied in conjoinment—produces harm under the guise of care. The wound it inflicts becomes the very thing the characters must survive. It is Myrtle's decision to separate, not the narrator's coerced fusion, that offers a glimpse of genuine healing. It is the act of naming pain, of making it legible, that allows for the reassembling of self, even if it is not a return to an earlier wholeness.

In the end, *Mending Bodies* resists any neat reconciliation between damage and healing. Rather than offering reparation as a redemptive or restorative arc, it unravels the very premise of repair—showing how acts of mending, particularly those imposed from outside, can become new sources of trauma. The novel charts a spectrum of failed and partial repairs: collective solutions that collapse under their own violence, individual acts that are provisional, uncertain, and ethically fraught. Hon Lai Chu does not propose a stable model of wholeness regained. Instead, she invites us to dwell in the tension between what breaks and what endures. If there is any reparation to be found, it is tentative, situated, and unfinished—less a resolution than a willingness to remain with what is unresolved.

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