

“WOULD YOU RATHER LIVE A GREAT NOVEL OR WRITE ONE”: WRITING ASIAN
CANADIAN WOMEN’S (HI)STORIES

by

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Abstract

Drawing on recent queer scholars' notion of queer temporalities and queer time as opposed to the heteronormative history and a seamless progress of linear time, this thesis looks at the emergence of Asian Canadian literary movement and examines the proliferation of non-linear temporality and non-normative sexuality in Asian Canadian women's writing. Whereas the theme of discovering the matrilineal history has been constantly explored in Asian North American literature, this thesis suggests that their story-telling practices do not rely so much on the genealogical transmission. Rather, I bring my approach to grief, loss, displacement and history in line with queerness to read Asian Canadian women's novels and explore the turn to the non-linear temporality and non-normative sexuality that is directly related to each novel's representation of Asian women as they retell the family history.

The two novels I choose to analyze, Hiromi Goto's Japanese Canadian story *Chorus of Mushrooms* and SKY Lee's Chinese Canadian family saga *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, are considered as founding texts of the Asian Canadian literary movement in the 1980s and 1990s. Both writers foreground the characters' formation of non-normative sexual identity alongside the unearthing of the family's past to reconstruct the personal, family and collective histories. I examine the non-linear temporality as a strategy in their stories for women characters as racialized and gendered minority to reject and critique the official account of history of nation-building. Through the culminating story-telling practices, female characters appear to exist outside the normative time of the worlds they occupy, and in doing so they offer the reconstruction of subjectivity and relationality with queer utopic visions beyond the white heteronormative framework. Therefore, queerness only marks the turn to non-conforming, non-normative sexualities but also offers a new mode of relationality that puts emphasis on women's

communities, rejecting a singular or reductive expectation of Asian Canadian women's identity. Queerness, this thesis suggests, provides fertile terrain for tracing the spatiotemporal disjunction that the Asian Canadians have suffered, so as to reimagine identity, history and futurity.

Lay Summary

This thesis looks at Asian Canadian women's writing and brings the representation of non-linear time into conversation with non-normative sexuality portrayed in two founding texts of the Asian Canadian literary movement in the 1980s and 1990s—Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* and SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. Both novels are about the female characters' journey of tracing their family's matrilinear history and discovering their own sexual, cultural and political identity. This thesis shows how the authors construct non-normative sexual representations to express their gender politics to understand the past, present and the future of Asian Canadian struggles. The aim of this thesis is to highlight how the dominant normative framework can be restrictive and reductive, and how Asian Canadian women, as racialized and gendered minority, should create their own non-normative ways to think about their desire and subjectivity against the dominant white heteronormative regulations.

Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Sijia Cheng.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Halfway through SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*, the narrator Kae reveals an astounding fight between her grandmother and her great-grandmother. Her grandmother is trying to get rid of the last remnants of her dowry as if she wants to get rid of her past, and her great-grandmother becomes furious at her daughter-in-law. As the grandmother discovers a pair of never-used scissors brought from China at the bottom of the hope chest, the dramatic scene ends with the two women at each other's throat. At this point, as she gradually gets to all the family secrets, Kae feels overwhelmed and comments that "I know I love melodramas, but this is beginning to sound like nonstop hysteria," while her friend Hermia responds, "if you ... cling to somebody who refuse to nurture you, you would get quite hysterical too" (165). The dowry is a symbol of their past that was rooted in China, a land that they might never go back to again. The fight between the two women is therefore a fight over letting go or holding on to the irretrievable past. Along with the excessive emotions of family melodrama, the burden of the past is "too much." With multiple processes of loss associated with immigration, displacement, diaspora and assimilation, everyone in the immigrant family clings to a past that can never come back. The hysteric family story resonates with Freud and Breuer's famous claim that "Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences" (58). Memory, especially too much memory, is considered an illness.

Indeed, Asian migration experiences, rooted in dislocation and displacement, have constantly been framed by many scholars through the notion of melancholia that is about the failure to "let go." Sigmund Freud first theorizes melancholia as the preservation of the lost object in his "Mourning and Melancholia," in which Freud distinguishes melancholia from mourning. Freud suggests that while melancholia borrows some features from mourning, they

both function as “the reaction to the loss of a loved object” (245), they diverge in their ways of dealing with the loss. In mourning, ego is fully absorbed and impelled to give up the lost object by declaring it to be dead. Contrarily, the melancholic refuses detachment by forming an identification with the lost object, incorporating it into the ego. In doing so, the lost object becomes part of the person, leading to self-loathing and self-punishment. Such way for the subject to refuse loss culminates in a regressive process of internalization or incorporation, during which the orientation toward the lost object can be shifted back onto the self, characterized by feelings of “being slighted, neglected, or disappointed” (251). David Eng, drawing on Freud’s notion, suggests that mourning is the “successful” resolution to loss while melancholia is a “failed” one, an ongoing regressive process without end (670). To further Freud’s distinction, Eng states that the melancholic, unable to resolve grief, “makes every conceivable effort to retain the lost object, to keep it alive within the domain of the psyche” (672). Based on the notion of mourning and melancholia, Anne Cheng, in *The Melancholic of Race* considers grief and mourning as defining vectors of racial experience and suggests that melancholia and its dynamics of loss and recovery are foundational for racial identification. David Eng builds on Cheng’s argument and notes that, when associated with immigration, displacement, diaspora and assimilation, racial melancholia names an ongoing process of unresolved loss for Asian North American subjects.

The relation between the past and the present in melancholia exhibit a temporal framework in which the past occupies the present, and the future seems hopeless. If the outbreak of melancholia can be seen as the product of a compulsion to repeat the internalization, the moment wherein one acts out without resolving it, then the repressed origin remains always there to come back. With the ongoing and repetitive process incorporation and identification, the lost

object never dies. On the one hand, the melancholic, unable to know what they have lost, is locked into a permanent, timeless pathological state where the distinction between the present and the past is blurred as they refuse to let the lost object go. On the other, the melancholic's compulsion to repeat highlights desires to retell and reproduce, the shared desire for stable, coherent meaning. With both feelings of self-loathing, self-punishing and the desires to reproduce, the temporality of melancholia, then, seems to be a looped one that produces compulsive repetition.

To recognize in melancholia a distinctively static relation to temporality is also to glimpse alternative possibilities for racialized groups to tell history. To tell Asian Canadian stories is always to recuperate the collective past by overcoming historical displacement and repression, for, as Lisa Lowe observes in an Asian American context, writing of racialized subjects performs “politicized cultural work that emerges from dislocation and disidentification” (9). Dealing with questions of migration history nevertheless raises questions of how to represent immigrant experience and how the presence of the past affects people. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed describes lived experiences of migration, involving multiple spaces and timelines as a process of “disorientation” and suggests that it is a point of intersection with queer politics, as Ahmed depicts heterosexuality, especially the heteronormative whiteness, as “a straight line,” “a form of bodily inheritance” (121). Diasporic experience rooted in dislocation and displacement, then, is a deviation from the straight line, the normative chronology.

While migration does not entail a necessarily transgressive mode of queer existence for diasporic subjects, a queer turn to tell time and histories also requires attention to the gender and sexual politics. Gender and sexuality are indeed an integral component and a site of contestation in the Asian diaspora identity formation, with two interrelated histories influencing Asian

racialization. On how sexuality historically shapes the Asian American and Pacific Islander subjectivity, Robert Diaz summarizes that Asian male populations were marked as threats to “‘civilized’ norms of social and sexual behavior” that constructed “whiteness” (176), while Asian women suffered from the “heteropatriarchal, misogynistic, and sexualized modes of disempowerment” (177). Furthermore, Canada’s policies of head tax and restrictions on early immigration patterns and interracial relationships led to the relative absence of Asian women—especially Chinese women—among the immigrant “bachelor” society where men far outnumbered women¹. Early Asian Canadian subjects, thus, did not follow and moreover was not allowed to follow the pattern of what Ahmed calls “a straight line” or “a linear inheritance” (121) in North America.

Therefore, I take up the notion of “queerness” as opposed to the linear line in Asian diasporic experiences as a point of departure. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in “Queer and Now” considers heterosexuality as a defining factor in institutions such as “Inheritance, Marriage, Dynasty, Family, Domesticity, and Population” and states that “heterosexuality has been permitted to masquerade so fully as History itself” (10) that replicates the domination of conceptions of national time. To disrupt the dominant national history, then, is to disrupt the white heterosexuality itself. Perhaps one of the most frequent repeated definition of “queerness” by scholars is Sedgwick’s statement that it signals the “open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (8). This is in accordance with Jack Halberstam’s claim that queer uses of time

¹ For more studies on the bachelor society and early Asian immigration experiences, see, for example, Dua, Enakshi. “Exclusion through Inclusion: Female Asian Migration in the Making of Canada as a White Settler Nation.” *Gender, Place and Culture*, 2007, 14(4): 445–466.

and space offer useful frameworks to oppose normative “institutions of family, heterosexuality and reproduction” (1). If, as Judith Butler characterizes, queering is “a contestation of the terms of sexual legitimacy” (232), and as David Halperin prefers to understand queer not as a term that defines any particular person or thing but as a position that is “at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant...it demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative” (62), “queerness” can be deployed quite usefully. Talking about the heteronormative reproductive politics, Lee Edelman famously theorizes the notion of “reproductive futurism” investing hope in the Child as antithetical to the queer (14). Edelman suggests that the queer should reject the future, or the Child figure that lies in the heart of many contemporary political visions. While Edelman’s refusal of a white heteronormative futurity and his rejection of the centrality of a pure temporal repetition and reproduction remain productive, Jose Munoz critiques that Edelman’s theorization of queerness “as a singular abstraction that can be subtracted and isolated from a larger cultural matrix” (94). Indeed, what Edelman imagines as a non-reproductive future rejecting the child is a concrete and repressed past imposed upon many Asian Canadians. The abstract and totalizing nature of Edelman’s theorization therefore seems to fall short in the Asian Canadian context.

Perhaps Sedgwick’s framework of “reparative reading” as opposed to the practice of “paranoid reading” is helpful here. Commenting on what she calls the “paranoia of New Historicism,” Sedgwick critiques the scholarship that “rel[ies] on the prestige of a single, overarching narrative: exposing and problematizing hidden violences in the genealogy of modernist liberal subject” (18). Whereas the “paranoid reading,” according to Sedgwick, seeks to expose structures of oppression, it fails to escape from the binary sexual difference in the heteronormative tradition of the “Lacanian calculus of phallic presence or absence” (24).

Therefore, it still looks for “progressing” identities and roles, and Sedgwick describes its temporality as rigid and stiff: “it takes shape from a generational narrative that’s characterized by a distinctly Oedipal regularity and repetitiveness” (26). History as such still appears as a deadlock not unlike the repetitive structure. In place of the paranoid temporality that emphasizes “generational relations” (26), Sedgwick offers what she calls “a practice of reparative knowing” that may lie at a textual level “at the heart of many histories of gay, lesbian and queer intertextuality” (27). The desire of a reparative impulse, based on queerness, is associated with pleasure and born from the fear that “the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture” (28). It is grounded in its inseparability from the damaged life. Going back to Hermia’s remark on the Chinese women in Kae’s family who try to fit into a world that refuses to nurture them, the reparative hermeneutics might offer a resolution to the psychic predicament of the lingering of the emotion and memory that is diagnosed as “too much” for racialized experiences.

For Asian Canadians, to offer a politics of the past with possibilities to the future is both to reject a stable and normative identity, and to eschew the compulsions to pursue it. My turn to the focus on queer time and history therefore follows recent queer scholars’ work that revolves largely around Sedgwick’s notion of the reparative practice. In *Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich, taking up the reparative call, suggests that to construct diasporic cultural loss as “something other than traumatic or irretrievable loss” (122), cultural reproduction that is queer or non-normative might open up possibilities. To trace her project to Sedgwick’s reparative reading as the critical impulse and challenge the frequent emphasis on loss and trauma by some queer scholars, Elizabeth Freeman, drawing on relationships between sex, “time travel” and the transatlantic slave trade, coins the term “erotohistoriography” in her book *Time Binds* as a corporeal counter-history, especially for encountering the horrors of racialized history, and

suggests that it “does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter” (96). The exploration of migration space and time requires the recognition of conceptions of embodiment and the corporeal. If melancholia is the refusal to let go the lost object, Freeman’s method that foregrounds bodily pleasure in the encounter with the lost object, then, might be productive to approach questions of loss and displacement in Asian migration experiences without feeling the need to pathologize them, countering what has been repeatedly identified as the melancholic undertone in Asian North American identification. Each of these reflections on history and temporality has been taken up in ways that offer not simply a critique of other forms but an awareness of new relations. Queer possibilities, by virtue of the focus on the body, sexuality and desire, therefore, might be able to save the past from the lockstep and recover a generational story beyond loss, trauma and the compulsive reproduction.

Building on the limitations of the linear model of temporality, the reparative hermeneutics that puts emphasis on queerness may offer alternative ways for imagining Asian Canadian timing. As time and history is the context in which this thesis considers the engagement in diaspora studies with the queer orientation, I again turn to Munoz’s discussion on the temporal dimension of queerness:

Theories of queer temporality that fail to factor in the relational relevance of race or class merely reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal—which is to say a subject whose time is a restricted and restricting hollowed-out present free of the need for imagining a futurity that exists beyond the self or the here and now. (94)

To imagine a futurity for Asian Canadians, therefore, requires a contextualization of the racialized past. Hijin Park has noticed that, began in the early 1970s, Asian Canadian movement, dominated by Chinese and Japanese artists, writers and community activists at the beginning, focused primarily on “working class, heterosexual, Chinese and Japanese men” (18) when talking about the Asian Canadian subject. For Asian Canadians whose sexuality was deemed deviant and illegible at the very beginning, their relationship to the “nation’s reproductive and sexual politics” is queer in the first place, evoking both the sexual and the non-normative aspect (Kojima, Catungal & Diaz 71). When talking about gender politics of Asian Canadian women, Park concludes that the “gendered Orientalism” has received token attention in literary culture (19), further reproducing gendered stereotype of Asian women. Similarly, Jo-Anne Lee points out the danger of such “cultural nationalism” that writes about “heroic masculine longings to place asian males in their role as national builders by telling stories of the economically successful” (39). The motivating force behind such attempts to recover and write the Asian Canadian past nonetheless functions in service of the white heteronormative narrative structure that assimilates racialized subjects into the process of nation-building. Instead, in *Slanting I, Imagining We*, tracing Asian Canadian immigrant history, Larissa Lai calls for a formal disruption and argues that “the histories of expulsion, exclusion, evacuation, internment, and incorporation produce Asian Canadian subjects not as the linear subjects of arrival but as discontinuous subjects for whom the possibility of speaking or writing the self is never easy or complete” (9). Lai, talking about Asian Canadian literary, artistic and community activist movement in the 1980s and 1990s, reminds readers that retrieving history is not as easy as it appears on the surface; “[i]t is certainly not nearly as simple as an (autobiographical) recounting of ‘what happened’” (42), which is essentially another form of linear narrative. To approach and

write the part of history, Asian Canadian literary culture in the 1980s and 1990s puts emphasis on narrative forms that attend to “ruptures” against the dominant historical narratives of linearity. In this process of rupture and disruption, writers and feminists strive to invoke and imagine different and diverse temporalities to refuse a coherent self and a singular hegemonic history.

Following the establishment of the queer analytic of time and history and the emergence of Asian Canadian movement, to be attentive to either the erasure or the orientalization of women in the Asian Canadian movement is to be attentive to the gender norms that frames the dominant discourse. It is crucial to acknowledge the complex positions of Asian Canadian women that are historically grounded to go beyond the one essential, reductive identity. The identification with being Asian and being female in Canada signals the doubled erasure from both the history of racism in and the male-oriented culture, where heterosexual white men continue to remain the normative subject. In addition, talking about women’s sexuality, Park mentions the “erasure of lesbian subjectivities due to heterosexualized depictions of Asian women as objects of male desire” (19). Nevertheless, as Jo-Anne Lee has noticed, at the forefront of the Asian Canadian women activism is “the courage shown by asian [sic] lesbian feminists who are writing from the complexities of their lives as asian [sic] lesbians without privileging any single aspect of their many identities” (36). Simply inserting oneself into the official discourse of citizenship and nation-building in turn supports and reaffirms the dominant ideology of normalcy. Instead, to write Asian Canadian women’s histories and to negotiate Asian Canadian women’s identity, the turn to queerness offers potential for emerging Asian Canadian women’s consciousness that has never been monolithic.

Understanding sexuality and sexual identity within racial and national contexts, a queer analytic of Asian Canadian women’s writing of the past remains productive not only because of

the emphasis on non-normative sexualities that aim to unsettle heterosexual national identity as norm, but also because of the critical perspectives that create new and different forms of relations. To queer Asian Canadian women's writing is to reject the normative and rethink about issues of identity and difference, having multiple forms of recognition without privileging a single aspect. The recognition of multiplicity and relationality speaks to Munoz's idea of queer futuristic possibilities "in which multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity" (26). Munoz's turn to queer readings, according to himself, is aligned with Sedgwick's reparative hermeneutics (12). In this light, for Asian Canadian women writers emerging from the histories of coalition and community work, and for Asian Canadian women's writing as a site of world-making that attests to the gendered and racialized violence, the queer turn marks not merely non-conforming, non-normative sexualities but a recognition of identities as never coherent, historically stable or continuous, a new mode of relationality that puts emphasis on the community to destabilize cultural nationalism and national belonging in order to imagine and create a future.

Therefore, this thesis demonstrates feminist and queer understandings of world-making and explores the reconstruction of temporality and history in writings by Asian Canadian women in relation to their identity and sexuality formations, where sexual and temporal dissonances are intertwined. Taking the body as an entry point into cultural conversation, the idea of queerness helps to shape the Asian Canadian women's literary and cultural tradition in a way that in telling stories about diaspora and displacement, writers envisage alternative ways of world-making, so that they can create, to use Sedgwick's words again, "ways in which selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (35).

This thesis is organized into two main chapters, focusing on two texts—Hiromi Goto’s Japanese Canadian story *Chorus of Mushrooms* and SKY Lee’s Chinese Canadian family saga *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. My thesis aims to find ways to think about the body as the locus of encountering the past in narratives of migration, loss and displacement by bringing queer scholarship on this topic into conversation with work that has sought to theorize Asian Canadian women’s literary traditions. I understand writings of Asian Canadian women within the theoretical framework of queer temporalities and explore their relation to the broader political and cultural context. The two texts I choose to analyze, as founding texts of the Asian Canadian literary movement in the 1980s and 1990s, have much in common, from their shared engagement in excavating history to the impulse towards a future of non-normative sexuality. Whereas family narratives are prevalent in Asian North American literary tradition, and the theme of discovering the matrilineal history as a journey from abjection to enactment of desire has been constantly explored and probably over charted, I have tried to bring my approach to grief, loss, displacement and history in line with queerness to read Asian Canadian women’s historical novels. They can both be understood as the textual practice of probing into the family’s past that is both personal and collective, and in turn offer a model of reading and telling Asian Canadian history. While the narrators of the two novels delve into their family history, they both exhibit not a chain of forward moving time, but the shared story-telling and deliberate delay. As the narrators travel back and forth in history, presented are queer effects of disorientations of reading that disrupt unity of plots, event and meaning, through which they create a world of their own making. An analysis of the narrative function and textual form finds that both of them are doing a reparative reading of their family histories, putting emphasis on bodies and the fulfillment of desires as a means to approach history. Both literary works, I would suggest, underscore the

violence behind official accounts of history, and use storytelling to form Asian Canadian women's sexual and political identity.

I start with Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*. Through the portrait of Naoe, Goto rejects the melancholic Japanese women figure, returning to a focus on the body and flesh. Through the growing telepathy of sensual telling between Murasaki and Naoe, together they weave the traumatic memory into a phantasmic journey marked by hedonistic food consumption and erotic lovemaking. If the erotics in *Chorus of Mushrooms* is the erotics of tasting and telling, then that in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is the erotics of touching and writing. For the narrator Kae, her own identity and subjectivity is embedded in histories of other women in the family, and to express herself, she must excavate those stories through writing and through understanding of the long-repressed sexual desires of women. As Kae comes to terms with her own sexuality, the novel ends with the vision of a transnational future of women's communities. In telling these stories about unveiling the family's past, the histories, both personal and collective, are conjured by non-normative and non-reproductive sexual desire that forms corporeal connections among women characters; their actions entail the resistance to feminine procreative sexuality. The queer Asian Canadian stories explored in this thesis do not aim to reproduce notions of a coherent national and sexual identity, but instead incorporate the traumatic transnational histories lived as a resource for the construction of new forms of temporalities and political and sexual desires, to counter the nationalist, assimilative and homogenizing discourse of multiculturalism in the case of *Chorus of Mushrooms*, and to form an intricate web of migrations and relations to situate Asian Canadian identity that is transnational, embracing histories of diaspora that include various locations and differences of sexuality in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*.

Chapter 2. “IMMIGRANT STORY WITH A HAPPY ENDING”: Reconstructing Immigrant Time and Stories in Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*

Walter Benjamin, in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” depicts “the angel of history” caught in the middle between the past and the future. The angel’s face is turned toward the past—a scene of destruction, and a storm blowing from Paradise “irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned;” “the storm is what we call progress” (260). Heather Love sees the angel, who longs to redeem the past yet is nonetheless passively blown into the future, as a melancholic figure who is constantly feeling backward with his failed redemption (148). Similarly, Hiromi Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*, a story about a Japanese immigrant family in Alberta, depicts a grandmother, who, with her “japanese eyes” at the back of her head, “can only see backwards” (116). If we understand her Japanese years as her past and her “Canadian years” as her present and future, then the grandmother can be seen as a backward figure, like Benjamin’s angel, who is stuck in the middle between her Japanese past and her Canadian present, a displaced subject trapped in the timeline and cannot see the future.

For his part, Benjamin further contests the assumption that history consists of a linear relationship between events and objects to an “empty homogenous time” (262) that forges false causalities. Benjamin’s call for a model of time that constellates past, present and future is echoed by the narrator’s response to her lover halfway through the novel. When her anonymous lover and listener questions her that “*you switch around in time a lot,*” she answers: “*There isn’t a time line. It’s not a linear equation. You start in the middle and unfold outward from there*” (136 *emphasis original*). The narrator’s metacommentary on the experience of getting to know the story as “*like being inside a ball that isn’t exactly a ball*” (136 *emphasis original*) further complicates the temporal significance when approaching the story. The sense of “*all mixed up*”

(136 *emphasis original*) the listener experiences while listening to the story speaks to Sara Ahmed's remark that diasporic experience is always out of line, queer and disorienting with its multiple spatial and temporal frames². The deliberate disorientation the narrator invokes places the feeling and telling of time at the center of the construction in a story concerned about connections and disconnections between the past and the present in a diasporic family.

Deeply invested in memory, story-telling and relations between the past and the present of a Japanese Canadian immigrant family, *Chorus of Mushrooms* represents an intricate response to questions of belonging, identity and history as it centers on three generations of women and their struggles with their immigrant identities. The grandmother Naoe knows English yet refuses to speak it and eventually leaves the house for good; the mother Keiko has abandoned her Japanese heritage so that she can fit her family into the demands of normative white domesticity; the granddaughter Murasaki struggles to communicate with her mother and come to terms with the disappearance of her grandmother. As the grandmother attempts to achieve a resolution while the granddaughter seeks connections, ways of telling a family story remain central. The novel, structured as a series of scenes of intertwined narration between Naoe and Murasaki with the frame narrative asserted intermittently, dissolves the boundary between the historical and the fictional. With conversations between the grandmother and the granddaughter happening across time and space in a non-linear sequence, women in the family try to get connected through various lines of contact and inheritance. With layers of temporal disjuncture presented in the narration, present and past constantly interact with each other, both creating and disseminating that specific immigrant history at the same time.

² See Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke UP, 2006.

Goto explores female desire, sexuality and subjectivity in ways that acknowledge the past but also celebrates possibilities as she reconfigures the spatiotemporal confrontation of three generations of Japanese Canadian women. The novel offers an account of memory and inheritance that is more about moments of bodily encounter than the succession of generations in history. The multi-layered non-sequential narration destabilizes the boundary between memory and immediacy. By manipulating the linear model of time into a fluid one, the novel problematizes the discourse of linear progress that readers may rely on. Unbound from time linked to progress or reproduction that implicates racial and sexual relations, queer moments of Naoe's bodily pleasure disrupt the homogenous historical time. Drawing on recent queer scholars' notion of queer temporalities and queer time as opposed to the heteronormative history and a seamless progress of linear time, I return to moments of erotic sensations and bodily pleasure as moments of knowledge transmission and suggest that the novel contributes to a queer politics of time that is distinctly corporeal. I investigate the magical realm of telepathy between the grandmother and granddaughter in relation to haunting effects of repressed Japanese Canadian histories. Both Naoe's and Murasaki's bodies used to be disciplined through the ideology of gender and nation. However, the temporal orders of normative framework regulated by national progress and reproduction can be contested with an alternative focus on the body and eroticism. Centering on a set of corporeal and predominantly sexual scenes, this chapter suggests that a more embodied and affective form of historical inquiry between and across bodies of women can function as alternate starting points to counter the trauma of linear time.

“The Best Old Woman You’re Going to Find”: Feeling and Queering Time

The beginning of *Chorus of Mushrooms* immediately complicates the relationship between the present and history and poses the dilemma of how to address the past and its legacy

on the present. The story of Naoe is introduced to readers within the first page, before Part One, by the italicized frame narration. The claim by the frame narrator that “here’s a true story” and the following “Mukashi, mukashi, omukashi” (11)—the formulaic opening of Japanese folk tales meaning “once upon a time”—reflects two modes of temporality, encapsulating both the present, the real and the past, the mythological. Such formally reflexive opening refuses to give credit to authority or accountability of “truth” as the story unfolds. The archaic yet desire-filled house of dust and moth where the family story begins further renders the novel a certain sense of timelessness as if the past never goes away. In a seemingly dysfunctional family where the mother wishes to leave their Japanese past behind so as to be as Canadian as possible and the grandmother keeps speaking Japanese aloud to herself, Naoe’s madness is deliberate: “there is method in my madness” (16); it is her refusal of assimilation even though she is fully capable of speaking English and her insistence on telling a history that belongs to her in Japanese only. By dramatizing the silence of the uncommunicative grandmother in English³, the novel poses the question of how to tell a past that seems unspeakable and untranslatable.

To theorize the sum of effects of power over a body through the organization of time, Dana Luciano coins the term “chronobiopolitics,” or what she calls the “sexual arrangement of the time of life” (9) of entire populations. Individual bodies, synchronized with larger temporal schemes such as marriage, accumulation of wealth, reproduction, childrearing, death, are

³ Various scholars have examined and theorized themes of silence and storytelling of Japanese Canadian women. See, for example, Pamela Sugiman’s critique of “the image of the silent, unresisting, and uncritical Japanese Canadian woman” (51) in “Passing Time, Moving Memories: Interpreting Wartime Narratives of Japanese Canadian Women” and Mona Oikawa’s study on the silencing of Japanese Canadian subjects of the Internment in *Cartographies of Violence: Japanese Canadian Women, Memory, and the Subjects of the Internment*. Dai Kojima also theorizes Japanese queer men’s silence and stoicism in his “Bootstraps, Sugar Daddies, Silence and Civility: A Queer Reflection on Japanese Endurance.”

regulated through the orchestration of time. Such timed management of bodies is further theorized by Elizabeth Freeman as the “chrononormative.” Drawing on Luciano’s term “chronobiopolitics,” Freeman extends Luciano’s notion of the symbiotic relationship between linear and cyclical time and refers to the temporal regulation that turns naked flesh into heteronormative “socially meaningful embodiment” as “chrononormativity,” a mode through which institutional forces through temporal experiences (3).

Naoe’s body during her Japanese years under the impact of Japanese imperialism and western modernity, thus, can be understood as being adapted to the “chronobiopolitics” of the dominant arrangement of time encompassing her labor work and domestic duties. Along with wars and displacement, Naoe’s reminiscence of her Japanese years is preoccupied with social relations determined by labor and domestic life, from her rich family with storehouses and the subsequent loss of family fortune, to her job at a silk farm and later her failed marriage in which she stays mostly at home while her husband is busy joining the war. She too is like the silkworms she nurses, an animal who is kept to live and die solely to produce silk for humans, leaving herself a “well-worn and well worked” (15) body tuned to and dominated by the rhythm of production and reproduction. As she later moves to Canada, the migration further complicates the temporal regulation of her body. As she simultaneously dwells in the present and the past, unable to adjust to a single line of chrononormativity.

Spatial dislocation and alienation in Canada further locks Naoe into temporal immobility, yet her body is both an obstacle and a means to know the world. An almost invisible woman in the small town, who, up until she goes missing, is not even known by most of the town folk and is only present because of her absence, her body remains a marker for the inscription of racial exclusion. Bearing witness to the traumatic impact of wars and nuclear bombs, her body bears

witness to the history of war, displacement and alienation even when there is nobody to talk to about them. Naoe's immobile body, "so used to the form of the chair" (81), is the externalization of her internal stagnation. Her choice to sit all day in the house and never leave her chair as if her time freezes, then, seems to be her gesture against the management of her body through time charted by gendered social and domestic relations, rejecting any forward movement or development or the "chrononormativity." Her body, therefore, both reinforces her abjectness that makes visible the traumas of alienation and displacement and represents a refusal of any linear progression or domesticity that would contain her.

Pregnant with female longing and desire, the novel links the experience of knowing and telling with a bodily eroticism that counters normative time. From the previous sexual repression, to later her passionate sexual encounters and sensual food consumption on the road, Naoe's journey of transformation stems from and is always accompanied by her desire for physical pleasure. For Naoe, looking for her own stories of departure to resolve her past is always linked to the fulfillment of sensual desire that she failed to enjoy when she is younger. Talking about sexuality and the progress of time, Luce Irigaray suggests that female sexuality does not correspond to the Freudian male sexual model or linear progress, and is indeed "more related to becoming, more attuned to the time of the universe" (113). Irigaray further critiques the temporalities associated with domestic and reproductive time, and states that menopause brings women more time for "social, cultural, and political life" (115) as they are no longer limited to their reproductive obligations. Indeed, "eighty-five years old and horny as a musk-drenched cat" (48), Naoe's sexual desires open up a world for her becoming that is "most unseemly" for her age. As Keiko runs into Naoe sticking her hands inside her pants and thinks she is going senile, Naoe is experiencing her own realm of time pervaded by pleasure after years

of silence and repression when she was younger. Her aging body does not suppress her sexual desire, but makes her all the more ready for, to use Irigaray's words, "crossing frontiers" that offers her a chance to refuse and defy the temporal norms regulating women's body and sexuality and explore her desire that is not tied to heteronormative reproduction.

The fictional temporality expands Naoe's bodily possibilities, queering an old woman's sexual gratification in a way that generates a reversible time to unmark the historical burden. Naoe's leaving thus becomes a process of undoing temporal regulations. Naoe's deviance from both the linear, progressive temporality and the domestic women's time that contains her racialized and gendered body further accords with Freeman's concept that emerging "from within, alongside, and beyond this heterosexually gendered double-time of stasis and progress, intimacy and genealogy" is "queer time" (23). Naoe's masturbation scene in the mushroom barn before she leaves then can be read in terms of queerness beyond reproductive sexual practices. Her departure starts with her masturbatory ecstasy that is previously interrupted by Keiko. As she envisions that her fingers dip "in the moist soil where [mushrooms] ripen in the dark" (89) which loosely alludes to finger sex, what is getting moist is her own aroused body. With her fingers between her thighs and the moisture filling her "hollow body" (91), she enacts her own sexual desire. The sensual rediscovery reorganizes her body from muscles and bones to hair and skin, turning back the time in her:

Softly, softly, her hands, her fingers, the moisture, her ache, peat warm as blood,
the moisture seeping into hair, skin, parchment softening elastic stretch of
muscles gleaming a filament of light. Murmur murmur forming humming earth
tipping under body swelling growing resound and the SLAM of breath knocked

from lungs, beyond the painful register of human sound, the unheard chorus of mushrooms. (93)

The rhythmical nature of the language in the scene conjures up the regular movement as she strokes her bodies. The “chorus of mushrooms” (93) in the background not only refers to the title of the novel, but also highlights the transformative power of fleshy sensory contacts. As she experiences her masturbatory ecstasy, along with the “unheard chorus of mushrooms” that is “beyond the painful register of human sound” (93) the novel also opens up a dimension beyond the painful register of human time for her metamorphosis.

It is only after she fakes her death to get rid of her previous identity that Naoe can break away with the past to start a new form of temporality. After Naoe’s departure, the “missing person’s” case in the local newspaper and the predicted impossibility for an elderly woman to survive a single night in the snow (95) seem to hint Naoe’s possible death and the end of her socially meaningful time in the novel. Naoe’s self-comparison to Yuki Onna (snow woman), the inhumanly pale Japanese ghost commonly believed to be someone who perished in the snow, further adds some unearthly qualities to her disappearance in a snowy night. In the moment when Japanese folklore meets the mushroom farm in a snowy small town in Alberta, the time of the ancient, prehistoric and the future potentiality are brought together in Naoe. When Murasaki tries to apprehend what has happened to her grandmother and herself after Naoe goes missing, her question with shock at first that “you are ninety-one years old? One hundred and five? If anyone could live that long and still wander over this earth it would be only you” (61) and later that “you are dead after all, aren’t you?” (134) seem to all suggest Naoe’s potential death. However, with Naoe’s definite answer that “as if I would be ready for death” (134), the novel moves increasingly into magical realism. Naoe’s faked death seems to be an escape from the expansion

of her socially normative identity. The conversation between Naoe and Murasaki across time and space that overcomes both physical and social distance further blurs boundaries between realism and imagination, rendering Naoe as a ghostly figure existing outside of normative human time.

As her journey unfolds, Naoe's escape is her attempt to escape the sexed and gendered normative time; she uses her no longer socioeconomically timed body as a response to the racial and sexual stigmas imposed upon her. As her journey proceeds, during Naoe's unpleasant confrontation on the Trans-Canada highway with the racist police who stops her as she is Asian, she is reminded by the truck driver Tengu, with whom she is about to share intimacy, that she should obey the law "in a country not of her birth" (147), which again defines her as not belonging to this nation even though she has been living in Canada with legal status for decades. As both the officer and Tengu exclude Naoe as an alien in a country that is not considered as her own, the construct of national belonging intersects with her identity as a visible minority and a racialized immigrant. In response to both the officer and Tengu, to the exclusionary nationalist narrative defining belonging based on skin color and a single origin, Naoe steps out of the scene and spins like a "world class gymnast" (147). She is in a sense dancing her way out of the earthly tempos that neglect her bodily potential and define her only as an old Asian woman. Naoe's phantasmic performance not only reverses time, but also defies the "chrononormativity" marked by all the white normative codes used to delineate limits and boundaries that contain her flesh. As her body keeps metamorphosing from immobile to agile, from withered to promiscuous, embodied in the sexuality of Naoe is the denaturalizing and deconstructing of the body of the national.

“From Daughter to Daughter to Daughter to Daughter to ...”

Whilst Naoe’s personal journey suggests that any understanding of immigration experiences invokes transnational migration and displacement, the psychic connection between Naoe and Murasaki that takes place in spite of the spatial and temporal distance after Naoe goes missing further reminds readers of the impact the past has on the whole family. As Eng and Han point out as they develop the theory of racial melancholia, “if the losses suffered by the first generation of immigrants are not resolved and mourned in the process of assimilation...then the melancholia that ensues from this generation can be transferred onto the second generation” (352-353). After Naoe is gone, the family begins their attempts to find the long missing grandmother by tracing credit card receipts but the journey turns into their own healing process as they cope with transgenerational grief, longing and desire. Indeed, as Murasaki believes, the history of the family “gets tattooed on to [them]” forever, “[p]assed on from daughter to daughter to daughter to daughter to ...” (45). The past refuses to go away and lingers around in the household, with the mother experiencing a nervous breakdown and the daughter trying to understand the family’s past. Along her trip, as Naoe keeps using Keiko’s MasterCard, therefore Keiko’s identity, and adopts the name “Purple,” the English translation of “Murasaki,” her escape brings identities of three generations of women together; it is their collective journey of departure.

Negotiating with the past and the present for the women in the family is always presented through visceral sensations while the stability of words and meaning is undermined throughout the story, which further dramatizes the difficulty the novel faces—conveying the unspeakable aspects of transgenerational connections that have been silenced or repressed. Indeed, words are presented as weak and superficial, unable to bear meaning sometimes. When Naoe recalls the

stories told by her mother during her childhood to sugarcoat the harsh conditions the family faces, she sees that “words are coated with honey and nectar but the flesh inside is weak and hollow” (18) because they do not convey meaning or have the transformative power to change their life. Naoe’s previous insistence on silence is her refusal of any sugarcoating and her insistence on finding a way to communicate a history beyond hollow words. In the language filled with “memory, pain, desire” (133), developed is the sustained connection between history and affective body that emphasizes corporeal form of words and telling.

The act of remembering is rendered as bodily, and memory in turn becomes the material basis in the body. When Murasaki is a little girl and does not speak Japanese, she engages herself with sonorous experience rather than words themselves as she listens to Naoe. She feels Naoe’s talking through bodily sensations: “Obachan and I, our voices lingered, reverberated off hollow walls and stretched across the land with streamers of silken thread” (31). For young Murasaki, the significance of words lies not in the actual meaning but in the sensations they evoke. Naoe’s words are like “notes of music instead of symbols to decipher” that leave marks in her life, while the things her mom talks about “never [linger] in [her] heart or deep inside [her] head” (39). Keiko, on the other hand, refuses to speak Japanese and is described by Murasaki as thriving on “subject verb object” (74), the typical order of English language⁴. Whereas Keiko thrives on English alone and thus fails to communicate with Naoe, she too feels Naoe’s absence as a bodily loss. Memory seems to be a physical process as her body rather than mind remembers experiences related to Naoe. Such moments of contact always consist of erotic sensations, from

⁴ Typically, English is considered a subject-verb-object language, while in Japanese, the verb always appears at the end of sentences/clauses, making Japanese a subject-object-verb language. The linguistic reference here seems to suggest Keiko’s embrace of English and her abandonment of Japanese.

hair washing to ear cleaning that makes the body limp and toes curl. They remember from moments of joy through physical processes that bind them together.

Gaps and losses are both psychic and visceral and are given new meaning by the experience of eating. The act of eating that intensifies bodily sensations is always presented as racialized and sexualized. Murasaki is connected to Naoe in her childhood through their sharing of Japanese food from the “mystery packages” (29) from Naoe’s brother that carries her memories about Japan. In a household where the mother wishes to raise the family in a white Canadian way, Japanese foods are nonetheless linked to juiciness, moisture and sensuality, as the characters stick fingers into red beans, lick their lips, suck and drink their way through the story, making eating both political and sensual. Although Keiko has long “converted from rice and daikon to weiners and beans” (24) and refuses Naoe’s way of living, after Naoe goes missing, she nevertheless has a nervous breakdown and recovers from the feeling of abandonment only by eating Japanese food. The perverse Japanese food consumption in the family invoking erotic sensibilities thus marks their resistance, especially Keiko’s moving away from the nationalist politics of what Kyla Thompkins calls “correct eating.”⁵ When the Tonkatsu family are finally eating tonkatsu, it is a symbolic moment when they are finally able to fully incorporate the family name into their bodies when words and the flesh become the one and they reconcile with their family identification.

Goto’s play with the family name puts further emphasis on the politics of identity and immigration experience. With Naoe’s insistence that “the name begins the story” (47), names in

⁵ Various scholars have focused on food and eating in immigrant experiences. Kyla Thompkins theorizes eating food as biopolitical. “Correct eating,” according to Thompkins, “like correct sexual behavior, is understood as a performative act of national identification. In eating as national subjects, flesh is called into social being through a model that understands race as anchored to some of the most intimate of biological functions” (267).

the novel always seem to be the prime site of struggle that determines identity. Keiko insists on being called Kay in the hope that she can be as “Canadian” as possible, while Murasaki struggles with her name and eventually outgrows the name Muriel as she comes to realize that she comes from “a specific cultural background that [isn’t] Occidental” (193). The careless mispronunciation of their family name by Murasaki’s teacher as “Ton Kasu” (181) further marks the family’s position as the exotic “other,” constantly subject to misnaming and misunderstanding in the small town. The uncommon family name Tonkatsu, which means the Japanese dish deep fried pork cutlet, links the family with exotic ethnic food. Nevertheless, tracing the etymology of the word, the father explains that “tonkatsu” is not “a purely Japanese word” and he does not know the origins of the word “katsu” (213). Their surname, according to Lisa Harris, indicates that “notions of authenticity tied to a particular place are always socially constructed and subject to change” (26). As a matter of fact, the word is a combination of “ton,” the Sino-Japanese word meaning “pig,” and “katsu,” the transliteration of the English word cutlet. Through the word “tonkatsu,” the “impure” Japanese word, their family name is presented as a product of hybridity, foregrounding the identity formation as never fixed nor homogeneous.

Immigrant time and space marked by gendered and racialized violence further collapse into a liminal space through Murasaki’s attempted retelling of both Naoe’s and her stories to produce historical knowledge. Yet mutual storytelling is not always easy; Murasaki’s telling practice is often painfully incoherent. At first, they tell their own stories and Murasaki has to constantly make sure that her Obachan is still listening (64) and doing well (67). The past frequently frustrates Murasaki and points out the complexities of the immigrant subject position produced by multiculturalism’s limited sense of inclusion. At the point when Murasaki is recalling her remark that “Oriental people in single does were well enough, but any hint of a

group and it was over” (129), she realizes her own failure to comprehend her racial and gender identity during her teenage years. Emotionally exhausted as her own subjectivity is challenged, she finds it difficult to keep telling the story. Naoe suggests instead that “why don’t I talk sometimes and you just move your lips and it will look like you’re the one who’s talking” (131). However, it is not merely the grandmother putting words into the grandchild directly, given Naoe’s additional remark that “you can do the same for me, sometimes” (131). When Murasaki tells Naoe that “[y]ou’re supposed to be the one telling stories to me” (176-77), Naoe’s reminder that telling and listening are of equal importance once again affirms for readers the novel’s denial of representations of any past as fixed or static entities that can be told from one single side. Naoe’s clear statement that “we must both be able to tell” (177) sets the aim of the novel clearly: it is not the “grandmother telling stories of the past” (177); it does not put emphasis on the genealogical order.

As Naoe remarks when she looks back on her younger years that each woman, each girl keeps “the unwritten silence” (33), the novel is as much about understanding Naoe as about women’s attempts to tell their own stories. As Naoe chooses to name her granddaughter after Murasaki Shikibu, the unconventional woman writer of *The Tale of Genji*, a book that, according to Keiko, “gives an aching account of what life was like for women of court in the eleventh century” (171), the literary reference to her namesake evokes the history of women’s struggles, desires and creative powers. The infinite list of “from daughter to daughter to daughter to daughter to.....” (45) then not only refers to the women in her own family, but also encapsulates all the women, from Murasaki Shikibu and the women of the court to the Japanese women in Canada, whose struggles are not limited to generational conflicts but more about what life is like as women, confined by their gendered roles. Right after Murasaki realizes the meaning of her

name and the story of Shikibu, the novel presents a scene of “*coming together*” (174 *emphasis original*) in which Murasaki is drawn to Naoe’s chair and feels that their bodies are becoming one and the same. They are united together not only because of their blood relation, but also because of their mutual struggles and strengths as women. Later, when Murasaki is again anxious about telling her own story, Naoe reassures her that “we can do almost anything” and “if you falter, I will fill in the words for you until you are ready to begin again” (178). Having said that, it is the last section titled *NAOE* in which Naoe is directly given a voice. It seems reasonable to believe that Murasaki has her own agency now and is finally able to take over the story and make her own voices as a woman.

The resolution to the story-telling thus does not rely so much on genealogical transmission than the mutual effort that weaves together corporeal connections across women’s bodies regardless of space and time. The subversion of the conventional hierarchical Asian North American “mother-daughter” narrative, an “unmediated vertical transmission of culture from one generation to another” (Lowe 65), is made apparent as Keiko, the daughter who, according to Naoe, is “from [her] body, but not from [her] mouth” (35) sets the distinction between reproduction and inheritance clear and problematizes the idea of inheritance through lineage. Naoe’s request at the beginning of the novel that Murasaki “listen with an open ear” (30) to understand her story lays bare the novel’s investment in negotiating the nature of knowledge inheritance and transmission. Murasaki’s blunt refusal to marry consolidates the novel’s rejection of a future dependent on heterosexual or heteronormative reproduction. Naoe and Murasaki’s collaborative narration breaks the linear chain of succession and forms a process that can be understood through Lisa Lowe’s theorization of practices that are “partly inherited, partly modified, as well as partly invented” (65) in the making of minority culture. From inheritance to

invention lies the body presented to stand for relations between past and present. Through the shifting and exchanging of their consciousness, time and space is further conflated between the Naoe and Murasaki, along with their partners. Their journeys, both marked by the fragmented sex scenes and sensual food sharing with their lovers, mirror each other in a way as if Murasaki is getting closer and closer to Naoe through their mutual exploration of sensual pleasure. The parallel story lines of Naoe's and Murasaki's coincide the moment when it is indicated that they have both been speaking Japanese to their lovers the whole time, forming moments of connections in response to their previously repressed bodily desire.

Immigrant Story as Political Act

Through the family life embedded in the small town, the novel further exposes racial dynamics, striving to narrate immigrant experience not only based on but also beyond the Tonkatsu women. The very category of "immigrant," according to Sunera Thobani, undermines the notion of "the nation as a homogenous entity" while it also "paradoxically helps sustain the myth of the nation as homogenous" (58). It can thus at once subvert and reinforce the notion of a homogenous Canadian identity based on whiteness. The novel offers various ways of constructing immigrant stories, many of which are told to sustain the idea of a homogenous nation as Thobani indicates, and this can be shown in two stories about immigrant experiences from the fictional newspaper *The Herald*. In the "funny true stor[y]," an elementary teacher shares the story of a newly immigrated Japanese boy who, according to the teacher, is shy, not good at English but is "really clever in mathematics" (108). While the teacher self-indulgently assumes that the boy will bring "a lovely fan or a silk kimono or something" (108) as something to share with friends, when the boy brings a skunk to school thinking that it is his cat, she mockingly suggests that the boy takes "wildlife identification courses as well as the English

lessons” (109), which emphasizes the various difficulties and cultural stereotypes faced by Asian immigrants. On the other hand, in the “Multicultural Voices of Alberta” (193), whereas Murasaki tells her struggle with her Japanese Canadian cultural identity, Keiko’s account of her “happy and easy life” in Alberta and her claim “I would never move to Vancouver” (193) because too many Japanese people live there ironically sustains the nationalist discourse of assimilation and exclusion.

The multicultural discourse is further contested through Murasaki’s own lived experience. In a small town where all Asians are reduced into one homogenous category “the Oriental,” Keiko is constructed as the desirable immigrant “other” by the predominantly white town, the good minority who would willingly dye her daughter’s hair blonde so that Murasaki would “resemble” Alice from *Alice in Wonderland* in her school play. As Murasaki’s teacher explains, “Alice is an English girl with lovely blonde hair” and they “simply cannot have an Alice with black hair” (181). The visual assimilation of her hair color underscores the regulation and homogenization of the racialized body as normalization. When Murasaki is asked by her high school cowboy boyfriend to have “Oriental sex” (126) as he has seen on television, his request indicates further how gender and sexuality is shaped by Murasaki’s minoritized and Orientalized identity. The “Oriental sex” incident is followed by Murasaki’s memory of being lumped in with Chinese Canadian families she has never been close to, especially the Chinese Canadian boy Shane Wu whom she used to deliberately avoid talking to because of her belief that it might make her unpopular. Talking about the masculinity of Asian men, Kenneth Huynh and Benjamin Woo examine the construction of Chinese Canadian masculinity with a focus on the “perceived nerdiness” (364) of Asians and argue that racial stereotypes exclude Asian men in Canada from the hegemonic notion of masculinity based on whiteness. As the awkwardly quiet

and not very sporty Shane, an unpopular “Oriental” boy, embodies the construction of failed masculinity of the Asian male that upholds white men’s dominance in the small cowboy town in the novel, Murasaki is nevertheless unknowingly complicit in this narrative, partaking in the exclusionist discourse to stay away from Shane so as to “fit in” in the small town and maintain her status as an ideal model minority.

What Murasaki thinks as “sad” stories are indeed based on the contradictory ideals of multiculturalism that attempts to assimilate racialized subjects into national ideals of whiteness. Murasaki’s contemplation on the Jap oranges the family would eat during Christmas further highlights such reductive and assimilative ideals. “Technically called Mandarin oranges and Mandarin isn’t even a place but a Chinese language” (98), the Jap oranges are misnamed in the first place. More ironically, while Keiko refuses to buy any “Oriental” food that might “contaminate” her ideal white household, she could allow the family to have Jap oranges for Christmas simply because the church would purchase them too for religious purpose. Keiko’s acceptance of the oranges as they are approved by the church is a further indication that identities can be constructed and manipulated so that their meaning can be complicit with the dominant ideology. The novel therefore critiques all those “sad immigrant stories” that erases cultural differences in celebration of the fraudulent idea of “multiculturalism” which, as Roy Miki critiques, only reduces the minority group-members into a homogenized “visible minority” (6) and expects them to “work in tandem” with mainstream, dominant groups in power (10).

Instead, the novel, aiming to tell a happy ending, forges ways of reconstructing not only personal but also collectively legible forms to tell immigrant experiences that underscore heterogeneity as opposed to the idea of multiculturalism. If we understand newspapers as an archive that charts official history, then from Murasaki’s creative reconfiguration of Naoe’s story

divergent from the news claiming her missing and potential death, to the happy immigrant story that she attempts to create, the official historical narratives are constantly challenged and contested. Whereas many of the other “oriental” people, from the Vietnamese workers on the mushroom farm to other families in the small town, are largely silent in the narrative, Murasaki’s belated self-reflection and realization that “[Shane’s] story isn’t mine to speak” (130) reminds us to read against the grain to discover the multiplicity of immigrant positions that cannot be reduced. Notably, Naoe’s and Murasaki’s nameless lovers are further depicted as transnational subjects—Tengu has spent years studying in Japan and Murasaki’s anonymous lover and listener is a fresh-off-the-boat— further situating the novel in a transnational context that stresses mobility and movement over any fixed or stable origin and transcends the limit of the nation. The novel therefore goes beyond the family narrative of generational conflict and filial relations which, according to Lowe in an Asian American context, offers an essentialist and reductionist view of cultural identity by privatizing social conflicts into familial problems (78). With the title that does not refer to any specific “immigrant story,” the novel locates the narrative not only in the Japanese Canadian family with the reconciliation between the mother and the daughter as a happy ending, but also in a more collective language that would bring the individual “Orientals” together into alternative ways which reproduce narratives that are not homogenous, but rather mark differences.

Happy Ending

The immigrant story culminates in the bull riding scene both physically and spiritually when Naoe shows up at the Calgary Stampede away from Nanton, the place Murasaki previously remarks as “cowboy purgatory.” The ideology of racial and gender difference is presented as collapsing the moment when Naoe is believed to be a cowboy, a “he,” underneath her mask and

her androgynous drag style. The “mask” in the name Naoe adopts, along with her outfit functioning as masquerade, further disrupts the notion of a single coherent self based on race and gender⁶. As she is mastering the role usually related to masculine white men while embracing her female desire at the same time as the heart of the bull rubs the inner side of her thighs, bringing her tension and orgasmic pleasure not related to phallic activity, she does give bullriding “a whole new meaning” (222) that disrupts the traditional white male domination.

By choosing the name “the Purple Mask,” which again alludes to the name “Murasaki,” the grandmother and the granddaughter are becoming with each other, further conflating space and time. It is no longer indicated in this part who is the speaker, as if Naoe and Murasaki are becoming one and the same voice that, just like beginning and ending, cannot be separated. The ending and beginning cannot be separated because there is no definite closure and the ending always opens up future possibilities. Goto herself has explained that “there is a resistance to the notion of closure for this is not the reality of women’s lives. Closure to me is very artificial, contrived and prescriptive” (234). Naoe’s disappearance is not the end of her story, but the beginning of Murasaki’s rewriting through which she mobilizes Naoe’s missing to envisage a possible future with hope for both Naoe and for herself. As Murasaki is finally able to form new connections with Naoe and use her own words to express her family history, the melding of the two voices in the end suggests a blueprint of a world in which Naoe lives vicariously through Murasaki’s words, a story that will not end at the Calgary Stampede.

⁶ Drawing on Riviere’s and Butler’s dialogue on gender masquerade, Tseelon suggests masquerade functions critically as it “unsettles and disrupts the fantasy of coherent, unitary stable, mutually exclusive divisions” (3). See *The Masque of Femininity. The Presentation of Woman in Everyday Life*. Sage Publications, 1995.

With the potentiality beyond reproductive heterosexuality, Naoe finds her own queer way to gain pleasure and freedom while Murasaki is finally able to reimagine an immigrant story with hope in the end. The last sentence that Murasaki says in the novel— “*You know you can change the story*” (225)—demonstrates again the refusal of any fixed ending or identity and depicts a future awaiting. By calling into attention the constructedness of race, sexuality and linear time, the ending gestures toward a political, collective and historical narrative rather than the personal myth of Naoe only. Time is presented in the novel as malleable, open for recuperation and modification, and celebrates multilinearity, ruptures and possibilities rather than what Benjamin calls “the continuum of history” (264). Ways of recuperating and reconstructing the immigrant experience involve an investment in bodily sensation and non-normative erotic sensibility, making possible a reading of queer time. As sexual and temporal dissonance are inextricably intertwined in Naoe’s and Murasaki’s storytelling, it is through the reconstruction of temporality in a corporeal form that the novel offers an alternative way for characters to come to terms with the trauma of history and to envisage a possible future that reconsiders ways to approach histories of Japanese Canadian women, an “immigrant story with a happy ending” (211) that is tailored to envisage an optimistic immigrant future beyond the national homogeneity and belonging.

Chapter 3. “LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER”: Queering Chinese Canadian Women’s Stories in SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe*

In *Jin Guo: Voices of Chinese Canadian Women*, it is stated in the introduction that the history of Chinese Canadians “is an unfortunate chronicle of institutionalized racism” (17). A novel that spans from the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway to Head Tax and Chinese Exclusion Act to the 1980s, *Disappearing Moon Cafe* remains a witness to the history dotted by racialized violence against the Chinese Canadian family. At the center of the story is the narrator Kae Ying Woo’s longing for the hidden family history and her various attempts to unearth the truth as SKY Lee narrates how four generations of women navigate a “woman-hating” world. With multiple temporalities and pieces of the family’s past that juxtapose Kae’s attempt to tell the stories and explore her own meaning of life, memories are neither linear nor sequential, but divergent and full of blanks and disruptions. In *Many-Mouthed Birds*, Bennett Lee holds the idea that for many second and third generation Canadian born writers, the “question of identity, which in turn leads to an inquiry into the past, both private and collective” (3). Looking back to tell the collective past, for Lee’s narrator Kae in the novel, is as much about how the past creates the present as it is about how the stories of the past are excavated by her in the present and how it reshapes her identity and future. While the novel is Kae’s attempt to write her own personal and family story, Lee’s firm belief that “personal is political and becomes the seed for revolution and cultural revelation” (311) remains significant both for herself in life and for Kae in the novel. Through Kae, presented in the novel are ways in which Lee remembers, tells and creates the Chinese Canadian past, present and future.

Thus, this paper focuses on SKY Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and explores how Kae reconstructs her life story through the unveiling of a family history that is all about repressed

racialized and gendered violence so as to present a broader Chinese Canadian experience. As the narrative moves backwards and forwards in time, Lee delineates not a linear chain of forward moving time, but the temporal disjunction that addresses gaps of loss, absence and missing information within those supposedly linear genealogical accounts of the Chinese Canadian history. I examine the reconstruction of temporality and history in the novel in relation to identity formations and suggest that racialized violence and displacement remain a crucial factor in the construction of immigrant time. I look at various attempts to tell time and history in the novel and trace the spatial displacement and temporal disjointment through the lens of sexuality. I investigate ways in which Lee re-imagines geographical and temporal specificity in the novel and how complicated multilinear frames allow alternative histories and spaces for Chinese Canadian women. Lee's engagement with queer and interracial romances challenges assumptions about dominant history, racialized bodies and repressed desires. It is through queerness, I suggest, that women are able to bind together, and historical "truth" emerges and becomes embodied, opening up a new spatiotemporal dialectic through which Lee imagines a Chinese Canadian future formed by queer love and hope that is beyond the white heteronormative frame.

Immigrant History and Time

In a story deeply invested in the past and the present, essentially every character deviates from the normativity in reproduction, undermining the neat and coherent family tree, and Lee conveys these deviations in temporal terms. Lee often turns her attention to the senses of time, as subjectivity in the novel is usually accompanied by timekeeping. While each section of the novel is neatly titled with a character's name and a year, the narrator Kae nevertheless has difficulties telling time. For Kae, her story begins at the age of thirty-six with the birth of her son, when the

contact with the past for her still means “applying attention to all the important events such as the births and the deaths” (23). However, a neat family tree with “a crisp beginning and a well-penned conclusion” (24) does not exist in this case. Kae’s play with time as she ambiguously remarks that “let’s just say for now that Gong Gong died in 1972, maybe 1942” (24) not only presents the challenges of timekeeping but also foreshadows the incest plot that makes the family tree even more tricky. The patriarch of the family, her Gong Gong (father-in-law) Gwei Chang too struggles with time as the novel suggests that he is “play[ed] with” by his memories (6) in the rest of his pitiful life. While he leaves his indigenous lover Kelora in the first place to marry Fong Mei in order to maintain the racial purity of the Chinese family lineage, he is nevertheless stuck in that past abandoned by himself. For Fong Mei, her life in China is marked by waiting and counting time to get married. However, “after five years, three months, and soon nineteen days” (31) of waiting in China, soon after she arrives in Canada she turns into the “bodiless” or perhaps “soulless” figure due to alienation and discrimination and becomes “old before [her] time” in Canada (218). Morgan, the mixed-blood grandson of Kelora who is troubled by his dubious origins and lives in a haunted house with an unspeakable past, seems to be doomed to the circle of time and can only find his relief as he gets his knowledge from reading outdated archival files. In this family saga, bodies are always timed bodies and characters constantly struggle with time.

There are reasons why the attention to temporality remains central. As the novel begins with Gwei Chang’s journey, behind that “bone-searching expedition” is the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, a project that is predominantly related to speed, progress, industrialization and modernization. But the images that follow, including ghosts, long dead figures, scattered bones and disembodied form of male bodies along the iron road, bring in a

heavy sense of timelessness and obsolescence. Such temporal duality sums up the exploitable nature of Chinese labor, for whom time functions differently, with the juxtaposition of both the modern railroad and the primitive forest. In his essay “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” E. P. Thompson thinks of time as an invention of the human mind, and argues that men are converted to specific valuations of time in industrial capitalism for “without time-discipline we could not have the insistent energies of the industrial man” (93). If, according to what Thompson proposes, ideally in a mature capitalist society “all time must be consumed, marketed, put to *use*” (90-91 *emphasis original*), then the old overseas Chinese in Lee’s novel, who “never wasted anything—not their time, not their leisure” (13), seem to represent such ideal “mature capitalist society” (Thompson 90), as for them nothing will remain irreducible to exchange or consumption. The industriousness of the Chinese workers should have made them highly wanted as part of the industrial progression based on Thompson’s claim, yet on the contrary, with their racialized bodies, the early Chinese railroad workers are constantly framed and dehumanized as unfeeling and machine-like labors without need of leisure or personal time, and therefore considered as a threat and excluded from the society. Focusing on such contradiction, Iyko Day examines the racial implications and suggests that Chinese labor is rendered abstract qualities of capital under Marxist capitalist analysis. As the “heterogenous labor” is reduced to the “homogenous” equivalence of money, Chinese laboring bodies are excluded from “normative social and domestic temporalities” (Day 46). While they are highly indispensable in the modernization progress, the Chinese workers in the novel are depicted as being immediately forgotten “at the ribbon-cutting ceremony by the whites” (Lee 6). When the picture is taken at the ceremony to document the historical moment for newspapers and history

books, those Chinese who build the railroad do not exist in the temporality of the nation-building.

The gendered and sexualized discipline is further imposed upon the Chinamen, marked at first by the sexual suppression of Chinese workers in the railroad camps, and then its long-lasting aftermath redirected towards residents in Chinatown. For early Chinese immigrants who are historically excluded and socially alienated, conceptions of time are racialized and sexualized into stagnation and sometimes distortion. In “Queer/Asian/Canadian,” Kojima, Catungal and Diaz, defining queerness as critiques of normalcy, argue that queerness of early Chinese laboring bodies that are subject to intense labor discipline lies “in the form of their bachelorhood and non-normative domesticity, that becomes useful for their social construction as racial threats to white hetero-futurity” (72). Queerness of Asian Canadian bodies, then, does not only signify the presence of narrow sense of same-sex sex, but also functions as, to use Alexander Weheliye’s words, “a shorthand for the interruptions of violence that attends to the enforcement of gender and sexual norms” (97). Chinatown, therefore, becomes the very site of complexity—of races, sexualities and nations—complicated in its twisted histories, with multiple frames of time and space coalescing in the claustrophobic streets and houses. As the Chinese men are treated at best as outsiders such as Gwei Chang, and at worst as merely temporal existence like those old Gold Mountain sojourners who remain single the whole life and would never be able to establish roots or have a family, sexuality is further restricted, contained and queered by Canadian legislation. For the Chinese workers whose lives remain invisible after their work is done, early Chinese Canadian experience is traced and constructed as socially non-reproductive by the settler society. While the overseas Chinese in Chinatown are surrounded by the world of what they call “white

ghosts” in the novel, they are the actual invisible ghosts in the white Canada denied of a reproductive future that adheres to the normative framework.

The obsessive quest for racial and blood purity in the Wong family further leads to unstable narratives of the family lineage filled with secrets and rumors. Troubled by the obsession of a pure origin, in this messy family saga, nearly all characters are preoccupied with a past that does not easily pass away, and do not have the ability to look towards a future or to believe that change can happen. This pathology, of course, has tragic consequences, one of which being Morgan, who is described as the “haunted man” (78) obsessed with the past. While Kae first describes him as “hunted” because Morgan is haunted by the ghost of his lost first love Suzie, Morgan is further haunted by the secrets of his parentage and in turn haunts the Wong family as a return of all the family secrets. Being the Eurasian and the son of Ting An’s, he is the embodiment of miscegenation, adultery and incest, a threat to the “Chineseness” the Wong family strives to maintain. As the older generations intentionally keeps their distance from Morgan and refuses to talk about him, he remains the spectral presence in the Wong family upon whom historical narratives of racial purity in both Chinese Canadian and white discourse are imposed.

As the plot details Morgan’s own research on his parentage and family history, what he uncovers is the messiness of the archive that further indicates constructs of racial, sexual and class ideology. Lee utilizes the historical intertext of the Janet Smith murder as Morgan is portrayed to live in the haunted house where Janet Smith was murdered. As Morgan is obsessed with reading old newspapers in the library, Lee mobilizes archival narratives of the Janet Smith case to remind readers of the racial and sexual implications of the spectral presence. While Morgan attempts to find relief through activities of reading the past, emerging from the archive

may never be the “facts,” but ways in which narratives manipulate the event. In the story, the anti-Chinese discourse manipulates her death as a proof against the Chinese men, and the truth behind her unresolved murder seems to be forgotten. Just like what Morgan notes, “the story had something for every kind of righteousness. For those who hated Chinese and thought they were depraved and drug-infested. And for those who hated the rich and thought they were depraved and drug-infested” (83). Kae’s notable remark that the old Chinese men in Chinatown “were surprised to find out how much alike chinamen [sic] and white people were” (223) points out ways in which both sides employ Janet Smith’s murder to maintain the discourse of racial purity. When Morgan concludes that “only one thing missing—women” (83), the missing part can be understood as both Chinese women historically in the bachelor community that is Chinatown, and Janet Smith herself as her death is turned into a power struggle between the Chinese and the anti-Chinese communities. The secret of Janet Smith’s death would never be revealed, yet the “willowy, tuneful scottish [sic] nightingale” (84) is not missing. She turns into a ghost in the house, and, to use Derrida’s words in *The Specters of Marx*, “a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back” (123). Along with the inability of the dominant narrative to convey actual racial and sexual experiences are traces of the absent in the disjunctive mode of historicizing, requiring deconstruction and reconstruction. The ghost of Janet Smith, the working-class white woman that hints “the suppressed sexual undertones of Vancouver’s churchgoers” (83), reminds readers of the construct of racial purity, in which any interracial relationship would be seen as threatening and women are reduced to reproductive function only, for working-class white women and for Chinese women in Chinatown alike.

“Feeding the Dead,” Feeling the Dead

The novel constantly tropes the ghostly figure as what exceeds boundaries, disrupts normative patterns of desire and eventually cannot be contained by the white heteronormative temporalized discipline. As Lee herself believes, “the ghostly one is the most powerful voice of all” (325); she invites ghosts in her story rather than exorcising them. Such ghostly encounters culminate in the section “FEEDING THE DEAD,” in which Kae faces a past with all her female ancestors and brings them together with a surreal chant. Female characters in Chinatown almost all struggle with their identity as “underground women, living with displaced chinamen [sic], and everyone trapped by circumstances” (145), none of them are fully in control of their own sexuality, with their bodies and sexuality reduced to maximum reproductive function only. However, as Lee frames FEEDING THE DEAD between the unveiling of the two deepest secrets in the family leading to most tragedies—the adultery between Fong Mei and Ting An and the incest between Morgan and Suzie, it is a section cloaked by excessive and deviating sexual desires.

As the only woman who is not directly related to the Wong family drama but present in this scene, Hermia Chow, the outsider, brings in her own conspicuous sexual energy. Hermia, whose name echoes the disobedient and relentless daughter of Egeus’ in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, first appears in the drab women’s dormitory in Beijing, sharing with Kae erotic Chinese classics and booze. Described by Kae as like a “bare and naked newborn” (47) with her angelic face, Hermia is constantly constructed as a child figure with her innocent rawness and a dreamy quality. But she is not just an infantile subject. “A misplaced bastard daughter of a gangster and his moll” (49), Hermia is also placed at the margin of any society, marked by her lack of “righteous family connections” (49), her disregard for social values, her

overt and promiscuous sexuality and her “artfully artless” (47) that all speak to her anti-relational traits. Such duality also hints at Kae’s remark about Hermia’s “dual personality” (249); her hair that is too short further renders her androgynous quality. Hermia remains the unspoken drive behind Kae that animates Kae’s desire to write down the family story and the catalyst for Kae’s fulfillment of her longing to set the Wong daughters free. In sum, Hermia speaks to what Freeman calls the “asocial” mode of relationality that is “counter to marriage, kinship, and reproduction” (22). Hermia’s cry that “the world is drying up,” in contrast with her face that is “floating wet and free” (222), seems to serve as a comment on the repressed sexuality in the Wong family. As she speaks bluntly to Kae about “genitalia coming together because it feels good” (222), Hermia, with her overt sexual energy, moisturizes the dry land of the Wong women.

Lee further renders the connections to the past and among characters in the novel as corporeal, putting emphasis on the bodily desire, when in Kae’s design of the scene she states that “I want a classic scenario of wailing women huddle together to ‘feed the dead.’ Lots of eerie mist. I want to make them weep from their own time periods and, at the same time, in harmony with each other” (223). In her article “Queer Belongings,” Elizabeth Freeman describes queerness as a volitional positioning of the self in history and states that queer belonging “names the longing to ‘be long,’ to endure in corporeal form over time, beyond procreation” (299). While Edelman states in his *No Future* that the queers should say no to the future altogether, Freeman, in her introduction to *GLQ*, departs from Edelman’s belief that even “a queerly intergenerational relationality” is based on reproductive futurity (166), and suggests alternative ways to connect across time. To want to belong, according to Freeman in “Queer Belongings,” is to “long to be bigger not only spatially, but also temporally, to ‘hold out’ a hand across time and

touch the dead or those not born yet, to offer oneself beyond one's own time" (299). Indeed, the novel is full of individual hands that form corporeal connections. That "hand," therefore, remains quintessential to reorganize relations between the past and the present, for Gwei Chang as a bone collector to pick up the lost bones, and for Kae as a writer to document her stories. As Kae attempts to "massage" the complexities of the Wong family "into a suant, digestible unit" (23) using hands, she has aligned the writing of history with the corporeal since the very beginning.

The hand in the novel is indeed constantly related to ways for contact that is usually sensual, seductive and deviant: when Gwei Chang tries to take the food from Kelora's hand but she "springs back" (4), when Kae "crumbled like a cupcake" (81) in Morgan's hands, when Fong Mei "clamped down on [Ting An's] hand" (218), when Kae's hands "sneaked up behind [Hermia's] shoulders to start a massage" (249). That touch is related to exchange of memory and knowledge. Animated by the desire to seek love and pleasure, the corporeal encounter of the Wong women is consummated in the moment as Kae, to use Freeman's words, "holds out a hand" (299) across space and time to evoke them and bring them together. In this section, all the Wong women find each other again, looking at the abyss together. When the wailing women, from Mui Lan to Suzie, alive and deceased, huddle together, they are reconnected "hand in hand" both metaphorically and physically.

Gathering around the "timeless circular table" with no beginning or ending (223), all the Wong women are presented together in a horizontal way instead of the vertical hierarchy of a family tree that has been defining their whole life while they are alive to reproduce the normative structure of a patriarchal clan. When tears from their own time periods join together according to Kae's design, the transience and obsolescence nevertheless turn to timelessness, forming new connections among their psyches and bodies. The past is therefore put into transformative

relation with the present. As tears travel across time and space, the “eerie mist” (223) moistens the male-dominant world that attempts to drain their sexual subjectivity. With the dissolution of hierarchical boundaries, the affective bodies are no longer timed bodies marked by what Freeman defines as “chrononormativity,” the use of time to organize individual human bodies towards maximum productivity. The women who do not have enough time or choice when they are alive, such as Fong Mei who is always busy with the business to make more money, finally feel that they get “plenty of time” (223) to dwell on matters such as love, desire and sexuality in this spatiotemporal realm that is able to break the reproductive or genealogical time.

As Kae speaks to the dead and speaks the dead, the encounter is corporeal and she herself becomes an individual who, as Hermia realizes, “is not an individual at all, but a series of individuals” (224), unsettling established forms of connection to the past and the present. When Kae, as “one individual thinking collectively” (224), decides that she wants to live a great novel instead of writing one, she is no longer stuck in the past and instead becomes the crux of all her maternal ancestors, which points to what Freeman depicts as “erotohistoriography,” a corporeal counter-history that “does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid” (96). Kae’s body thus becomes tools to perform the encounter with the history of a community of women across time and space. Through this corporeal form of history, the embodied imagination of Mui Lan is finally able to speak her mind and stress the “love of my woman’s body” (223). The potentiality of generations of Chinese Canadian women is recovered through such alternative ways as a counterhistory of female sexuality. Instead of the past repeatedly invading the present, the encounter through the conflation of time, rather than inheritance or succession, allows the present to enter the past and open up a future. If *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is the very book Kae is trying to write, then the

potentiality of the novel in becoming both in terms of Kae's future and the future of the novel she will be writing becomes apparent. The time of the Wong family that seems socially non-reproductive is able to be continued in another space through the imaginative realm of fiction. Moreover, though Kae laments to Chi that in the book she is writing, women are "full of ornament⁷, devoid of truth" (247), the women in the novel, if anything, are the only ones in the family that are aware of secrets or able to unveil truths. A hidden world of female subversion and meaning making behind the words thus emerges.

Women's Community and Futurity

The non-normative desire that stands outside genealogical time counters generations of regulation imposed upon women. The possible female love and bonding plot thus invites further investigation. *Disappearing Moon Cafe*'s most straight marriages are unfortunate and even disastrous; even the only seemingly happy one between Bea and Keeman has to bear the burden of potential incest at first. Before her marriage to Canada, Fong Mei, forced to part from her sister, is told that "this is the way of women. She doesn't retain ties to her childhood past" (55). Never able to see her sister again, Fong Mei remains marooned in Chinatown. Later in the book, listening to Kae's story of Mui Lan and Fong Mei, Hermia makes the similar remark that "grown women are orphan children, are we not? We have been broken from our mothers' arms too soon and to made to cling to a man's world, ..., many of us are just barely hanging on by the skin of our teeth" (163). Hermia understands that women's strength is in the bonds they form with each other. She sees through Kae's eyes "that drive to love and create" (47) and stimulates Kae with her insistence that their love will remain forever. Throughout her interactions with Hermia, while

⁷ The commodification and objectification of Asiatic femininity is further developed through the term "Ornamentalism" theorized by Anne Anlin Cheng. See Cheng, Anne A. *Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman*. Oxford UP, 2019.

Kae claims that she “never did totally succumb to Hermia’s very enticing lure” (149), their relation is nevertheless marked by the conspicuous sexual energy. As the two girls walk “linking arms and snuggling tightly against each other in their space” (48) when they are in Beijing, they are surrounded by a certain aura of intimacy. While they are both in Hong Kong, as Kae flirts hard with men in front of Hermia as if she wants to make Hermia jealous, presented is another very different kind of sexual tension that Kae has never experienced and is not shown in her marriage. After the section FEEDING THE DEAD, their interaction during Kae’s Hong Kong visit is depicted with touches around shoulders and the long kiss pressed against Hermia’s neck, further adding to the homoerotic sensation between the two.

While various critics debates whether Hermia not only Kae’s very best friend but also her lesbian lover⁸, SKY Lee herself seems to be against the “lesbian” reading. There is something worth noticing about Lee’s own refusal of the identification with “lesbianism” in her Chinese Canadian story, considering the specific history of the term “lesbian” for Asian Canadians. Racial and gendered constructions of passive femininity render Asian lesbian experiences marginal and invisible in white-centered lesbianism in the late 20th century. Jo-Anne Lee, when talking about Asian Canadian women and feminisms, points out the long history of “asian [sic] women” being constructed by Western media as “objects of White male desire” and reminds readers that representations of “asian [sic] women” still “deny the reality of lesbian sexuality” (25). Due to their “embodiment of the racial-sexual non-normative nexus,” Asian LGBT people were “rendered out of place within early LGBT activism and organizing” in the 1970s and 1980s (Kojima, Catungal & Diaz 73). In *Telling It: Women and Language Across Cultures*, a book

⁸ Scholars have various comments on the relationship between Kae and Hermia and whether or not it is queer. While most scholars acknowledge the homoerotic plot, Caroline Chung Simpson, for example, believes that there is no “lesbian characters or themes” (72).

considered as a platform for “native-asian-lesbian [sic] women writers” (182), SKY Lee reflects upon women’s community and her personal experience of being in the lesbian community. Drawing on her mother’s experience from her original village in China where “women lov[ing] women” (123) is part of the community, Lee rejects the narrow Western sense of lesbianism that is defined by genital sexuality and argues that it is both limiting and silencing. Lee’s resistance thus questions both the hypersexual fantasy of Asian women under the white male gaze and the exclusive second wave feminism with its internalized Eurocentrism of the term “lesbian” that is not large enough for women of color. Talking about her own view of being a lesbian but also bisexual and heterosexual, she furthers her idea about a sexual identity that is less rigid and more fluid: “I just can’t imagine half the world not loving half the world” because of the limiting concepts such as “lesbian” or “bisexual” (122). As Lee constantly reminds people the fluidity of culture, what she envisages is a women’s community that resists rigid identity politics. Questioning the term “lesbianism” and bringing up what she calls the “Eastern sense of being a lesbian” (122), Lee instead emphasizes the “idea of woman love” that is fluid, nonconforming and non-hierarchical between women and is “a bit larger than lesbianism” (125). Such love carves out a queer space for grown-up women, for Kae and Hermia in the novel, across racial, cultural and sexual boundaries so that grown-up women will no longer have to be “orphans.” Therefore, as Lee rejects the white context of “lesbianism,” the idea of “woman love” plays an important role both for Lee’s own gender politics and for Kae in the novel.

In Lee’s design, a “nonstop hysteria” (165) of the family comprise of adultery, suicide, incest and miscegenation ends with Kae’s flight to Hong Kong and her reunion with Hermia. Realizing that she is “the resolution to this story” (248), Kae’s attempt at achieving understanding of the past and the future ends up with her decision to leave Canada to “live a

great novel” in response to Hermia’s question “would you rather live a great novel or write one” (256). For Chinese Canadian women, subject to double marginalization, from both men in Chinatown in the novel, and from white feminists in the women’s movement, what Lee calls for is “a bigger space which can accommodate diversity” (188). In the novel, Hong Kong remains such kind of space, where Kae has most freedom, and the most sensual plot between Kae and Hermia takes place. The same-sex love, care and bonding of women is distinct from heteronormative marriage, both emotionally and sensually. The queerness of the ending does not lie merely in the lesbian codes narrowly defined by white feminism, but the utopic vision of a women’s community⁹ with non-normative love and desire to counter the failures and impossibilities of history.

The queer ending opens up a new spatiotemporal dialectic through which Lee imagines an Asian Canadian future that is beyond national borders, straight time and reproductive heterosexuality. In *Feminism Without Borders*, Chandra Mohanty, talking about the western-centered feminism, critiques any notion of a “unity” of either the individual subject or the feminist practice, and instead stresses the importance of “politics of location” (106) for cross-cultural and transnational feminist works, emphasizing geographical locations and recognizing the significance of occupying different spaces to make differences. The geographical and cultural specificity of the colonial Hong Kong in the novel, a site of global trade and transnational connections, therefore invites attention. The ending in Hong Kong, a place that carries its own histories of struggles, represents a localized vision for Chinese Canadian feminists to navigate

⁹ It is worth noting that Lee’s notion of a “women’s community” is historically grounded as opposed to what Lee sees as the “white lesbian context.” The definition of “women” as a category and issues of transgender exclusion within feminism are not within the scope of this thesis.

gender politics. Notably, while Hong Kong in the late 1980s is still under the British control, the transfer to control by mainland China in 1997 is about to happen. As Lee sets the ending in Hong Kong in 1987, Guy Beauregard reminds readers that considering the “insecure political future of Hong Kong in the late 1980s,” the utopian aspects of Kae’s reunion with Hermia and “the possibility of ‘return’” is “highly provisional and far from ‘settled’” (66). Talking about Hong Kong, Katharyne Mitchell critiques the romanticization of Hong Kong by many scholars as a hybrid and liminal space that is “in the tactical war against dominant hegemonies,” as “a new site of hope” (533). Focusing on the economic relations and everyday grounded practices, Mitchell asks for a concept that is “historically and geographically located” so as to not fall into the repressive logic of capital accumulation and social orders (551). The shifting space of Hong Kong in the 1980s, therefore, gestures toward a more grounded theorization of the queer Asian future with struggles as well as potentials, both historically and spatially. It is not a prescriptive ideal, but rather, as Munoz theorizes, is about “building” and “doing” (118) in response to the repressive normative order.

While through the course of the novel Kae has been looking back waiting for enlightenment and the future to come, in the end she is able to look forward to a future in its making. For most old overseas Chinese in Chinatown who “were like derelicts, neither here nor there” (93), their whole life is paralyzed by longing for “being at home” and the reality of “not being home,” but Kae’s journey is nothing related to a search for homecoming or stable roots. Kae’s story in the novel ends with her overseas phone call to Hermia and her Hong Kong trip that is about to happen, yet indeed, it is never indicated whether after the phone call Kae has successfully landed in Hong Kong or not; it is a journey of “not yet here.” Kae’s possible ending with Hermia in Hong Kong therefore highlights potentiality that undermines stasis or fixity so as

to articulate subjectivities that are in the formation. The “living happily ever after together” (256) mentioned by Hermia offers an impulse toward what Jose Munoz calls “queer utopianism,” a notion that envisages a spatiotemporal realm that is not yet here, but, with its world-making capacity, provides “a horizon of possibility” (97) to reimagine the future. Munoz’s idea of the field of utopia is minoritarian, marginal and queer, grounded in historically specific consciousness. For Kae and for Hermia, the about-to-happen future in Hong Kong is such a site, the basis for other ways of knowing and being in the world where they can form a women’s community over the form of the individual. Therefore, it remains both a real place and an imaginative construct that places Lee’s writing at the intersection of the real, historical and the imaginary, utopian, with desires and identifications that move beyond heteropatriarchal boundaries and national belongings. What is pictured here is an affective bond of cross-cultural sisterhood in a land of the future with political possibilities, a futuristic attitude across space, time and race, because, as Hermia tells us, the “bond between true sisters can’t be broken by time or distant apart” (47). In the queer moments of telling, we find not only the possibility for queer desire but also the opportunity for a transgressive future that gestures towards a process that does not involve a, to use Mohanty’s words again, “coherent, historically continuous, stable identity,” but one that is unsettled and in flux (89).

Decolonial Love

As the novel circles unavoidably back to Kelora in the Epilogue, Kelora turns out to be the ultimate ghostly and timeless figure. Given the era in which the novel is set, the interracial romance between a Chinese man and an Indigenous woman emerges as sexually deviant as well. Throughout Gwei Chang’s fleshly encounters with Kelora, she is predominantly marked by her “nakedness” (22). With Kelora’s appearance in both Prologue and Epilogue, the history of the

Chinese Canadian family appears here as the interval between the beginning of the search for bones of the Chinese railroad workers who have become obsolescent and the sensual encounter with an indigenous woman, and a final embrace of the indigenous land and love across time and space that is never given the legitimacy by the white settler society. Goellnicht argues that the obsession with racial purity is grounded “in a false, essentialist notion of race as based on biological purity or cultural authenticity that enables the building of binary oppositions between Self and Other” (307). In this Chinese Canadian family that values their “Chineseness” as their core, the encounter with the Other, the “impure,” namely Ting-An and Morgan, is actually always the encounter with their own past, with Gwei Chang’s past. As Rita Wong suggests, Gwei Chang occupies “multiple class positions” (186) throughout the novel, and his upward mobility relies largely on his rejection of the past with Kelora and embracement of bourgeois rules and logic. Ironically the Wong blood comes from Ting-An, Gwei Chang’s illegitimate son with Kelora, which signifies his failure to keep the past with Kelora at bay, both temporally and spatially, with memory of her haunting Gwei Chang the rest of his life. His pursuit of a “family with chinese [sic] roots” (25) falls empty at the very beginning.

Kelora is therefore given a marginal yet shifting space that somehow assumes an uncanny centrality in the novel as well as the family relations. The interracial sexual encounter out of time and space that is considered taboo by the white society at that time blurs lines between the past and the present, the living and the dead. If we can understand Kelora as the missing mother, and the loss of her as the cause of the whole story that leads to the family tragedy, then it is Gwei Chang’s unresolved affair with Kelora that remains the missing piece from the puzzle. Kelora, in the end, again occupies another realm in which Gwei Chang meets her outside of the temporal discipline of settler colonial logic. Rita Wong encourages Asian Canadians to “position

Indigenous people's struggles instead of normalized whiteness as the reference point through which we come to articulate our subjectivities" (158). Tellingly, it is never made clear by Lee in the novel who Kelora's father is, whether she is Chen Gwok Fai's offspring or the dying white man's, but it does not matter, and such ambiguity further undermines any sense of family lineage or authentic pure bloodline so as to articulate subjectivities that are fluid. Roy Miki, when talking about Asian Canadian literature, calls for writers to employ the act of deterritorialization as "a viable method for resisting assimilation, for exploring variations in form that undermine aesthetic norms, for challenging homogenizing political systems, and for articulating subjectivities that emerge from beleaguered communities" (43). The loosely Deleuzian sense of deterritorialization that traces connections and movements as opposed to settler territorialization again reminds readers to deconstruct the neat family tree. As the novel narrates through the story of Kelora, it represents the potentiality of fictive kinship and relationality against logics of white heteronormativity for Chinese Canadians. It is always the forbidden love and desire distinct from straight marriage and time that transgresses spatial and temporal boundaries to carve out a new space to envisage decolonial love.

Conclusion

In this paper I want to offer a reading of the novel in order to explore the role of queerness and queer temporality in the struggle for a family and communal history, and what it means to be anticipating a potential future that is worth living when the past seems hopeless and the present stagnant. Narratives replete with memories, deceit, secrets, conflict and desires are of central importance in thinking about their relationship to the repressed history and trying to do justice to difficulties of the Chinese Canadian past. The building of railroads that constructs modernity connects various locations across space and time, creating spatiotemporal disjunction

that exposes the trajectory of the settler colonial design with the exploitation of both Chinese labor and indigenous land as its defining conditions. The temporal imaginary of nation building shapes early Chinese Canadian bodies by shaping time, exposing racial implications of progress and dominant historicism. Yet temporal complexities of Lee's construction of the family history challenge the single overarching trajectory of progress which is fraught with racial violence that excludes Chinese railroad workers and immigrants from the concept of the nation. The uncertainty and discontinuity of historical details undermines the fixed notion of place, origin and time and resists offering history as a single self-conforming ground or any romanticized origin story for Chinese Canadians. Through moments of affective bonding between women, the novel presents different routes to same sex love and coalition and calls for a women's community comprised of a web of relations with geographical mobility. The turn to a queer plot between Kae and Hermia in the end blurs geographical, racial and sexual boundaries in the diasporic formation, and provides fertile terrain for tracing the spatiotemporal disjunction that the Chinese Canadian community suffers, so as to reimagine kinship, time and future so we can look at the Chinese Canadian identity as not being solely based on national identity, belonging or loyalty, but as mobility and transnational connections. To reconsider ties of family, race, belonging and desire, the resistance of love or desire that is outside of heteronormative frame becomes clear. Queerness, therefore, offers a fecund futurity for readers to come to terms with a utopic spatiotemporal realm with the possibility of love and hope.

Chapter 4. Conclusion

I started this thesis with the scene from *Disappearing Moon Cafe* in which Kae remarks that her family history, filled with secrets, tension and drama, is hysterical. In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, when Murasaki first contemplates her experience growing up in Nanton as a Japanese girl from a family in which each member bears the burden of the past, she makes the similar comment that in her family “hysteria or history can become one and the same” (45), again linking the family history to the stereotypically feminized disorder. Once considered an illness, hysteria is seen by feminist scholars, in the second-wave feminist movements especially, as a symbol of the systemic oppression that aims to regulate women’s body and sexuality¹⁰. Just like Naoe’s statement that “there is method in my madness” (16), their choice to lean upon the discourse of hysteria and madness might not be coincidental, but deliberate, in a way signaling an identity with racial, sexual and gendered oppression at its core. Foucault famously claims in *The Order of Things* that “the history of madness would be the history of the Other” while “the history of the Same” is the history that is in order (xxvi). Writing stories of the racialized Other is not to rescue that history from madness that used to be excluded and regulated so as to adhere to the narrative coherence, but to embrace a past fraught with the ghostly, haunted, the racially impure that all seem to be “out of order” and “too much.” The idea of considering non-normative sexuality alongside the non-linear time has been important to me here, and my analysis has been concerned with how they interact with each other to create new modes of temporality, history and identity that ruptures the history of “the Same.”

¹⁰ In the 1980s, feminists started to reclaim hysteria as a constructed illness. They argue that hysteria results from women’s oppressed social roles in a male dominated society. See Gilman, Sander L., Helen King, Roy Porter, G. S. Rousseau, and Elaine Showalter. *Hysteria Beyond Freud*. University of California Press, 1993.

In exploring some of the reasons for the increasing engagement with anti-linearity and queer sexuality in Asian Canadian literature in the 1990s, this thesis has aimed to take on the notion of “queer time” that queer scholars see as critical to an analysis of how the history of the sexualized Other is produced. There is a turn to the non-normative sexuality that is directly related to each novel’s representation of women, which is fundamental to the construction of their status and agency as racialized and gendered minority. While I do not intend to undermine the long-existing theorizations of Asian North American identity and temporality in terms of melancholia, I bring my approach to displacement, grief and history in line with queerness and suggest a queer reading that foregrounds bodily pleasure in the encounter with the lost object might be productive in Asian migration experiences without feeling the need to pathologize them. I want to think about how to read the excess, the “too much,” the non-normative that gestures toward futuristic possibilities.

In the chapter on *Chorus of Mushrooms*, I suggest that Naoe’s excessive desires defy the aging process and potential death, engaging in a queering of time to unmark the gendered and racialized regulations of her body. Murasaki’s shared bodily experience with Naoe and her challenge to the hetero-reproductive marriage plot further undermine generational inheritance. As the novel reconstructs narratives of immigration with a happy ending, it critiques the assimilative discourse of multiculturalism. Then, I look at *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and suggest that the Chinese Canadian family’s history is not that heteronormative in the first place. Focusing on the queer plot between Kae and Hermia, I argue that it is specifically their womanly love that underwrites a future for Asian Canadian women in a transnational context. As narratives portray temporal experiences, through their manipulations of time, narrators challenge the logic of the chrononormative. The magical realm of telepathy between the narrators and their female

ancestors are the unifying traits of their attempts to tell the family history, in which women's desires have been largely repressed. The embodied encounters across time and space inform the individual's understanding of the world. Murasaki's and Kae's time travel forges new relations with the past, and both novels create a distinct temporality that challenges the prevailing normative linearity of national time. Through the culminating story-telling practices, female characters appear to exist outside the normative time of the worlds they occupy, and in doing so they offer the reconstruction of subjectivity and relationality that attend to experiences of immigration, abjection and subject formation, raising questions of migration, nationhood, sexuality and racial experience, among others. As they both undermine the genealogical expectations of the heteronormative reproduction, the disruption posed by the women characters is not something that should be fixed or reassuring.

The two texts herein not only offer a counter-history of the racialized and gendered Other, they also underlie the significance of multiple identities within Asian Canadian representations. They do not aim to reproduce a Japanese or Chinese culture and identity. From the Vietnamese workers and Chinese families who are largely rendered silent in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, to the mixed-blood lineage in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, the two novels require us to read against the grain to discover possible ways of how characters might articulate positions of alterity as opposed to a singular or reductive expectation of Asian Canadian identity. Rather than continuing to employ the racialized and gendered Other as a means of reaffirming the heteronormative structure of national identity, we should embrace the embodied experience of difference. Whereas Lee envisions a future for her female characters, a utopic sexual site that puts emphasis on fictive kinship and women's love and communities, at the same time, she ends the novel with an epilogue that gestures towards the past, in which Gwei Chang crosses the river

of time to reunite with Kelora. In this fictional moment, moving forward and going backward happen at the same time. Gwei Chang's time travel exposes not only a longing for an escape from time but also a longing for reversing the past. Notably, we recognize the significance of deterritorializing the homogenous ideology of nation-state. The contravention of the chrononormative therefore also lies in the contravention of the industrial-colonial capitalism that Gwei Chang benefits from after he leaves Kelora and starts his own business with his Chinese wife. This alternative fictional narrative that seeks indigenous coalition reminds us again of our positionality as readers of the Asian Canadian literary past to navigate legacies of settler colonialism and interracial relations when we think about racial and sexual identities. Reconciling with the past is as important as, if not more so than, creating a future.

I started the chapter on *Chorus of Mushrooms* with Benjamin's angel of history as it delineates a vision of politics of the past and the future. In a way, we also are the angel that hopes to recuperate the past and yet is brought forward into the future. Not only do the novels I have chosen to address both attend to non-normative sexual practices of Asian Canadian women, but the writers themselves are also self-identified queer Asian Canadians, contributing to the queer Asian Canadian activism that strives to create women's communities. Looking back at the texts about the past that arise from specific historical, social and cultural contexts and identifications, we as readers approaching historical writing share a similar position with the narrators striving to understand their family history. In this sense, my thesis works to show how the authors emerging from the specific period of time attempt to create relations with the past through sexual representations, so as to think about what we can make of their gender politics to understand the present and the future of Asian Canadian struggles.

The question of Asian Canadian futurity is where I would like to leave the thesis. Whereas the “future” is a site that is everchanging, some futures that have been previously envisioned have become the present moment. Looking at *Disappearing Moon Cafe* retrospectively in the thirty years since its publication, it seems that Lee’s imagined future that lies in Hong Kong has not really materialized yet, as Hong Kong still remains a site of struggle. Furthermore, with the rise of anti-Asian aggression and hate crimes in the current pandemic moment that echoes the persisting “yellow peril” discourse, how not to let the past take over the present and the future remains quintessential. From the Chinese Exclusion Act that led to the bachelor society and the abnormal gender ratio to the Japanese internment camps during WWII, reproductive futurism for Asian Canadians seems bleak at the very beginning. While it does not equate to the conclusion that we should merely stop believing in a future, it does require that we not to celebrate a hybrid future superficially. Talking about the future, SKY Lee once said optimistically in an interview that “often a child symbolizes the future, something to motivate you to work towards.” While Edelman warns readers that all political visions of the future are invested in “the Imaginary of the Child” that sustains a reproductive future (14), as various critics have pointed out, he barely touches on the subject of race. Edelman’s Child figure, as he himself acknowledges, cannot be a racialized one. To queer Asian Canadian history and embrace a different kind of future, then, requires us to move away from the essentialist notion of queer negativity. As we historicize the past to understand the concrete and exact struggles, we are able to work towards a more optimistic future of difference, towards what Munoz theorizes as the queer future that is about “a desire for another way of being in both the world and time” (91).

As queer Asian Canadians locate themselves in the transnational context, the focus on the future of transnationality requires further attention to multiple locations and relations. In her

theorization of queer politics, Cathy Cohen states that the radical potential is its ability to destabilize and transgress “the boundaries of identity” (481) so as to work towards coalition politics; queer is non-identitarian (482). The political potential of queerness that lies in its ability to destabilize various categories again speaks to SKY Lee’s critique of the dominant white lesbian politics focusing on one single category at that time that is limiting and problematic. Queerness offers a new mode of relationality that puts emphasis on communities and relationality while rejects cultural nationalism with a singular or reductive expectation of Asian Canadian identity. With both its historicity and its ongoing potential to think about Asian Canadian subjectivity, the analysis of queer temporalities and non-normative female sexuality presented in Asian Canadian women’s writing can be a starting point to help us recognize the significance of ruptures and disruptions and be aware of how melancholy, reproduction, futurity, kinship and utopia are all imbricated in their experiences and their writing for our understanding against constraints of the chrononormative.

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