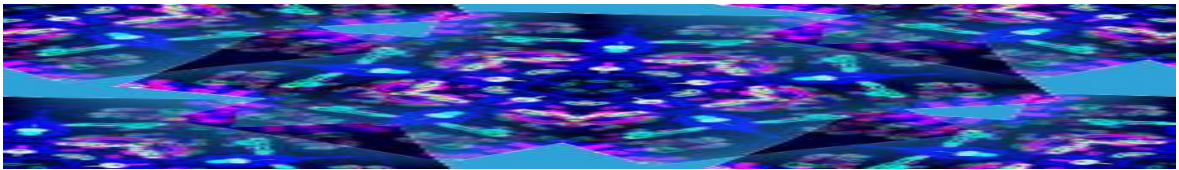


Nicole Falkenhayner

**Identity in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Sky Lee's  
*Disappearing Moon Café*.**

Narrative Strategies in the Re-Negotiation of Self, Ethnicity and Nation



Universität Konstanz  
Geisteswissenschaftliche Sektion  
Fachbereich Literaturwissenschaft  
Eingereicht als Magisterarbeit im Juli 2005

1. Gutachterin: Prof. Dr. Silvia Mergenthal

2. Gutachterin: Prof. Dr. Aleida Assmann

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>3</b>
<hr/>	
<b>1. IDENTITY AND MINORITY EXPERIENCE IN CANADA</b>	<b>5</b>
<hr/>	
1.1. PERSONAL IDENTITY	5
1.2. COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND EMANCIPATORY DISCOURSE	8
1.3. CANADIAN SOCIETY AND CANADIAN IDENTITY	12
<b>2. IDENTITY BETWEEN SILENCE AND SPEECH: JOY KOGAWA'S <i>OBASAN</i></b>	<b>17</b>
<hr/>	
2.1. THE NOVEL IN THE CONTEXT OF JAPANESE CANADIAN HISTORY	17
2.1.1. THE NOVEL	17
2.1.2. JOY KOGAWA	20
2.2. "HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION" AS STRATEGY FOR IDENTITY NEGOTIATION	22
2.2.1. <i>OBASAN</i> AS "HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION"	22
2.2.2. IDENTITY BETWEEN SILENCE AND SPEECH	27
2.3. IDENTITY AND LAND	34
2.3.1. LAND, MYTH, NATION	34
2.3.2. NAOMI'S OWN CANADA	35
<b>3. TRICKY IDENTITIES: SKY LEE'S <i>DISAPPEARING MOON CAFÉ</i></b>	<b>38</b>
<hr/>	
3.1. THE NOVEL IN THE CONTEXT OF CHINESE CANADIAN HISTORY	38
3.1.1. THE NOVEL	38
3.1.2. SKY LEE	41
3.2. "TRICKSTER NARRATION" AS STRATEGY FOR IDENTITY NEGOTIATION	42
3.2.1. <i>DISAPPEARING MOON CAFÉ</i> AS TRICKSTER NOVEL	42
3.2.2. TRICKSTER WRITING AND "THE COLLECTIVE SELF"	45
3.3. IDENTITY MASKS, IDENTITY TRAPS	48
3.3.1. MASKS OF AUTHENTICITY	48
3.3.2. AN ECO-FEMINIST ALTERNATIVE?	52
3.3.3. MARKETABLE IDENTITIES	55
<b>4. "WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE CANADIAN?" – CHANCES FOR TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITIES</b>	<b>59</b>
<hr/>	
4.1. CANADIAN MULTICULTURALISM	60
4.2. TRANSCULTURAL HYBRIDITY?	64
<b>FINAL REMARKS</b>	<b>67</b>
<hr/>	
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>69</b>
<hr/>	
<b>ANHANG 1: DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENFASSUNG</b>	<b>74</b>
<hr/>	
<b>ANHANG 2: ERKLÄRUNG</b>	<b>76</b>
<hr/>	

## Introduction

The aim of this essay is to discuss the novels *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa and *Disappearing Moon Café* by Sky Lee with a focus on how these novels present and provoke issues of personal identity, ethnic identity and a discursive construction of these two identity types within a national identity of Canada.

In recent decades, women writers from minorities have entered the literary world with politically engaged art which aims at overturning essentialised notions about their identity, and unearthing the experiences and history of their specific communities which were previously not regarded within mainstream cultural discussion. “Border-crossing” has been a key word in the discussion of this writing were writers from ethnic minorities try to break down the cultural borders that have assigned them a marginal, racialized position. The establishment of a counter-discourse, however, faces the danger of positing another iconic discursive myth which would again stabilize binaries where it sought to destabilize them. But writers were and are addressing this challenge by applying narrative strategies which undercut the possible positioning of a counter-icon. These strategies include a high level of self-consciousness about the constructed quality of their own narrative, which hints at and uncovers the narrative construction of official history, and thereby deconstructs official discourses. This reflected stance is also constitutive of an understanding of identity as a creative, dynamic act that is akin to the construction of narration.

In the light of postmodernism, and with post-structural theory, clear-cut definitions of identity fail, and the fluid, dynamic and ambiguous nature of identity is foregrounded. Also, with post-structural and post-colonial theories, the power relations embedded in identity constructions are foregrounded. This essay will try to show how the notion of identity as a dynamic project is present and presented in the two novels discussed.

Both authors are Canadians and the novels are set in Canada. The novels discuss the re-construction and possible re-negotiation of Canadian history and identity from the specific vantage point of the ethnic groups they belong to. Canada, or rather the construction of a Canadian identity, appears

as fruitful ground for questions of identity negotiations, as these are an ongoing concern in Canadian literature and culture in general. Canada, as a former colony, but as a settler-colony, also a coloniser itself, displays within its history the many complexities of inter-cultural or multicultural self-definition. I believe the novels I want to discuss are also fruitful vantage points for discussions about the routes and strategies Canada has sought and applied to search for an identity that assesses the hybridity<sup>1</sup> of its population. This essay will therefore also review the Canadian policy of Multiculturalism, and question its success.

I will first aim at a definition of personal identity that will be applied as basis for the discussion of collective identity and minority experience in Canada. Then, I will turn to discuss Kogawa's and Lee's novel with a focus on identity questions, and the narrative strategies these works apply in order to establish and re-negotiate identity issues. In doing this, I will not rely on one specific theoretical frame. I will use theoretical concepts to highlight what I perceived the novels transport within the context of identity negotiation, but the texts themselves are at the heart of the discussion. Searching for concepts that helped me explain best what I geared at, I settled on discussing Kogawa's *Obasan* with the aid of Linda Hutcheon's concept of "Historiographical Metafiction" and I will apply Jane Rosier Smith's paradigm of "Trickster Writing" to Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*. In the last part of the essay, I will discuss Canadian Multiculturalism and throw open the discussion on where we are to find new concepts for collective identity constructions in a time in which cultural migration and mobility will grow in significance.

---

<sup>1</sup> The term hybridity is used throughout this essay to denote individuals or groups of individuals with heterogenous cultural and / or racial heritages. It is not used as an attempt at masking or "white-washing" cultural differences. The last part of the essay discusses the term as a conscious attempt at "the deliberate disruption of homogeneity" (Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2003: 120). The author of this essay is aware of the old, negative connotation of the term in imperial discourse, but contends it has been discussed frequently enough in a different meaning by authors such as Bakhtin and Bhabha to be used safely with a positive connotation today.

## **1. Identity and Minority Experience in Canada**

### **1.1. Personal Identity**

The term “Identity” has gained great currency in the cultural sciences in recent decades. The term functions as a connector which touches on topics of history and memory, on personal and collective identification with narratives of history, on questions of the discursive self-construction of persons and groups of all kinds, from small groups of friends to the self-understanding and image that nations apply to themselves or get applied to from outside.

“Identity” is therefore one of the theoretical core terms in sociology, anthropology and psychology, three disciplines which started to rise with the epochal cultural changes linked to industrialization, the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of what is called modernity in discussions of literature. The term “Identity”, as it is understood throughout this essay, has to be seen as closely linked to and constituted by the project of modernity, and the more recent reactions to this cultural frame which have frequently been described as postmodern.

The modern understanding of “Identity” can hardly be thought about without an idea of identity-crisis, which has been frequently seen as the constitutive state of mind in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and is reflected in the literature of this time: Feelings of alienation and a confusion about what to identify with are frequently expressed, as for example in John Dos Passos’ *Manhattan Transfer* or the characters of Ernest Hemingway’s writing.

The term “Identity” as it is used today can be seen to have developed out of the ego-psychology of Erik H. Erikson since the 1950’s, who often used the compound term “psychosocial identity”. Erikson’s term denoted the unity of a person, which would be achieved via acts of psychological integration (into a given context) and a synthesis of influences, by which a person wants to assure herself of the continuity and coherence of the life she leads. The idea would be that continuity and coherence are developed and constructed out of diachronic and synchronic experiences of difference and alteration. These experiences are

constitutive for the acts that are employed for identity construction, and are probably the reasons why identity construction becomes necessary in the first place<sup>2</sup>.

At the core of Erikson's understanding of identity was the experience of the identity-crisis, in which orientation posts that one has constructed for the self – the terms one applies to describe oneself and their meanings – are shattered. Jürgen Straub describes Erikson's idea:

Wer nicht (mehr) in der Lage ist, sich Orientierung im physikalischen, sozialen und moralischen Raum zu verschaffen, wer an einer Diffusion des physikalischen, biographischen und historischen Zeitbewusstseins leidet [und daher nicht mehr selbstbestimmt handeln kann, N.F.], wer überdies die Fähigkeit eingebüßt hat, jene (auch unbewussten) Leistungen zu vollbringen, welche einem das Gefühl und Bewusstsein vermitteln, trotz wechselnder Lebensumstände und vielfältiger Widerfährnisse und Aktivitäten die nämliche, einheitliche Person zu sein, der erfährt jenen Mangel an sich selbst den Erikson Identitätskrise nennt<sup>3</sup>

This passage also can be read as a definition of what Erikson would have understood as a working identity construction *ex negativo*. Identity problems are problems of orientation, and this links back to modernity: In societies where experiences of difference and alteration are the norm, and where individuals must continually change to adapt to continuously changing outer circumstances, identity construction is highlighted as a perpetual project. Identity diffusion and threatening loss of identity can therefore be seen as constitutive for the modern subject.

In later theories and the further questioning of the term, identity came to be understood as a project, as a task. This implies that identity is not something "natural". The term points to certain features of the personal meaning-making of the self. This meaning-making of the self has to be actively performed, it is

Ein kultur- und gesellschaftsspezifischer Modus, Subjektivität zu formen, mit anderen Worten: dem Selbst- und Wertverhältnis von Personen eine spezifische Struktur oder Form *zu verleihen*. Identität ist in jedem Fall ein

---

<sup>2</sup> See Straub, Jürgen. „Personale und kollektive Identität: zur Analyse eines theoretischen Begriffs“. Assmann, Aleida and Heidrun Friese (eds.). *Identitäten: Erinnerung, Geschichte, Identität 3*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998: 73-104: 75

<sup>3</sup> Straub 85

stets nur vorläufiges Produkt psychischer Akte, in denen das Denken, Fühlen und Wollen untrennbar ineinandergreifen und die ihrerseits sozial konstituiert oder vermittelt sind: ‚Identität ist sein soziales Phänomen bzw. ‚soziogen‘<sup>4</sup>

The term “Identity” is based on historic and socio-cultural conditions which shape and determine the way it is applied. Like the project of modernity, to which the discussed understanding of identity is linked, it is an always incomplete and unachieved project. The construction of identity has in this sense to be understood as something never to be pinned down as a finality. The negotiation of who somebody is, who somebody wants to be or is allowed to be, is never finished.

The (post-)modern question of identity is grounded in radical experiences of contingency, difference and alteration. The wish for continuity or coherence does not apply to something that is supposed to be unchangeable – rather, the question of identity asks how subjects construct themselves under circumstances in which alteration and contingency are understood as given<sup>5</sup>. These features lead an understanding of identity, and with that, an understanding of the historicity of a person or group, away from homogenous narratives, away from ideas of unity, a wish for authenticity and a dogmatic understanding of “reality” as one universal truth:

Am Grunde des identitätstheoretischen Denkens der Psychologie und Soziologie der (späten) Moderne liegt die Erfahrung einer beschleunigten, dynamisierten Zeit, die Erfahrung des eigenen Selbst, ja der Wirklichkeit überhaupt, als Möglichkeitsraum.<sup>6</sup>

Identity can therefore be seen as a process, which begins to get to work under circumstances of transformation, not in static, unchangeable situations. It is in spaces at the borders between entities, at the spaces in-between, where identity is negotiated and re-constructed. Identity is therefore always a reflexive construct: It is not something that is simply “there”.

---

<sup>4</sup> Straub 87, he quotes from Assmann, Jan. *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München: C. H. Beck, 1992: 130

<sup>5</sup> Straub 89

<sup>6</sup> Straub 90

When a person is successful in constructing her identity, she has actively and creatively *made* what she was looking for. Identity is made, affirmed or scrambled and changed with everything we say or otherwise express about ourselves, and how we assemble a diachronic and synchronic context around us. Seeing identity as an always provisional result of creative acts (and, foremost, speech acts) shows the nearness of the concept to the concept of narration. The telling of stories and the way we shape them are of utmost importance for the construction of who we are, want to be, can be. With the attention of post-structural theories to the textuality and essentially narrative nature of the faculties the human being applies to construct a “self”, a subject, any claiming of a “natural” identity must be seen as ideological, as such an understanding misses the changeability of “the signified by the various chains of signifiers in which it is entangled”<sup>7</sup>.

The acceptance of alteration, ambiguity and plurality are necessary conditions for the construction of a creative, workable identity. The novels that I will discuss in this essay reflect this acceptance of ambiguity and plurality in their narrative forms, as they apply strategies by which the context-frames in which the characters move are shown as being not congruent with the labels that are applied to them. The narrators perceive a distance, a difference between who they feel they are and the words that are given them to write about themselves. In many ways, which will be discussed in this essay, the novels acknowledge and creatively work with “the questionable subject in process”<sup>8</sup>.

## 1.2. Collective Identity and Emancipatory Discourse

After having discussed the constructed and symbolic features of identity on the personal level, it becomes clear that, on a collective level, where a group, a gender, an ethnicity or a nation constructs an identity, this structure

---

<sup>7</sup> Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983: 129

<sup>8</sup> Kristeva, Julia. “From One Identity to an Other”. Lucy, Niall (ed.). *Postmodern Literary Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000: 69-92: 70



is finally totally symbolic. A group-construct is clearly not a biophysical entity, but the identity constructions that are formed for or by groups often describe the group as such in order to give it agency. As Jan Assmann notes: “Den Sozialkörper gibt es nicht im Sinne sichtbarer, greifbarer Wirklichkeit. Er ist eine Metapher, eine imaginäre Größe, ein soziales Konstrukt. Als solches aber gehört er durchaus der Wirklichkeit an”. (Assmann 132)

While the term “personal identity” refers to a subject who exists as a biophysical entity (as more than a metaphor), the question of group identity immediately addresses the constitution of the given group: which persons are discursively assembled *by whom* and in *which way* is this done<sup>9</sup>, and to what possible ends?

When we regard these questions, the question of collective identity becomes intrinsically also a question of power. The power to author the story of ones’ identity or the “being authored” by an other group discursively shapes the “real” fate of “real” people. As Goellnicht quotes Wittig: “I would like to insist on the material oppression of individuals by discourse”<sup>10</sup>. To address these questions of power-structures formed by discourse leads right into questions of the discursive value that certain groups are being assigned and emancipatory movements which demand a change in the ways in which we understand concepts such as gender and race. It also leads to questions of how concepts of the “foreign” or “other” are constructed in order to define what is the “own”. Collective identities are therefore often formed by expressing and prescribing what is not part of the given collective. Straub notes how, in order to express the identity of a collective, a group of persons has to be essentialised and actively unified to turn the collective into a discursive “fact”<sup>11</sup>. This making of a collective often operates ideologically and includes a prescription of identity-features that are often stereotypical. These discursive acts are performed to establish borders between collectives and are used to prescribe

---

<sup>9</sup> See Straub 98

<sup>10</sup> Goellnicht, Donald C. “Father Land and Mother Tongue: The Divided Female Subject in Kogawa’s Obasan and Hong Kongston’s The Woman Warrior” Morgan, Janice and Colette T. Hall (eds.). *Gender and Genre in Literature*. New York: Garland, 1991: 119-134: 129, he quotes from Wittig, Monique. “The Straight Mind”. *Feminist Issues* 1 (Summer 1980): 103-111

<sup>11</sup> See Straub 99

understandings of what constitutes the “centre” of a group, culture or nation and who is discursively positioned in a marginal or subaltern space.

Centres, however, need their margins in order to become centres in the first place. They don't simply disregard the people, or places, genders or ethnicities they have discursively defined as their margins. They need them as their “other”, with which they are intrinsically linked: Marginalized subjects or groups function as the image of what the centre is not and with that, constitute its identity. The opposition between centre and margin must be kept up in order to ensure the ongoing existence of the centre. “Something” only “is” via the definition of its antithesis. If a centre would acknowledge that maybe its “other” isn't so different from itself in the first place, that the borderlines are blurry and can potentially be undercut, it would have to open its identity up to discussion. It is this potential blurring of oppositions that is used in emancipatory discourses in order to re-assess the identity of groups which have been assigned a marginal space.

The “blurry sign” of post-structuralism can therefore be applied as a strategy to de-naturalize the shape of gender identities and ethnic identities.

In the feminist movement especially, these strategies have been applied to help deconstruct the position of woman as the “eternal other” to man. They have also been applied by many writers to address the marginalization of histories and experiences of ethnic minorities. Applying narrative strategies which defy closure and *telos* reflect the problematic position of self-narrative of subjects and groups which have, along narrative constructions by dominant groups, been historically denied access to an understanding of themselves as subjects who have an authority to fashion and re-fashion their history and identity. This authority has been increasingly demanded and worked upon by writers from a marginalized background in recent decades. Similar to the above discussed understanding of identity as a creative, ongoing task, these writers have applied an openness in the understanding of story and history in order to fashion new narratives about silenced histories. Thereby, it was possible to assert an “in-between” position which makes it possible to both establish and discuss their cultural heritage while at the same time working to destroy and attack essentialised notions and narratives about their identity.

Writers who want to establish a counter-discourse to a hegemonic narrative that orders minorities to a marginal space, however, always face the thread to establish an iconic construction concerning their identity which would be just as monolithic, just as stereotypical and static as the hegemonic narrative they were tackling in the first place. It would therefore be just as prone to deconstruction. Newer literature by ethnic writers, such as the two novels that will be discussed in this essay, addresses this challenge via their narrative forms: by opening their own narrative up to discussion and reflecting upon the uneasy nature of language as a transporter of experience, they express a self-consciousness about their own status as constructs.

By defying linearity and closure, they leave it to the reader to work out their many levels of meaning. Due to these features, the novels take on just the fluid, dynamic and ambiguous quality that has been developed in the context of identity formation above. They can thereby deal with questions of identity formation connected to memory, history, ethnic and national identity without returning to essentialised notions and blocking themselves off to change. I believe that the novels I will discuss here are actually quite interested in change, and that they try to find strategies of how to re-assess the identity confusion of people with a multicultural, hybrid heritage. With the rise of a globalised economy, experiences of alteration and change, of “identities in motion”, so to speak, take on a new urgency. Traditional nation states of the European type have in recent years reacted to this with attempts to recuperate traditional ideas about values and markers to stabilize their identities, as could for example be seen in the recent discussion on patriotism in Germany. These attempts alone show that national identities are set into motion, and that the traditional values for which a return is sometimes demanded, have been scrambled. I believe that it is therefore interesting to look at the situation of a nation that is “traditionally” multicultural and uneasy to define its overall national identity, such as Canada. In recent years, many writers dealing with marginalized histories and identities have entered Canadian literature and again re-shaped the ongoing discussion about Canadian identity.

The novels *Obasan* and *Disappearing Moon Café*, which will later be discussed, were written by female authors from a Japanese Canadian and a Chinese Canadian background, respectively. The history and situation of these two subcultures of Canada will be shortly reviewed directly preceding the discussions of the two novels, as the contents of the novels are reviewed in context with these histories. In the remaining part of this passage, I will attempt to shortly review the cultural make-up of Canadian society as a whole, and the reactions of Canadian literature to the specific situation of this country concerning a possible Canadian identity.

### 1.3. Canadian Society and Canadian Identity

Canada, a traditional immigrant nation such as the United States, is frequently described as a “multicultural mosaic society”<sup>12</sup>. The cultural mosaic is the image which is frequently used to describe the multi-ethnic compilation of its population. If, however, a possible Canadian overall culture would indeed be the sum of all the existing subcultures is an ongoing question, just as the question if there is such an overall Canadian culture and identity in the first place. If one would wish, in an attempt to return to ideas of a more or less clearly defined identity of a nation as a discursive construct, try to single out a Canadian national identity, constructs that have traditionally been used for this such as defining common values and / or ethnic homogeneity, Canada would be a problematic case. The cultural structure of Canada is extremely heterogenous and not easily defined. It is, however, possible to dissect three kinds of subcultures: The “First Nations”, constituted by the autochthonous peoples of Canada, the “Founding Nations”, constituted by people of French and British heritage, and the “other” ethnic subcultures<sup>13</sup>. But the problems of such a distinction are obvious: neither are the First Nations a hegemonic group, as they are constituted by peoples of vastly different cultural heritages,

---

<sup>12</sup> See Mintzel, Alf. *Multikulturelle Gesellschaften in Europa und Nordamerika: Konzepte, Streitfragen, Analysen, Befunde*. Passau: Rothe, 1997: 559

<sup>13</sup> See Mintzel 561

combining the Métis (people of French Canadian- Native North American heritage), the Inuit and many North American Indian tribes, nor are the French and the British subcultures ethnically homogenous. The last part of the “other” ethnic subcultures are again combined of vastly varying cultural backgrounds, including people of German, Ukrainian, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Latin-American and African heritage, to name but a few. Also, the different groups cannot be said to be standing on one level regarding their influence on dominant political discourse. Traditionally, the quarrels between the Founding Nations have dominated Canada, and cultural output was largely influenced by cultural movements and traditions from either France or Britain. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the influence of the United States on Canadian culture has grown, and only with the advent of movements from other ethnicities and the official multicultural programme since 1971 and the Multiculturalism Act of 1988, people from a non-British or non-French background gained larger ground in the cultural self-definition of Canada.

This cultural self-definition, and the idea of a Canadian identity, are however still under heavy construction. The country lacks several criteria which would make a definition of it as a “traditional” nation, along the lines of a common ethnicity, religion, history and common cultural values, possible.

The citizens of Canada cannot be unified by belonging to one ethnicity, they do not speak the same language and have no common religion. Also, Canada lacks an important discursive factor that makes the idea of nation easier in the United States, which is also a multi-ethnic and multicultural society: Canada did not produce a national narrative, it has no “national dream” that would be comparable to the US-American “civil religion”<sup>14</sup>. While both countries share a legacy as British colonies, and both are equally multi-racial, the identity proclaimed by the United States has found a narrative centre within ideas of the “manifest destiny” and the “American creed”, and with the Declaration of Independence, stylised itself as a nation of the “Free”.

---

<sup>14</sup> See Mintzel 577

In Canada, however, no such discursive construction has taken place: it stayed and stays a part of the British Commonwealth of Nations and, in Quebec, under francophone influence. The country only slowly moved from a bicultural towards a multicultural policy. With the Multiculturalism Act, Canada made an official attempt to assess the hybridity of its population, thereby searching for a new definition of itself as a nation.

While the US seeks to assimilate immigrants to an “Anglo-Conformity” via the English language and a subscription to specific, national myths, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act proclaimed a demand and wish for diversity. If the idea of the “community of communities” (Mitzel 580) actually meets the emancipatory demands of ethnic minorities will be discussed in the last part of this essay. Regarding the question of a Canadian identity it is important to note that apart from ethnic heterogeneity, other factors such as the strong regionalism and the historical development of the country, make a construction of an “over-all“ Canadian identity along traditional concepts difficult. There seems to be little feeling of traditional, uniquely Canadian culture held in common by all, or even most Canadians. It has frequently been stated that the perpetual search for an identity is, paradoxically, maybe the most stable project in Canadian culture. As Lipset notes, “National identity is the quintessential Canadian issue”<sup>15</sup>.

If one is interested, as this essay is, in the above mentioned understanding of identity as a process, the ongoing discussion about Canadian identity can be seen as an expression “in real life” of this concept. In Canadian literature, a re-writing of seemingly authoritative narratives is taking place. Canadian literature in English has in the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century seen itself as an outpost of British literature. Concerning cultural self-definition, Canadian literature in English clung to the colonial centre, Great Britain, long after Canada became a state of its own. The relationship of Canada to Great Britain in this time is fittingly described as a family relation in the poem “Our Lady of the Snows” (1897) by Rudyard Kipling, where the personified Canada describes itself as daughter of England:

---

<sup>15</sup> Mitzel 577, he quotes from Lipset, Seymour Martin. *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of United States and Canada*. New York: Routledge, 1990: 42

“Daughter am I in my mother’s house / But mistress in my own”.<sup>16</sup> Here, Canada can be seen as defining itself as a margin, the discursive construction of which is defined by and related to the authoritative centre, Britain. The wish to belong to this centre was also reflected by Canada’s enthusiastic taking part in the Second World War, which it entered one week after Great Britain<sup>17</sup>.

In the post-war decades, an active attempt at constructing a national literature and culture was taking place. Here, Canada tried to define itself rather against the powerful neighbour, the United States. But this attempt as well showed Canada as a country with a cultural inferiority complex, with problems to define itself independently. This changed, however, in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a new, postmodern attempt towards literature. The cultural marginality of Canada, long lamented, was now understood as an asset: Out of the margins, a new understanding of history and identity could arise. By “writing back to the centre”, many Canadian writers were now interested in revising and re-writing colonial hierarchies and historical narratives. The past, and its narrative which act as a source for identity construction, were fictionally reconstructed. The narrative nature of identity was thereby highlighted. As Robert Kroetsch notes, “In a sense we haven’t got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real.” (Pache 552) The novels by Joy Kogawa and Sky Lee operate with a like understanding of identity and deal with a revision of the part the subcultures they deal with were ordered to play in the historical narrative of Canada. Where Canada is in a process to re-construct and re-write its history, the novels discussed in the following attempt to re-construct and re-write the history and identity of the Japanese and Chinese minorities within Canada. With that, they write from a position of a double margin, re-assessing their own past and with that, enlarging and changing the Canadian “story”. By this, they are part of a change of the image of Canada towards a polyphone, hybrid, and dynamic concept.

---

<sup>16</sup> Pache, Walter. “Literatur Kanadas – Die Andere Nordamerikanische Literatur”. Zapf, Hubert (Hrsg.). *Amerikanische Literaturgeschichte*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997: 520-585: 536

<sup>17</sup> See Pache 544

In the following two parts of this essay, I will discuss first *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa in detail, then attempting to do the same with *Disappearing Moon Café* by Sky Lee. I will, for each novel, give an overview of it in connection to the history of the Canadian subculture it deals with, shortly introduce its author, and then discuss the topics and strategies of the novels connected to identity construction. Thereby I wish to review the narrative strategies the novels apply in order to negotiate and re-assemble questions of personal, ethnic and national identity within an understanding of identity as a dynamic process.



## **2. Identity between Silence and Speech: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan***

### **2.1. The Novel in the Context of Japanese Canadian History**

#### **2.1.1. The Novel**

*Obasan*, first published in 1981, tells the fictional story of Naomi Nakane and her family, concentrating on the experience of the actual internment, dispossession and relocation of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War.

Learning about the death of her uncle in 1972, Naomi returns to the house of her Aunt Aya, called *Obasan* (meaning “Aunt” in Japanese). Here, she begins the search for her family’s past. With the narrative frame of Naomi filing through documents sent to her by her other Aunt, Emily, the novel intermingles Naomi’s lyrically described memories, diary entries from Emily, actual legal documents, letters and newspaper clippings. The mixing of these different forms of textual remembering defies an idea of hierarchy. The novel does not value legal documentation as having more authority, or, adding more authority to personal memory and personal narrative. Rather, the mixing of the different forms of narratives poses questions about who has the authority to define the shape and meaning of the past, who is allowed or takes the right to author the past, to author not only a personal, but also a society’s memory and with that, a person’s identity.

It also, by posing those questions, reveals how the identity of Naomi and her family as Japanese Canadians are made problematic and maimed by an official discourse that is presented as having strategically destroyed a Japanese Canadian community and their sense of belonging in Canada.

The novel chronicles the destruction of this community via a geographical movement of the character’s location. Before the war, Japanese Canadians appear as possessing a sense of belonging and a working existence centred at the Canadian pacific coast, living of fishing, highly regarded as manufacturers of boats and also working in learned professions, as signified by

the character of Naomi's father, who is a doctor, and her Uncle, who is a shipmaker. Especially the generation of Naomi's parents, the Nisei or second generation Japanese Canadians, believe they are better adapted and assimilated to mainstream, Euro-centric Canadian society than for example the Chinese Canadians whose situation will be discussed in the chapter on *Disappearing Moon Café*. This can be seen, for example, in the character Emily's identification, as a young woman, with a Canadian national symbol, the Mounties:

At one time, remember how I almost worshipped the Mounties? Remember the Curwood tales of the Northwest, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and how I'd go around saying their Motto – *Maintiens le droit* – maintain the right?<sup>18</sup>

During the war years, however, the acceptance that the Japanese Canadians believed they possessed, was quickly destroyed – labelled by wartime-propaganda as spies and traitors, in league with the enemy Japan, their identity and status as Canadian citizens is denied them completely. The reasoning along propagandistic lines was then used by the government to dispossess the Japanese Canadians and force them to move into ghost towns in the British Columbia interior, dispelling them, as it were, from Canadian society. In the novel, Naomi, with her brother Stephen and their Aunt Aya and Uncle Isamu Kato, move to the ghost town Slocan.

But even in Slocan, the Japanese Canadians are described as managing to maintain a community, learning to adapt to the situation and build up a town complete with shops, traditional gathering places as a bath house, and a school. They hope to be allowed to return to their hometowns after the war, but this hope is revealed as an illusion as, after the war, the members of the Slocan community are forced to relocate again and the community is finally scattered, single families are moved to places east of the Rocky Mountains. The scattering of communities was an actual policy of the Canadian government. Also, 4,000 Japanese Canadians were deported to Japan<sup>19</sup>. In the

---

<sup>18</sup> Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan*. New York: Anchor, 1994 [Quoted in the following as OBA]: 118

<sup>19</sup> See Lo, Marie. „*Obasan* by Joy Kogawa“. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong and Stephen H. Sumida (eds.). *A Resource Guide to Asian American Literature*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2001: 97-107: 101

novel, Naomi and her family are moved to a farm in Granton, Alberta, where they have to toil as cheap labour on a beet farm, which also echoes actual Canadian policy. With this, the Japanese Canadian community is finally destroyed and the reasoning of the Canadian government concerning the relocation of the Japanese Canadians is unmasked not only as racist but also as exploitative.

The forced mass-movement was the largest exodus in Canadian history. Roughly 22,000 Japanese Canadians were forcibly moved from the west coast to other parts of the country<sup>20</sup>.

The forced movement of the Japanese Canadians, as it is described in *Obasan*, can be seen as an “inverse-pioneer” – movement: rather than the historic American pioneer movement from east to west, the Japanese Canadians are moved from west to east. Rather than appearing scattered first, then forming communities and finally establishing urban societies, as would be the assumed development of a settler-colony, the Japanese Canadians are moved out of urban society, form a wilderness community and are subsequently scattered. This movement of the novel not only defies ready-made, formulaic ideas about historic development, it also signifies the forced undoing of a community, and the forced undoing of Japanese Canadian identity.

On a different level, which however also combines political and personal dynamics, Naomi’s personal identity is harmed by the fate of her mother. Naomi’s mother leaves for Japan at the beginning of the war and never returns to Canada. Whatever happens to her is not told to Naomi until the assumed present of the novel in 1972, when she finally learns that her mother was disfigured by the impact of the atomic bomb which destroyed Nagasaki, and later died there.

The haunting description of mother Nakane’s disfigured face and body combines the traumatic history of the Japanese Canadians with the global trauma of the Second World War.

---

<sup>20</sup> See [http://archives.cbc.ca/IDD-1-71-568/conflict\\_war/internment/](http://archives.cbc.ca/IDD-1-71-568/conflict_war/internment/) [20.05.05]

The fate of her mother, as I have mentioned, is hidden from Naomi for all her life. This silence about her mother's fate and Naomi's nagging inner questions about what happened to her mother are described as highly harmful for assuming and building Naomi's own identity. Naomi's personal trauma, however, must be seen as connected to the larger trauma of being denied a working identity in a discursive environment that demands a location in one original place, and has no space for an existence in between cultures. The readiness with which the Euro-centric Canadian society identified the Japanese citizens as scapegoats during the war shows that the acceptance that the Nisei believed they were granted in Canadian society was only superficial.

When in contemporary public discourse the treatment of the Japanese Canadians during the 1940s is understood as an "aberration", as a historical error, the longer history of declaring Asians as second class citizens in Canada is being denied<sup>21</sup>.

### 2.1.2. Joy Kogawa

*Obasan* was Joy Kogawa's first novel. She previously published several poetry collections<sup>22</sup>, and, after *Obasan*, the novel *Itsuka* (1993), which can be read as a sequel to *Obasan*, and the novel *The Rain Ascends* (1995).

Born in Vancouver in 1935, she personally experienced the historical circumstances that are treated in her novel(s). *Obasan* established her as a canonized author, as it proved very influential in the literary scene both in Canada and abroad, where it was read along various lines: In Canada, it has been received as a Canadian novel, involved in discussions about multiculturalism, politics of minorities and questions of national identity. In this context, Kogawa and her novel also played a key role in the Japanese Canadian Redress Movement during the 1980s. This movement led to an official apology and compensation package by the Canadian government on

---

<sup>21</sup> See Beauregard, Guy. "After *Obasan*: Kogawa Criticism and Its Futures". *Studies in Canadian Literature* 26 / 2 (2001): 5-21: 10

<sup>22</sup> *The Splintered Moon*. Fredericton: University of New Brunswick Press, 1968. *A Choice of Dreams*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974. *Jericho Road*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1977. *Woman in the Woods*. Oakville: Mosaic, 1985.

September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1988<sup>23</sup>. During the hearings, passages from *Obasan* were read aloud to underline the points of the Redress Movement.

In the USA, *Obasan* has been regarded inside a discursive field of questions about Asian American literary and cultural criticism. However, US-critics have been criticised for simply incorporating *Obasan* into the theoretical frameworks of Asian American studies, without paying regard to its specificity as a Canadian novel<sup>24</sup>. The different approaches in reception of Kogawa's work may suggest a re-thinking about how and to what ends "racialized texts" are discussed. Guy Beauregard has demanded, in this context, to pay attention to the changes in hegemonic discourses, pointing to the fact that simple visibility of the histories of minorities does not mean an automatic end to racism:

These [hegemonic discourses] have moved away from simple silencing and active suppression of racist histories to a politics of containment and domestication of unreconciled discourses on the nation's past.<sup>25</sup>

What is interesting about *Obasan* is that it itself discusses this complexity of silence and speech about a traumatic past. I will return to this topic in passage 2.2.2. First, however, I would like to return to the questions of history making that the narrative form of *Obasan* poses, and the links it establishes between history and narration. As I have mentioned above, *Obasan's* narrative style is rather self-conscious about the question who has the right to author a history. Narrator Naomi tests her own memory against official papers and statements, showing how often they do not fit together, how often the newspaper clipping appears as a fabrication, the own memory dreamlike. The structure of *Obasan* leads to questions about features that fiction and history making have in common. I therefore would like to discuss *Obasan* along the lines of "Historiographic Metafiction" as they have been formulated by Linda Hutcheon for a certain style in postmodern, and possibly especially Canadian postmodern literature. I found the descriptions of Hutcheon of relevance for a discussion of *Obasan* because of the themes and structure of the novel. The view that history making shares some tropes with

---

<sup>23</sup> See [http://archives.cbc.ca/IDD-1-71-568/conflict\\_war/internment/](http://archives.cbc.ca/IDD-1-71-568/conflict_war/internment/) [20.05.05]

<sup>24</sup> See Beauregard 17

<sup>25</sup> Beauregard 18

literature has influenced history as an academic field in recent years. It can therefore do no harm to review the premises on which the idea that history and fiction share certain features is formulated, and how they can apply to the novel.

## 2.2. “Historiographic Metafiction” as Strategy for Identity Negotiation

### 2.2.1. *Obasan* as “Historiographic Metafiction”

In her book *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988)<sup>26</sup>, Linda Hutcheon speaks about the distinctions of literature and history. In the larger part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, literature, as an art, had been perceived as the site of beauty and refinement, opposed by history which was perceived and practised as the empirical search for a profound external truth, a coherent narrative of the past. In postmodern thought, she states, this opposition was challenged, and common features of fiction or story making and history making were expressed: the commonalities between history and literature include that both cannot convey objective truth, both are linguistic constructs and highly conventionalised narrative forms. Both narrative forms are not transparent, and both are intertextual, as they deploy texts of the past<sup>27</sup>.

Thinkers such as Foucault saw a change in the way that history is perceived and thought about: Foucault saw a trend towards an “individuation of different series” that follow each other, overlap and intersect with one another, are juxtaposed to one another “without one being able to reduce them to a linear schema”, so that no continuous chronology of reason can be possible, instead we find “scales that are sometimes very brief, distinct from one another, irreducible to a simple law”, we discover a “type of history peculiar to each one” which “cannot be reduced to the general model of a consciousness that acquires, progresses, remembers”<sup>28</sup>.

---

<sup>26</sup> Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1988

<sup>27</sup> See Hutcheon 105-106

<sup>28</sup> Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. London: Travistock, 1977: 8, quoted in Beautell 193

Hutcheon sees “the postmodern novel” (Hutcheon 106) as operating along similar lines, within the contradictory cultural enterprise of postmodernism, which is embedded in what it seeks to challenge, confronting and testing the elasticity of binaries such as fictive and historical representation, particular and general, present and past. The dichotomies, Hutcheon states, are not resolved, but both sides of them are being exploited in the creation of art. What is pointed to is that history and fiction have elastic boundaries, for example, both included at various times both travel tales and sociological writing<sup>29</sup>.

Along with these perceptions comes the questioning of authorship and with that the question who is granted authorship: If storytellers can silence, exclude and absent certain entities – one might suspect historians of doing the same thing, as both forms share the conventions of selection, organization, diegesis, anecdote, temporal pacing and emplotment<sup>30</sup>. The question of authorship becomes political at the latest when we ask ourselves whom we grant the authority to select, organize and plot our history, and to what ends. Also, with valuing empirical knowledge, literature is discursively assigned a marginal place in the hierarchy between the two fields. Hutcheon states that “Historiographic Metafiction” “attempts to de-marginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical” (Hutcheon 108), both on a thematic and on a formal level.

This kind of writing no longer stabilises binary oppositions, but regards the “space between the entities.” (Hutcheon 112) With this regard to the relational, to the space “in-between”, it lends itself as a strategy for writers from marginalized groups. Novels such as *Obasan* first install the opposition only to subvert it, and they do this, typical for a postmodern strategy, in an open, visible way. Where generally, the protagonist of a historical novel should be a type, a synthesis of the general and the particular<sup>31</sup>, the protagonists of historical metafiction are typically “ex-centrics”, they are marginal, peripheral figures of history.

---

<sup>29</sup> See Hutcheon 108

<sup>30</sup> See Hutcheon 108

<sup>31</sup> See Hutcheon 114

With that, literature demands a plurality and recognition of difference. In *Obasan*, where Naomi's personal memory is confronted with markers of recorded history (the diary, the letters and official papers), the textualized accessibility of the past to us today is reflected. The novel asks questions – how do we know the past? And what do and can we know of it?

Novels which can be read as “Historiographic Metafiction” pose questions to the nature of identity and subjectivity, as they mistrust authority – even their own, as can be seen not only in *Obasan* but also in the second novel which I will discuss, where the narrator often reflects on writing her story. Naomi, in *Obasan*, appears not so much as an unable narrator, as the narrator of *Disappearing Moon Café* ironically presents herself, but more as a sometimes very reluctant narrator who perceives remembering the past events as an extremely painful experience:

Aunt Emily, are you a surgeon cutting at my scalp with your folders and your filling cards and your insistence on knowing all? The memory drains down the sides of my face but it isn't enough, is it? It's your hands in my abdomen, pulling the growth from the lining of my walls, but bring back the anaesthetist turn on the ether clamp down the gas mask bring on the chloroform when will this operation be over aunt Em?<sup>32</sup>

In this passage, we can see the narrator Naomi as imprinted by history, as maimed by the past. Not only does she not show confidence in knowing the past with certainty, also she describes a physical reaction of nausea while having to remember her own past, her own identity through her memory. By passages like the one quoted, *Obasan* simultaneously shows an assertion and a shattering of Naomi's selfhood. Naomi's wish to remain silent, to not address the traumatic past is connected to an obsession of “Historiographic Metafiction”, and post-colonial and post-structuralist attempts in general, with the question whose history survives and to what ends it does so. It reveals an ambivalence concerning the own experience of historical events. In *Obasan*, Naomi appears pushed to remembering as her Aunt Emily demands the visibility of their experience, the incorporation of the marginalized into the official history of Canada.

---

<sup>32</sup> OBA 232



But Naomi's reluctance also reveals a typical "postmodern" (as defined by Hutcheon) feature: her refusal to speak and remember and make herself visible as Emily demands it of her, can be seen as a refusal to integrate fragments, as a refusal of closure and *telos*. Naomi is reluctant to make her story a closed one, she insists on parts of her experience which are beyond verbal expression, which cannot be integrated in a coherent "story". Referring again to Foucault's history "peculiar to each one", "Historiographic Metafiction" and Naomi's reluctant narration stress and assert the specificity and particularity of the individual past event.

A refusal of closures might be seen as being of special relevance to writers who address the past of ethnic minorities and aim at acts of revision concerning their narrated history, and with that their identity as it is publicly perceived. These writers often face a double dilemma: to make a space of articulation for themselves they first have to displace the dominant historical narrative. The epistemological claims of the dominant narratives such as narratives of national history, which centre around coherence, a causal linearity, must be deferred.

However, if the legitimacy of the dominant history is questioned, a questioning of the legitimacy of a counter-history seems to be inherent in the very process of positioning this counter-history. Presenting a closed, stabilized version of the own counter-history would make this counter-version susceptible to the same criticism of closed identification as the dominant narrative<sup>33</sup>. Novels such as *Obasan* and *Disappearing Moon Café* seek to inscribe an Asian Canadian experience into Canada's historical account, but they refuse to posit this experience as a model or icon, and focus on the "difficulty in finding a language that signifies historical experience."<sup>34</sup>

Due to this, novels of minority writers often apply a strategy in which closures and fixed endings are deferred. That *Obasan* follows such a strategy

---

<sup>33</sup> See Palumbo-Liu, David. "The Politics of Memory: Remembering History in Alice Walker and Joy Kogawa". Singh, Amritjit et al. (eds.). *Memory and Cultural Politics. New Approaches to American Ethnic Literatures*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996: 210-226: 211

<sup>34</sup> Beautell, Eva Darias. "The Imaginary Ethnic". Rocio, Davis (ed.). *Tricks with a Glass*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000: 191-207: 192

can for example be seen by the ending of the novel, as it does not conclude with Naomi's narrative. Naomi's story ends, as she has finally managed the task of remembering and has learned to integrate the fate of her mother into her own narrative, with a prayer to her ancestors:

Father, Mother, my relatives, my ancestors, we have come to the forest tonight, to the place where the colors all meet – red, yellow and blue. We have turned and returned to your arms as you turn to earth and form the forest floor. Tonight we picked berries with the help of your sighted hands. Tonight we read the forest braille. See how our stained fingers have read the seasons, and how our serving hands serve you still.<sup>35</sup>

With this poetic passage, Naomi integrates herself into the story of her ancestors, and finds a calmness and a certain closure in integrating her loyalty to her ancestors with a renewed understanding of the passage of time linked to natural seasons.

This passage, however, is followed by an "Excerpt from the memorandum sent by the Co-operative Committee on Japanese Canadians to the House and Senate of Canada, April 1946"<sup>36</sup>. In their memorandum, the committee speaks out against the injustice against the Japanese Canadians and demands an abolition of orders against them. Including this memorandum as the epilogue of the novel takes the focus from Naomi's personal story back again to questions about an assessment of the Japanese Canadian past on a national level. Including this pro-Japanese Canadian statement also defers simple judgements about the "bad" white society without undermining the cruelty the Japanese Canadians received from their government. With including this statement, Kogawa defers a closure to the novel and opens its themes and topics up to discussion. It seems as if the novel demands a reaction, as if it has transformed the task it performs from telling into listening.

This task of listening the novel performs demands a heightened performance of the reader, who is not presented with a "this is how it was"-story which can simply be accepted or not. It transforms the assessment of a silenced past into an open, dynamic process, that includes and needs the

---

<sup>35</sup> OBA 295

<sup>36</sup> OBA 297

reader for its own sense-making. With that, the novel displays its reluctance to simply counter one fixed version of the past with another one.

Instead of opposing binary versions, it seeks to question different versions of the past, including the ones it presents itself. With combining official texts with fictional and poetic assessments, *Obasan* positions itself in a dynamic space “in-between” the literary and the politic. With its focus on the dynamics and politics of certain categories of silence as opposed to speech, it also seeks a space in-between these opposites, with that questioning the ability of textuality as a tool for the expression of experience and the constituting process of identity. Kogawa points again and again to the “kind of history that cannot speak”. (Beautell 192) I will therefore go on to discuss the dynamics of silence and speech in *Obasan*.

### 2.2.2. Identity between Silence and Speech

Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes forth from that amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence. But I fail the task. The word is stone.<sup>37</sup>

In *Obasan*, the acts of silence and speech can be seen as personified by Naomi’s Aunt Aya Obasan and her Aunt Emily, respectively. Emily, the “word-warrior”, is the collector of papers, the keeper of diaries, the one who also exemplifies the contemporary emancipatory academic discourse regarding minorities. Emily has chosen to cry out and speak loudly about the harm that her community has received, hoping for the freeing dynamics, the therapeutic and emancipatory effects that such a voicing is supposed to entail. Obasan, however, remains silent, and has grown closed as a stone by keeping the family trauma inside herself over many years.

With the movement of the plot, in which Naomi discovers the past with the aid of Aunt Emily’s collected documents, one could, as many reviewers have done, see Naomi’s story as a journey from oppressive silence into freeing speech. This reading means keeping to the usual western hierarchy which

---

<sup>37</sup> OBA epigraph

values speech as active and having agency, silence as passive and having no agency, a hierarchy that does not exist in this way in traditional Japanese culture. King-Kok Cheung, in his book *Articulate Silences* (1993)<sup>38</sup> has observed that “most reviewers of Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* have applied the hierarchical opposition of language and silence to the very novel that disturbs the hierarchy.” (Cheung 126)

Cheung himself, however, has reviewed *Obasan* in a chapter titled “Attentive Silence”, thereby pointing to the also positive value regarding certain aspects of silence in the novel. The novel operates with several shades of silence, the two most obvious of which are the silence of the adults concerning the fate of Naomi’s and Stephen’s mother and the attentive, or serving silence of Obasan, which appear as two sides of the same coin, one seemingly provoking a more negative, the second a more positive attitude.

The silencing of the events in Nagasaki, where Naomi’s mother was disfigured and later died, is intended as a protection and requested by Naomi’s mother. *Kodomo no tame ni* (“for the sake of the children”) is the motto of Uncle Isamu’s and Aya Obasan’s silence. This silence, however further conflicts the identity of Naomi, who cannot reach a narrative of herself, who cannot construct a working identity. As Cheung notes:

The novel depicts the plight of a child who does not know and cannot tell. Naomi has been withdrawn throughout childhood and adolescence; her quiet disposition seems tied to her mother’s unexplained absence. As a girl she questions but receives no answer; as an adult she desists because she [...] dreads knowing.<sup>39</sup>

Naomi is presented throughout the novel as living in a situation of estrangement on various levels: she is caught up in a linguistic estrangement, and with that stays away from others, from both her heritage cultures, and from the absent mother who by her very absence determines her daughter, and arrests her development towards an adult personality.

This personal drama is linked to her cultural drama, as Cheung states: “For Naomi, [...] bicultural upbringing against a backdrop of a hostile

---

<sup>38</sup> Cheung, King-Kok. *Articulate Silences*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993

<sup>39</sup> Cheung 131

dominant culture is first experienced as a source of linguistic and personal pain and confusion.” (Cheung 131)

Naomi must struggle to transform her pain into a resource, to find her own dynamics between the “word warrior” position of Emily and the wordlessness of Obasan. Throughout large parts of the novel, Naomi appears wary of both extremes: she does not fully embrace Emily’s need for crying out as the only source of truth and justice, and she cannot simply reject Obasan’s silence as an act of compliance with the victimizers. The novel underlines the importance of speaking out about the past, but it also is attentive to and aware of the many pitfalls of language, the fact that language can pervert, “other”, and transform experience.

The perversion of language that is expressed in the novel can for example be noted in the description of the sexual abuse of Naomi as a child by the neighbour Old Man Gower, who has to construct linguistic masks and justifications to divert the actual perversion he is performing, when he tells Naomi that he has to touch her because she has a scratch on her knee. The act of abuse is linguistically transformed into an act of care. By this, Cheung notes, “the child Naomi was jolted into simultaneous awareness of sexuality and of linguistic duplicity”. (Cheung 134)

The sexual abuse of Naomi happens shortly before her mother’s disappearance, and the incident creates for Naomi already a separation from her mother: Throughout the novel, Naomi’s mother is connected with the image of a tree. As a child, Naomi’s identity is bound to her mothers’, she feels a part of her:

I am clinging to my mother’s leg, a flesh shaft that grows from the ground, a tree trunk of which I am an offshoot [...]. The shaft of her legs is the shaft of my body and I am her thoughts<sup>40</sup>

This description of Naomi’s being at one with her mother echoes psychoanalytic ideas connected to the theories of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. It reads like a rendering of what Kristeva has described as the *chora*, a state of being in which a child, before entering the realm of language,

---

<sup>40</sup> OBA 64

perceives herself not as an individual but a part of the mother, without wishes or desires<sup>41</sup>. With the entry into the “symbolic realm” of language, the bond with the mother is lost. Having realized that she is not part of the mother, the lost unity is yearned for. Language is used to voice desire, to express loss: it presupposes the absence of the object it signifies. Entering a world in which relationships are maintained via language means to enter a world of longing for the absent object. In Naomi’s case, the severance is paradoxically amplified by having been propelled away from her mother by the secret of the sexual abuse: “the secret has already separated us [...]. My legs are being sawn in half” (OBA 64-65), Naomi states. Her entry into the symbolic order is, as Cheung notes, “doubly removed from reality: the deliberate deception in Gower’s words compounds the sign’s inherent elusiveness”. (Cheung 134)

The personal abuse of Naomi and the potential of language for deceit can be seen as linked to the official political language in *Obasan* and the language of the media that is used to turn the Japanese Canadians into enemies of the state. As Cheung points out,

During the war the Canadian bureaucracy used words to camouflage the most offensive actions against people of Japanese ancestry. Nisei – Canadian-born citizens – were dubbed ‘enemy aliens’ (92); prison camps were dressed up as ‘Interior Housing Projects.’ Emily fumes, ‘With language like that you can disguise any crime’ (34)<sup>42</sup>

As Donald C. Goellnicht has pointed out, “Language shapes, rather than merely reflects, reality for both the victimizers and the victims, its manipulation resulting in empirical, concrete actions.”<sup>43</sup> Also, language cannot denote without interpretation, which in *Obasan*, varies from character to character, for example Naomi notes “Aunt Emily’s Christmas 1941 is not the Christmas I remember.” (OBA 79)

Cheung observes in this context the reflected notion of “truth” in the novel, and links it to the work of other authors and literature in general in this respect:

---

<sup>41</sup> See McAfee, Noelle. *Julia Kristeva*. New York: Routledge, 2004: 19

<sup>42</sup> Cheung 135

<sup>43</sup> Goellnicht, Donald C. „Minority History as Metafiction: Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*”. *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 8/2 (1989): 287-306: 291

Even so-called facts are the prey of interpretation. Language, whether or not it is used to deceive, can convey only partial and subjective realities. The narrator observes her distance from her vociferous aunt: 'For [Emily], the vision is the truth as she lives it. When she is called like Habakkuk to the witness stand, her testimony is the light that shines in the lives of the Nisei, in their desperation to prove themselves Canadian, in their tough and gentle spirit. The truth for me is more murky, shadowy and grey' (32). Naomi's sense of truth is shared by [Hisaye] Yamamoto, [Maxine Hong] Kingston and Kogawa; all of them question the notion of transparent language, a transparent history. Yet their questions and their multiple answers are themselves ploys to get at the truth. Trin T. Minh-ha says of effective storytelling in general: 'Truth is not attained here through logocentric certainties [...]. The boundaries of lie and truth are [...] multiplied, reversed and displaced without rendering meaningless either the notion of lie or that of truth. Directly questioned, the story is also indirectly unquestionable in its truthfulness'.<sup>44</sup>

Naomi's attention for the murkiness of truth and her mistrust of "logocentric certainties" is also reflected by her attention to the silence of Obasan, for example in a scene where Naomi and Obasan are confronted with the belittling apologetic remarks of the white farmer the family toiled for in Alberta, who's only reaction to the past is the remark "It's a terrible business what we did to our Japanese". (OBA 270) While Naomi expresses anger (though not into the farmer's face) about this belittling and well-intended ignorance, she observes that, regarding the question of Japanese Canadian identity, Obasan resists being part of any discourse: "She does not dance to the multicultural piper's tune or respond to the racist's slur. She remains in a silent territory, defined by her serving hands". (OBA 271)

Here, the silence of Obasan takes on a stoic quality, becomes a form of resistance against any form of discursive identification. Obasan's silence and Naomi's reaction to it show how it is also this silence, together with the demand for speech of Emily, which are guides and motivators for Naomi's quest of uncovering her past and re-defining her own identity. A resistance towards verbal communication, a resistance towards language leads back to ideas of Julia Kristeva and the distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic qualities of language. If language is always the expression of loss, it builds up a necessary distance between the object it signifies and the expression, or signifier, itself. By her silence, Obasan rejects to build up this distance.

---

<sup>44</sup> Cheung 136, he quotes from Trinh, T. Minh-ha. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1991: 13-14

She, the stone-like woman, is like a tombstone of her family's past: not speaking about it, she keeps the past buried in herself, were it cannot be changed and transformed by language. Naomi, also, cannot follow Aunt Emily's advise to write her vision plain, as she also refuses to build up a semantic distance between her experience and the story of the experience. But Naomi does tell her story, and the poetic, unlineary way in which she does this, changing between her adult point-of-view and her childhood point-of-view, could be seen as a strategy by which her story aims at a quality of language that Kristeva has called the semiotic: The semiotic, actually, lies within language, but in a realm that acts like an undercurrent to orderly structural language. It is the very quality of our experiences that cannot be voiced by orderly language which is clearly structured semantically and syntactically. It is part of the "jouissance" that is at work in the realm of the *chora*, in the realm where there was still no desire.

It also acts as the "other" of the object that language defines, like the black matter that is the invisible other of all things material: an absent entity, which still can make itself a presence. The semiotic erupts in language whenever language transports more than the semantic value of a term, when meanings become ambiguous or are turned over – in this way, it makes itself visible, and transforms again and again our understanding of things: it has the potential to change concepts by disrupting them. The semiotic is always more or less at work in any speech act, but Kristeva locates the most potential for an emerging of the subversive force the semiotic can take on in poetic language<sup>45</sup>. The mythic poetry that Kogawa uses in *Obasan* appeared to me like a search for the semiotic quality of language, as can for example be seen in the quote from the epigraph at the beginning of this passage<sup>46</sup>: the "sensate sea" down in the "amniotic deep" can be read as the experience that is lodged in the body, and which ordinary speech, symbolic language cannot reach. Only by acknowledging the absent, the quality of the semiotic, which reflects the part of human existence that is lost by entering the realm of language, can the word

---

<sup>45</sup> See McAfee 15-24

<sup>46</sup> See page 24 of this essay



be made alive. Language which leaves no space for an eruption of the semiotic is seen as dead language.

The attendance to the “in-between” is of importance in the novel not only regarding the identity of its characters as Japanese Canadians, but also on the level of the language the novel itself applies. To pay attention to the spaces in-between, the “space between the entities”, is part of the task the reader has to perform, as Cheung observes: “The reader must attend to the unarticulated linkages and piece together the broken parts, meaning permeates the spaces between words.” (Cheung 155)

By joining the identity-trouble of the Japanese Canadian community to a total human identity-trouble of being severed from a wholeness, located by psychoanalytic theory in early childhood, which cannot be attained again in life, and which is searched for nevertheless, turns, as Laurie Kruk<sup>47</sup> has observed, *Obasan* into a human quest narrative with cross-mythological overtones: a search for identification and one’s place in life, a quest for “wholeness”, that cannot be achieved, but the strive for which is nevertheless of importance. This gives the novel a quality that is both culture-specific and culture transgressing. The importance that both her personal past and her relationship with her country play for Naomi’s identity stress again how the self is always social, how personal and political identity are linked.

The link of country and self, of nation and self are elaborately addressed in *Obasan*. One aspect that is of importance in this context is the link between self and land: Naomi’s story inscribes a new story and a new history into the Canadian land. The landscape of British Columbia and the landscape of Alberta become intrinsically linked with Naomi’s and, by implication, the Japanese Canadian experience. By telling the story of the Japanese Canadians in connection with the land, the land becomes a carrier for an experience that binds the Japanese Canadians to the physical country, if not to the nation of Canada. Also, by developing the inverted-pioneer story of the re-location that I have already talked about in the beginning of the chapter, Kogawa asserts a

---

<sup>47</sup> See Kruk, Laurie. “Voices of Stone: The Power of Poetry in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*”. *ARIEL* 30/4 1999: 75-94

counter-myth to usual pioneer-myths. I would therefore like to discuss this relationship of self and land in *Obasan*.

## 2.3. Identity and Land

### 2.3.1. Land, Myth, Nation

Myths in literature, as Mary Vautier states in her book *New World Myth*, act as “transhistorical master narratives”<sup>48</sup> which focus on narratives of beginnings and origins. Novels such as *Obasan* destabilize this function of myth with a “self-conscious re-examination of historical events”. (Vautier 1) *Obasan* performs a new and original investigation of myth, place and identity, using the a re-working of literary, historical and political myths grounded in the “New World” experience as a backdrop.

Karen Quimby notes the link between investing landscape with a certain meaning to contribute to the formation of national identity<sup>49</sup>. The historical seizure of the American continent by Europeans had been invested with mythical meaning from the beginning. In the narrative of the European conquest, the American land was read as female: By this, the European settlers could attribute to themselves “male agency through the objectification of the female”. (Quimby 257) The European settler, as active, male individual, saw himself confronted with a land perceived as feminine, as sizable.

Opposed to these European readings, Quimby observes, *Obasan* poses a “historical and mythic trajectory of the land that is neither Euro-centric nor male” (Quimby 258), here, “landscape functions to signify the problems of national and personal identity”. The novel addresses the paradox of being exiled from one’s own native land: with this thematic, the physical terrain in *Obasan* comes to define “the vast categories of identity, nationality and

---

<sup>48</sup> Vautier, Marie. *New World Myth: Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Canadian Fiction*. London: Mc Gill-Queens University Press, 1998: 1

<sup>49</sup> See Quimby, Karen. “‘This is my own, my native land’: Constructions of Identity and Landscape in Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*”. Hawley, John (ed.). *Cross-addressing: Resistance Literature and Cultural Borders*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996: 257-270

history". By Naomi's investigation of herself through landscape, and imagining her identity via landscape imagery, Kogawa challenges the poetical and political appropriation of the endeavour of colonising America. The European movement of colonisation from east to west is transformed, the land in *Obasan* is written afresh through Naomi's imagination, thereby, however, not wiping it clean of myths and implications, but evoking those and working against them: she, as Quimby states, "shapes her identity, and through implication a collective experience, through her interaction with and readings of the landscape in its natural, political and mythic form". (Quimby 259)

Naomi establishes a new frontier: the forcibly created Japanese Canadian frontier. By the importance that the land and natural imagery on a whole take on in the novel, it also reveals a problematization of the concepts of "homeland" and "national identity": Canada is Naomi's homeland, but a national identity can not be appropriated as her native society assigns her the space of the "other". It is this paradox that her brother Stephen hints at with his riddle "we are both the enemy and not the enemy". (OBA 70)

Where the national narratives can assign the Japanese Canadians only the space of the enemy, the physical landscape is taken out of the implications of meta-narrative inscriptions and written differently, but the alternative writing and reading of the landscape simultaneously points to the "traditional" reading of the "New World" by, paradoxically, silencing it. Naomi's narrative shows how "identities are shaped by the intersection of historical circumstances and the physical landscape". (Quimby 260)

### 2.3.2. Naomi's own Canada

One of the new inscriptions is Naomi's linking of the Japanese Canadians with the experience of the First Nation Canadians, which is also a feature of *Disappearing Moon Café*, where Chinese immigrants are also linked to First Nations People.

Naomi juggles with racial stereotypes and unmask claims of authenticity in her description of her Uncle Isamu at the beginning of the novel:

Uncle could be Chief Sitting Bull squatting here. He has the same prairie-baked skin, the deep brown furrows like dry riverbeds creasing his cheeks. All he needs is a feather headdress, and he would be perfect for a picture postcard – ‘Indian Chief from Canadian Prairie’ – souvenir of Alberta, made in Japan.<sup>50</sup>

Quimby states that “combining the native and immigrant identities destabilizes the idea of an oppositional and monolithic national and ethnic identity, offering another possibility of identity”. (Quimby 262)

Naomi finds herself in an uneasy space “in-between” ideas and feelings of belonging and not-belonging, of home and displacement, which is exemplified by the descriptions of the Japanese Canadian community in Slokan: Though forced to live there by displacement, the Japanese Canadians form a home. Though it is out of society and at times seems out of reality, Naomi permeates her description of the landscape here with live-giving imagery: the land is fertile and varied crops are grown, the descriptions of the woods are connected with air, “green-fingered breath” (OBA 160), coolness and freshness. The Japanese Canadians are presented as being able at “harvesting the wilderness” (OBA 164), they can make use of the fern stems in the wood and cook them like asparagus. By their ability to grow a community in the wilderness, they are presented as “true” pioneers. But at the same time, the trauma of being propelled outside society and the loss of the mother makes itself visible and expresses itself in the bodies of the characters: Stephen develops a mysterious limp, Naomi nearly drowns, their father, with whom there are temporarily re-united, lies in hospital with tuberculosis. The tension of being “both the enemy and not the enemy” seems to literally tear the characters apart.

Naomi, traumatised by the loss of her mother, roots herself in the earth, she searches her way through the Canadian landscape in search of her lost mother: “Like the grass, I search the earth and the sky with a thin but persistent thirst”. (OBA 3) Naomi roots herself in *her* Canadian land, which differs so much from the dominant national and political Canadian land. At the same time, she implicitly hints at it and at the historical significance of her experience.

---

<sup>50</sup> OBA 3

Search for the lost mother is of course connected to a search for the lost home, the homeland, and national identity which has been denied, as is most obvious in Naomi's version of "Oh, Canada":

Oh, Canada, whether it is admitted or not, we come from you, we come from you. From the same soil, the slugs and slime and bogs and twigs and roots. We come from the country that plucks its people out like weeds and flings them into the roadside. We grow in ditches and sloughs, untended and spindly.. We erupt in the valleys and mountainsides, in small towns and back alleys, sprouting upside down on the prairies, our feet rooted nowhere. [...] We come from Canada, this land that is like every land"<sup>51</sup>

This passage both asserts and demands the Japanese Canadians to be seen as part of Canada: The weed-metaphor both bespeaks the racist treatment but also the persistence of Japanese Canadian existence, that might grow in unlikely places, but will not stop to grow, is reluctant to be weeded out.

Another, historically "unwanted" group of Canadian citizens are the Chinese Canadians. Chinese Canadians have also re-assessed their status in Canada via literature. Sky Lee's novel *Disappearing Moon Café* deals with the fate of a Chinese Canadian family settled in Vancouver. Like *Obasan*, *Disappearing Moon Café* reveals a self-consciousness about the constructed quality of identity and combines this with a self-consciousness about the nature of language. Sky Lee also links the experience of her protagonists to the First Nations People and to the Canadian land as a purveyor of an alternative identity.

It would have certainly been possible to discuss this novel in the framework of Historiographic Metafiction, but I found another narrative paradigm to be even more fitting to reveal the intricacies of *Disappearing Moon Café's* narrative style: The trickster aesthetic. I will go on with discussing this novel, first, however, will again relate it to Chinese Canadian history, in this case, and introduce its author, Sky Lee.

---

<sup>51</sup> OBA 270

### **3. Tricky Identities: Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café***

#### **3.1. The Novel in the Context of Chinese Canadian History**

##### **3.1.1. The Novel**

Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*, written in 1990, narrates the complex and interweaving experiences of four generations of the Chinese Canadian Wong family, stretching over a time frame from 1892 into the late 1980s.

Starting and ending with the experience of the later patriarch of the family, Wong Gwei Chang, in the wilderness of British Columbia where he lives with First Nations People, the bulk of the novel relates the story of his various offspring. The family saga develops around the place of the title-giving restaurant of the Wong family in Vancouver, the literal "Disappearing Moon Café", which is both the founding stone for the economic prosperity of the family and at the same time the site of their grieves and disasters.

The large time frame allows the novel to cover various important instances in Chinese Canadian history. Lee carefully puts the action of her novel just after key moments in this history and by that, "engages with the problem of narrating a history of resistance in the face of labour exploitation and various forms of legislation exclusion"<sup>52</sup>: In the Prologue, Gwei Chang is sent out into the mountains of British Columbia by the "Benevolent Associations", a society of elder Chinese business men, to search the bones of Chinese workers so they can be send back to their families to be buried.

This activity points to both the history of Chinese Canadians and to a protest against the existing mainstream narrative of Canadian national identity: One of the founding myths about Canada is the building of the Central Pacific Railway, which connected the Pacific coast with the Atlantic

---

<sup>52</sup> Beauregard, Guy. "The Emergence of 'Asian Canadian Literature': Can. Lit.'s Obscene Supplement?" *Essays on Canadian Writing* 67 (1999): 53-75: 54

coast, symbolically and economically binding the country together, thereby giving significance to the state motto *ab mare usque ad mare* (from sea to sea).

The traditional national idea would be “that without the railway there would be no Canada, certainly not as it exists today”<sup>53</sup>. What would traditionally not be given much attention in remembering this symbolic “Canada making” is the fact that the railway was built chiefly by Chinese coolie labour. 17.000 labourers were recruited directly from China to build the British Columbia section, and at least 6.000 died in the construction.

The novel also reflects the high head taxes which Chinese landing in Canada had to pay, and which increased over time. These made Chinese immigration to Canada more and more difficult. Chinese were depicted by official authorities as hard, if not impossible to assimilate, and were undesired entries into Canadian society: They could not gain citizenship rights until the 1950s, when there had been Chinese living in Canada for a century<sup>54</sup>.

Another year that is of great importance for the Chinese Canadian community is 1924, also a year of great importance in the novel, in which the wife of Gwei Chang, Mui Lan, puts great pressure on her daughter-in-law, Fong Mei, to produce an heir . 1924 was the year of the boycott of the Chinese Canadian community against the possible passing of the so-called “Janet Smith”-bill: after a Chinese houseboy had had an affair with a fellow worker and killed her, there was a great public outrage and demands that Chinese should not be allowed to work with whites anymore.

Had the bill been passed, it would have established a legitimised segregation, further ghettoising an already unpopular minority<sup>55</sup>. In 1923, the Chinese Exclusion Act had been passed: After the high head taxes, this was the official end to Chinese immigration into Canada until the abolition of the act in 1947. It was also a great threat to the already existing Chinese-Canadian community, which suffered from a strong gender imbalance. There were nearly no women who had come to Canada, also due to official legislation, which tacitly tried to prevent the long-term establishment of Chinese in

---

<sup>53</sup> Francis, Daniel. *National Dreams*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 1997: 15

<sup>54</sup> See Chao, Lien. “The Collective Self”. Hawley, John (ed.). *Cross-addressing: Resistance Literature and Cultural Borders*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996: 237-255: 237

<sup>55</sup> See Chao 1996 243

Canada. Had it been hard to bring Chinese women over because of the high head taxes, the Chinese Exclusion Act now made it impossible. There was a real possibility of the extinction of the community.

*Disappearing Moon Café* reflects these historic circumstances: The crave of Mui Lan for a grandchild and the topic of possible incest, the terrible and strange confusions into which the Wong family throws itself to hold up the family line at all costs, can be seen as “a reaction to intolerable outside pressure” (Beauregard 1999 64): The story of the Wong family has, on one level, to be read against the foil of both a racist legislation, but also against the foil of patriarchal Chinese society, which takes on an even fiercer form in the Canadian “diaspora” due to the bachelor community: deprived from the society of women in her traditional Chinese village, Mui Lan’s only possibility to create an identity for herself is as wife of a successful businessman, her only significance is to guarantee the continuity of the male family line. Mui Lan and later also her daughter-in-law Fong Mei are shown as in some ways compliant to the Chinese traditions that oppress them.

By connecting important times and places of her narrative with important instances in Chinese Canadian history, Lee simultaneously achieves an inscribing of her narrative into the historic Chinese Canadian narrative, an inscribing of Chinese Canadian experience into the national experience of Canada, and also a critique of the fact that this inscription has been denied Chinese Canadians for so long.

Apart from the family patriarch Gwei Chang, whose story is told chiefly in the prologue and the epilogue, the novel concentrates on the experiences of the female family members: Outstanding are the fights of Mui Lan and Fong Mei, the story of Fong Mei’s daughters, Beatrice and Suzie, and the story of Kae, Beatrice’s daughter who acts as the narrator of the tangled family opera.

The incidents and stories are told in unlineary longer vignettes organized in chapters, jumping back and forth between the years and the persona. At the heart of the novel seems to lie the false-play that the family members played with each other in the 1920’s: the covering up of the illicit affair of Fong Mei with Ting An, who no one knows to be Gwei Chang’s son, Mui Lan’s paying another woman to produce an heir to the legal son of Gwei



Chang, Choy Fuk, who is Fong Mei's husband. These personal dramas are shown as developing a destructive force that troubles the life of the later family members, as the lies and the deceiving have been kept up throughout the generations as constitutive to the family tradition.

### 3.1.2. Sky Lee

*Disappearing Moon Café* is Sky Lee's first, and to date, only novel. She established herself with it as a known published author, and her editing the anthology of Chinese Canadian writing *Many Mouthed Birds* (1991) was probably partly responsible for that anthology's success also outside the Asian Canadian communities<sup>56</sup>. She published a volume of short-fiction, *Bellydancer* (1994), in which she, as in *Disappearing Moon Café*, ironically mocks a demand for the exotic while at the same time pointing to important themes of the Chinese Canadian experience.

Lee is part of a movement of Asian Canadians that via literature, wanted to "challenge racial discrimination in Canadian society and the political power that endorsed it". (Chao 1999 147)

*Obasan* and *Disappearing Moon Café* employ different strategies in re-assessing a silenced past, in trying to deal with a fragmented identity, politically and personally. I have described above how Kogawa works within oppositions between silence and speech to negotiate identity and deal with identity disrupting traumas.

Lee employs strategies of masquerade, of multiple perspectives, unlineary narration and game-play to point, via the unstable identities of her characters, to the fluid, dynamic and ambiguous identity of the female writer "in-between" cultures. I found this strategy similar to the "trickster aesthetic" that has been identified by Jeanne Rosier Smith in connection to the works of Louise Erdrich, Maxine Hong Kingston and Toni Morrison as a model strategy

---

<sup>56</sup> See Chao, Lien. "Anthologizing the Collective: the Epic Struggles to Establish Chinese Canadian Literature in English." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 57 (1999): 145-170: 148

for female minority writers<sup>57</sup>, and will therefore go on to discuss the narrative strategy of *Disappearing Moon Café* along these lines.

### 3.2. “Trickster Narration” as Strategy for Identity Negotiation

#### 3.2.1. *Disappearing Moon Café* as Trickster Novel

My trying to sum up the main events or themes of the novel above has shown already its intricacies. Trying to pin down the characters and the events to one main idea, to a causal conclusion, leads to nothing. Kae, the narrator of the novel, herself reflects about the frustration that a coherent understanding of her family’s past, and with that her own identity, is denied:

Here I am, still waiting. For enlightenment. Disappointed, yet eternally optimistic! Oh, and I’ve been told that it is important to keep a family strong and together, especially in this day and age, so I’ve come to expect the ceremonies and assemblies that come with families. At funerals, full-month parties, graduations, it was easy to see an inevitable logic underlining life, a crisp beginning and a well-penned conclusion, nice and neat, and as reassuring as receiving a certificate for good attendance [...] I get tricked because I want to be so damned perfect all the time. Now I’ve found that nobody has told me the whole messy truth about anything!<sup>58</sup>

Kae appears as a narrator often frustrated with her own narrative, showing how easily she loses control. She appears at times triumphant, at times utterly helpless. She seems to be an unreliable narrator, who leads the reader astray by the unlineary strands and pieces of the family saga, that will not flow together to form a coherent picture in the end. The reader, wanting to be perfect as well, trying to search for an expected happy, coherent outcome is tricked as well by Kae’s unreliability, as narrator and as character:

As narrator, she shifts and changes shape from a first person, autodiegetic narrator when she comments on the story, or tells her part of the

---

<sup>57</sup> See Smith, Jeanne Rosier. “The Trickster Aesthetic: A Cross-Cultural Feminist Theory”. In Smith Rosier, Jeanne (ed.). *Writing Tricksters. Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature*. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 1997: 1-30, Thomas, Ulrike. *Trickster Texts and Trickster Figures*. Magisterarbeit Universität Konstanz: 2003

<sup>58</sup> Lee, Sky. *Disappearing Moon Café*. Seattle: Seal, 1991 [will in the following be cited as DMC]: 20

story, to a third person narrator when she tells the stories from the point of view of the other family members.

As a character, we see her as successful businesswoman, a married, emotionally stressed new mother, and as the lover of Hermia Chow. She tells her stories, actually dealing with topics of discrimination and compliance with discrimination, with irony and humour.

Both as narrator and character, she constantly shifts shapes and appears in new disguises. Also, the stories she tells are reluctant to fulfil reader expectations of coherence and are characterised by their polyvalence and their non-linear structure.

The characters in *Disappearing Moon Café* are not what they think they are (for example Fong Mei's children of Ting An, or Ting An himself). They also often change their hierarchy positions. For example, the roaring "house dragon" Mui Lan, who bullies her daughter-in-law into depression, dwindles and nearly disappears from the story as soon as Fong Mei has produced her first child, and Fong Mei now takes on the dominant position in the family, changing roles with her former oppressor.

All these features make it possible to see *Disappearing Moon Café* in connection with the trickster as a narrative principle, as it has been described by Jeanne Rosier Smith.

Trickster figures in mythology are usually characters or gods who appear as neither good nor bad, who are double-agents seemingly afflicted with all sorts of mythical powers. They appear as gamblers with fate, as fools and storytellers. They move between tragedy and hilarious farce. They are subversive figures.

An example from Western myth would be the Nordic trickster-god Loki. In Chinese mythology, the playful Sun Wuk'ung, King of the Monkeys, is one of the most outstanding figures<sup>59</sup>, and also the main character of the classic Chinese epic *Journey to the West*.

Jeanne Rosier Smith has identified a narrative principle that uses the features of the trickster figure to re-negotiate the identity of minority groups,

---

<sup>59</sup> See Thomas 8

and to assess the ambiguous position of “in-betweenness” of the female writer writing from between cultures and communities:

In virtually all cultures, tricksters are both folk heroes and wanderers on the edges of community, at once marginal and central to the culture. Tricksters challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries. Whether foolishly, arrogantly or bravely, tricksters face the monstrous, transforming the chaotic to create new worlds and new cultures. In doing so, they offer appealing strategies to women writers of color who, historically subjugated because of their race and their sex, often combine a feminist concern for challenging patriarchy with a cultural heritage. In their novels, tricksters serve to combat racial and sexual oppression and to affirm and create personal and cultural identity.<sup>60</sup>

From a materialist-feminist viewpoint, which “contents that literature and its criticism cannot be separated from historical and cultural context” (Thomas 10), the culturally specific aspects of the trickster have to be taken into account. If one imagines again the well-known mythical figure of the Monkey King, who appears in many Chinese stories and features also dominantly in the Beijing Opera tradition, employing a narrative strategy that owes to the features of a trickster figure, can be seen as a way to both underline, and then actively transform and subvert, a concept of “Chineseness” out of China. The trickster can be seen as a possibility to take on the role of survivor and transformer, a role that performs, with writing, an action that is both culture-binding and culture transforming.

Trickster tropes not only surface in contemporary novels by female authors of colour, such as Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko and Maxine Hong Kingston, but American writers of colour in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century also used trickster figures from African American, Asian American and Native American traditions and with that developed covert trickster strategies as a means of political resistance in their writings in order to find “the most viable way of negotiating the white, male dominated American publishing industry”. (Smith 9)

With the discussed emphasis on the fluidity and process-like nature of identity, trickster strategies can now be used overtly and stand as a

---

<sup>60</sup> Smith 2

constituting idea behind a whole narrative. Lee does not refer to single, traditional trickster figures, rather the “trickster-idea” colours the narrative “make-up” of her novel, and she might thus qualify as an embodiment of the trickster-like author discussed by Smith:

a parodist, joker, liar, con-artist, and storyteller, the trickster fabricates believable illusions with words – and thus becomes author and the embodiment of a fluid, flexible and politically radical narrative form<sup>61</sup>

The illusion Lee fabricates, among other things, is that of a triumphant, emancipatory “ethnic” novel. I will come back to this topic in the passage on “Marketable Identities”.

Smith backs up her discussion of the trickster as narrative principle for the novel form with Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories of dialogic discourse in the novel and his “conception of the novel as being formed by various, diverse social languages constantly in interaction with each other, operating against the hegemony of a monologic, unitary language, [which] puts the novel form in a position where it ‘decentralizes any single worldview, presenting a potential challenge to ethnocentricity’”<sup>62</sup>. With that, of course, it also presents a challenge to any uniform idea of an identity which, ethnocentrically, would be assigned to an individual or a community.

Bakhtin traces the origins of the polyphonic and decentralizing aspects of the novel to its becoming carnivalesque. This feature renders the novel form dialogic and ambivalent.

### 3.2.2. Trickster Writing and “the Collective Self”

The mingling of many voices, so dominant a feature in *Disappearing Moon Café*, and the dialogism and ambivalence stemming from this, show the identity concept prevailing in the trickster novel as being “multiform, disruptive, contradictory, boundary-crossing, parti-colored, and multilingual”. (Smith 11)

---

<sup>61</sup> Smith 11

<sup>62</sup> Thomas 12, she quotes from Smith, Jeanne Rosier. “Rethinking American Culture: Maxine Hong Kingston’s Cross-Cultural *Tripmaster Monkey*”. *Modern Language Studies* 26/4 (1996): 71-81: 71

Adding the polyphony and the culture-transforming aspects, trickster writing appears as community writing. This also connects trickster writing with oral traditions of storytelling, wherein the stories are both remembered throughout the generations, but also always put up to reformation and transformation, where new voices add and change what has been told previously, and every single voice gains significance in taking part in shaping and re-shaping the story, rather than in a modern European idea of one individual authoring it.

The openness of the trickster-narrative principle is the feature that makes it so important and interesting for communities challenged with racism and silencing, as it allows the identity of cultures to become flexible and transformational to survive threatening and changing circumstances.

The openness of the narrative form also demands a strong participation on the side of the reader, who has to play her role in creating the identity of the story by an active way of reading, pinning seemingly disparate scenes and incidents together which are presented in an unlineary and polyphonic way.

The idea of trickster writing as community writing seems to also point into the direction of Lien Chaos's concept of "the collective self" which he discusses as a narrative paradigm in *Disappearing Moon Café*. He sees the novel as a "collective her-story as part of a community story in which Chinese women have to fight a double survival battle in a misogynist culture and a racist society". (Chao 1996 241)

He states that the episodic narrative mode brings "past, present and future unto one platform, individual and collective into ongoing dialogues". (250) Regarding identity, the collective self requires a regard to memory, to the generations that have shaped the individual. In this concept, "the collective is always grounded as an overall social-historical context in which the self exists and is defined". (243)

What Chao points to can be illustrated by the scene in the novel entitled "Feeding the Dead". (DMC 185-189) Here, Kae imagines an "opinion poll" taken on among the various family members on "the many and varied ways to destroy love". (DMC 185) The narrative changes into a semi-dramatic form, and the dead and the living accuse each other, and defend themselves, for the

mistakes they have made and which have culminated in the family's tragedies. Kae and her lover Hermia also partake in the discussion and come to a point where they discuss the connection of personal and collective identity:

Kae asks Hermia: "Is this what they call a forward kind of identity? Hermia asks Kae: "Do you mean that individuals must gather their identity from all the generations that touch them – past and future, no matter how slightly? Do you mean that an individual is not an individual at all, but a series of individuals – some of whom come before her, some after her? Do you mean that this story isn't a story of several generations, but of one individual thinking collectively?"<sup>63</sup>

In this scene, the idea of the trickster-narrative and the "collective self" flow together: Formally, Lee again experiments with narrative form, creating an imagined tongue-in-cheek theatre-scene or TV-interview in the novel. Also, she exemplifies in this scene what Chao states she is creating by the episodic structure of the novel: the levelling of time, the culmination of all influences from past, present and future, which make up the individual. This combination of influences can be continued rather indefinitely, and show the individual to be actually boundary-less, her outward identity only constructed by discursive frames and layers, both assigned to her and devised by herself.

In *Disappearing Moon Café*, there seems to be posited behind every identity that has been lived an alternative option that has not been taken, and which demands of the reader to ponder the question if it could have been liveable: This can be seen, for example, in the comment of Fong Mei, who posits the utopian idea that she could have left all the oppressive constraints of her Chinatown life behind, and could have lived with the man she loved among the First Nations People.

The story of the characters in the novel show in nearly all cases an entrapment, constraint or oppression by both the society of Chinatown as well as Canadian society.

In the next passage, I will take a closer look at how the conflicts of the characters in the novel are constructed around the social masks they are wearing, and how these are presented as entrapment.

---

<sup>63</sup> DMC 198

While Kogawa with *Obasan* seems to demand a reconsideration of a “liberation discourse” that points its sole emphasis on the regaining of voice for oppressed minorities, Lee seems to posit her novel against an only laudatory understanding of community. The “collective self” is not only a triumphant regaining of traditions and memory of the Chinese Canadian community. It also speaks, in *Disappearing Moon Café*, of the problematic state of a community which, put under political stress from state regulations, also represses its members on an individual level.

Lee’s characters demand of themselves to act out an over-determined identity as “super-Chinese” that is in some instances unmasked as artificially constructed and on one level corresponding to “exotic” ideas of the Euro-centric society in which they live. It also hints at the fact that by stressing their Chinese identity against a white society, another identity is silenced: the connection of the family members with the First Nations via Ting An’s mother Kelora.

### **3.3. Identity Masks, Identity Traps**

#### **3.3.1. Masks of Authenticity**

All my life I saw double. All I ever wanted was authenticity; meanwhile, the people around me wore two-faced masks, and they played their life-long roles to artistic perfection.<sup>64</sup>

This quote suggests again the problems that Kae faces as she tries to assert a stable identity for herself. The “authenticity” she craves for, that could work as a guiding light to give her belonging, to shape her personality, is presented as a phantasm.

The “authenticity-giving” construct that is used by the members of the Wong family is their Chineseness, which is, in the novel, shown to be partially a construct. By representing the way they act out their ethnicity as a

---

<sup>64</sup> DMC 128



constructed, discursive product, Lee in her novel again promotes an open, process-like concept of identity.

Identity is not presented as “natural”. It is presented as something that builds itself up in a relational way via social forces, and forces of the self trying to adapt itself to what the social constraints demand. In the case of the Chinese Canadians as they are described in *Disappearing Moon Café*, this relational construction is both limited by the social forces of a Euro-centric society, but also limits itself by building up discursive frontiers against anything perceived as “non-Chinese” – even if it resides in the own self. To cling to a self-fashioned “authenticity” by keeping up “Granny’s dumb China rules” (DMC 176) is represented as a way to stabilize identities threatened by outer circumstances, but also threatened by the lies that trouble the very existence of the family’s identity, and which have to be kept hushed over at all costs.

The process of this denial in order to keep a clearly defined self inside the Chinatown rules is represented in the novel as a destructive strategy: The circumstances that take their vantage point from a strategy of compliance with the “authentic Chineseness” the family members demand of themselves are presented as at least leading to unhappiness, in the worst case (with the early suicide of Kae’s Aunt Suzie) to destruction of the self.

In *Disappearing Moon Café*, women also appear as destroyers and, being enslaved by the patriarchal Chinese order, are also their own enslavers. This is exemplified in the characters of both Mui Lan and Fong Mei: the binding snare of these women is transplanted also on the lives of the second generation. Behind their carefully constructed masks, the women disappear.

Mary Condé, in her essay “Marketing Ethnicity”<sup>65</sup>, sees Lee’s women characters as “cursed with invisibility”. (Condé 2000 178) The despotic, hardened and lonely Mui Lan “lost substance. Over the years, she became bodiless”. (DMC 28) Fong Mei is described as “a shell – a thin, delicate porcelain shell”. (DMC 53) Kae’s mother Beatrice, who seeks solace in styling herself as the Chinatown beauty queen, is depicted as “nothing more

---

<sup>65</sup> Condé, Mary. “Marketing Ethnicity: Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café*”. Davis, Rocio (ed.). *Tricks with a Glass*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000: 171-189

substantial than a puff of smoke” (DMC 144), her sister Suzie, driven into suicide by the family drama, becomes “a desolate nothing”. (DMC 203) And Kae, acting out the demands of the contemporary multicultural Canadian society, perceives herself as “a public relations icon” (Condé 2000 179): “be the token, pregnant, ethnic woman; act cool, powdered, inhuman”. (DMC 123)

Similar to the maimed or sick bodies of the characters in *Obasan*, the bodies of the Wong women become sites for historical and cultural negotiations: With their pregnancies or not-pregnancies they gain or lose status, their bodies becoming signifiers for cultural rules and for the historically heightened importance of continuing the lineage (see passage 3.1 of this essay). Denied and denying themselves even the strive for a fulfilled life, being “othered”, both as women and as Chinese, they “other” themselves.

By this “othering” of the self, Lee’s characters seem to bespeak an internalisation of exoticism, rendering themselves “powdered, inhuman”. In his essay “The Latitudes of Romance”<sup>66</sup>, where Graham Huggan discusses *Disappearing Moon Café* as a novel using and subverting the traditional features of the romance form to create a new space to negotiate ethnic identity, he speaks of the double-sidedness of exoticism, stating that “Exoticism derives its greatest pleasure from the feeling of detachment, it seeks solace in the absent, in the latitudes of romance”. (Huggan 34) From a Euro-centric perspective, the Far East could be perceived as the site of mysteries, to be marvelled at from a distance. When the distance disappears, as in the immigrant-space of Canada, “the appeal begins to pall. The objectification of the exotic ‘other’ serves a different ideological purpose. Contact contaminates; romance plays out the darker themes of tainted love, miscegenation, incest”. (34) Around these tropes, the figure of the Canadian Chinatown is created as a “collective symbol of white European fantasies and fears of degradation”. (35) Lee uses all these tropes in her novel – love gone wrong, fear of incest – both to trick possible reader expectations, but also to show how her characters “other” themselves.

---

<sup>66</sup> Huggan, Graham. “The Latitudes of Romance. Representations of Chinese Canada in Bowering’s *To All Appearances a Lady* and Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café*”. *Canadian Literature*. 140 (Spring 1994): 34-44

Huggan goes on to speak of the capacity of exoticism to turn the “object of desire into a vehicle of loathing”. (35) He states the glorification of the “other” in exotic writing and the denigration of the “other” in colonial writing function like two sides of the same coin, as the European author declares himself the only subject. He quotes Tzvetan Todorov on this topic:

Once the author has declared that he himself is the only subject [...] and that the others have been reduced to the role of objects, it is often of secondary concern whether those objects are loved or despised. The essential point is that they are not full-fledged human beings.<sup>67</sup>

The important expression here is “not fully-fledged human beings”, as this seems to apply as well to the quoted descriptions of the Wong women. What can be seen in the story of the family is that, living in a misogynist tradition within a racialized society, the characters author themselves as “other” via patriarchal and racist demands; with this they fall into the trap of dehumanising themselves. Condé remarks of the Wong women, “the more Kae attempts to tell their stories, the more Sky Lee demonstrates that the passion and fierceness of these women is utterly defeated”. (Condé 2000 179) This seems to fit with Huggan’s comment that Lee “uses the ultimate self-defeating project of constructing the exotic ‘other’ as a means of exposing the contradictions in colonial attitudes to race”. (Huggan 37)

But by simply inverting binaries, as can be gathered from Mui Lan’s comment “Here we are living on the frontiers with barbarians... we [tang people] stick together” (DMC 61), nothing is gained. With the discussed strategies of the trickster narrative, Lee not only unmask Euro-centric racist views, but also subverts the racial and gendered hegemony within the Chinese community.

---

<sup>67</sup> Todorov, Tzvetan. *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989: 323, quoted in Huggan 35

### 3.3.2. An Eco-Feminist Alternative?

Lee develops an utopian alternative to the Chinatown existence of the Wongs in the prologue and epilogue. With the backdrop of the story of Gwei Chang and the First Nation / Chinese half-breed Kelora, who is the actual great-grandmother of Kae, as her son Ting An is the actual father of Fong Mei's children, Lee discusses the alternative in which the Wongs could have more actually arrived in Canada as land, more than in Canada as the political, Euro-centric society. She suggest an alternative immigrant story, that links the Chinese Canadians with the First Nations People.

Condé states that the most compelling woman's voice in the novel is that of Kelora. It is she rather than Gwei Chang who is the first Chinese Canadian of the family, due to her First Nation mother Shi'atko:

It is to Kelora, if anyone, that the Canadian land spiritually belongs: she tells Gwei Chang that 'when we walk in the forest, we say 'we walk with our grandmothers'' (DMC 14). This double consciousness of the emotional wilderness and of a confident pride in continuity marks her as the one character who could have presided over a happy outcome for Gwei Chang's family. Gwei Chang's desertion of her, and his refusal to recognize [...] Ting An, until it is too late, precipitate, over the generations, a great Chinese tragedy, the fall of his entire house.<sup>68</sup>

Similar to the opposition of British Columbia's live-giving wilderness and Alberta's deadening prairie in *Obasan*, one can note in Lee's novel the positive position of the Canadian *land* in opposition to Canadian *society/city*: The novel opens and closes in the Canadian wilderness and "there is a strong suggestion that this is the one positive abiding reality". (Condé 2000 180)

This positive account, also of the First Nations family of Kelora, who appears troubled due to Kelora's lack of status as a half-breed, but still accepts her decisions and excludes neither her nor Gwei Chang whom she chooses as her man, is opposed by the negative connotations of the specific urban locations in Vancouver: On the one hand, 1414 Osler Avenue, the site of the Janet Smith murder that led to increasing legislative racist measures

---

<sup>68</sup> Condé 2000 179

against the Chinese community, and on the other hand, 50 East Pender Street, the location of the title-giving Disappearing Moon Café, “an appropriately ambiguous social space... with its implication of servicing outsiders in a way which mimics the intimacy of home, thus marketing an illusion”. (Condé 2000 180) and also as an appropriately male space, as it evokes “the sexism of the traditional Chinese café, reserved as a place for men to enjoy themselves”. (180)

The opposition of female / autochthonous / wilderness with male / Chinese / European / city is also enforced by the fact that the story of Gwei Chang and Kelora is clearly divided structurally from the rest of the novel. The narrative perspective is near-omniscient, there is no comment from the narrator as in the rest of the novel, and one might at least suspect from these features that the narrator of prologue and epilogue is not Kae.

The idea that Lee plays with here is, what would have happened if the Wongs had chosen to identify with a female lineage instead of a male lineage? If they had chosen “Canadian” (in the sense of First Nation Canadian) as the stable identity marker instead of “Chinese”, and an ecological life instead of an urban / capitalist life? I thought that with the backdrop of the Kelora-story, Lee placed a possible eco-feminist utopia at the basis of her novel to again point to the provisionality of identity. It also posits the shape of identity as a question of choice.

This alternative idea also seems to be worked into the narrative as a “frontier-effect”, in which the “outside”, the other side of the identity of the Chinese Community is played out. It shows how identification, if seen as a discursive process, is always incomplete. As Stuart Hall has noted,

The total merging it suggests [meaning the act of identification] is, in fact, a fantasy of incorporation. Identification is, then, a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption. There is always a ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ – an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality. Like all signifying practices, it is subject to the ‘play’ of *différance*. It obeys the logic of more-than-one. And since as a process it operates across

difference, it entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of 'frontier-effects'. It requires what is left outside, its constitutive outside consolidates the process.<sup>69</sup>

If regarded in this context, the frame of Kelora's story provides the narrative not only with an alternative utopia, but also with its "constitutive outside" (as it is also outside the core narrative). It subsumes nature as the constitutive outside (or "other") to culture, female order as the "other" of male order. As by the core narrative we learn that the hard binaries lead to breakdown, as the house of Gwei Chang crumbles due to denying its "other" in not accepting Kelora's heritage, the novel also seems to point to not only a possible, but to a necessary scrambling of the code that rules the process of identification, demanding, as a discussed feature of the trickster narrative, a re-ordering of signifiers, a transformation of hierarchies, power-structures and traditions.

One could think that Gwei Chang had, with Kelora, the chance to "truly inherit Canada" (Condé 200 186) and that he threw this chance away for materialistic reasons, as it is described in the epilogue how he is shocked by the poverty of the First Nations People. By his link to Kelora and her pre-colonial ancestry, and his link to the Chinese rail-workers of the CPR, Gwei Chang is deeply inscribed into Canadian history. Condé states that "both Gwei Chang as an individual and Canada as a nation are responsible for his family's disintegration". (186) Due to the failure of a real connection, both politically and spiritually, with the Canadian land, Gwei Chang's descendants become marginalized. The rejected live with Kelora appears as an utopian state envisioned, the dystopia of which is the course the story of the family has taken.

The possibility of a life of the Chinese immigrants connected to a society other than that defined by Europeans also echoes the positive descriptions of the inverted-pioneer Japanese community in Slokan in *Obasan*. Both authors hint at the possibilities of alternative social orders. With that, they also point to a possibility to re-negotiate, and possibly actively change, identities.

---

<sup>69</sup> Hall 3

### 3.3.3. Marketable Identities

I guess it is because I am a woman of colour (meaning of course, that I'm a colourful woman). And maybe that circumstance is supposed to make me gasp and ooh and aah, and exclaim, "Well then, that makes me very special, doesn't it, dear? Why else would I be trying so hard to explain myself?" And here I go again, feeding those pompous, pious ideas that we all have roles to play, positions to take, and opinions to state.<sup>70</sup>

This quote of Sky Lee already suggests her self-consciousness with regard to the problematic status in which ethnic literature is perceived by the reading public. Lee voices, in this quote and also in *Disappearing Moon Café*, a high self-reflexivity about how, by writing a book belonging to the "staple-genre" of Chinese American literature, a multi-generational family novel, her own work is in the danger to reinforce perceptions about ethnic minorities which romanticise the "ethnic" experience, or re-establish exotic mystifications in an emancipatory guise. She also expresses a self-consciousness about how, in the time her novel was published, establishment attitudes and marketing plans had shifted in a way that made her writing a marketable, sellable commodity. In this way, the ethnicity of the writer becomes a marketable, strategic attribute. With the popular success of books by Chinese American writers such as Amy Tan, who has been criticised for producing a kind of fiction that combines Chinese American family narratives with gearing at an appetite for the exotic<sup>71</sup>, critics such as Mary Condé see a danger of a creation of an audience that is interested in ethnic fiction as a way to indulge in exotic fantasies under only a surface of liberational motivations.

The marketability of ethnicity is no new development, however, and it seems that a fleeting mask of an ethnic identity can go along with what is fashionable at a certain time: The first published Asian Canadian woman writer, Winifred Eaton, a Chinese-English from Montréal, published under the name "Onoto Watanna", as she considered it, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, to be more fashionable and more respectable to be Japanese, producing a fiction

---

<sup>70</sup> Lee, Sky. "Yelling it: Women and Anger across Cultures". Lee, Sky et al. (eds.). *Telling It: Women and Language across Cultures*. Vancouver: Press Gang, 1990: 177-183: 177

<sup>71</sup> See Condé 2000 184

marketed as “authentic” experience. Condé states that “it is perhaps rather appropriate that the author of one of the founding texts of Asian-American literature, the novel *Miss Nume of Japan* (1899) should have based her career on a false identity based on marketing decisions”. (Condé 2000 183) Eaton’s sister Edith, also a writer, kept her Chinese heritage, but she coloured it up by her pen name “Sui Sin Far”. However, “she has been claimed as a significant voice for Canadian women of ethnic minority” and her fiction has been described as a “search for an identity that is both Chinese and Western” (Condé 2000 184), and as interested in the real attempt at constructing such a hybrid identity.

It is rather the tone of books like Tan’s, with their depiction of mother – daughter relations which is akin to “a version [...] of cultural conflict premised on a static conception of Chinese American culture” (Condé 2000 185), the strewing of esoteric “traditional” wisdom and descriptions that one could call “exotic spice”, that Condé believes the trickster writer Lee makes a travesty of, for example when Kae overdoes the description of female bonds. In the context of the novel, where women over the generations have fought against each other for their status and identity, it seems comic when Kae sweetly speaks of the “simple truth”, the link from “mother to daughter, sister to sister”, which will “form a bridge over the abyss” that separates them (DMC 145-6). One can suspect the actual message behind passages as the quoted one as rather being “beware of simple truths”. Kae is hopelessly divided from her mother, and this tension is not resolved in the novel. Lee does not oppose one static, timeless myth with another one.

Also, Kae makes fun of the marketability of Chinese tragedy, and the market schemes for selling books, when she thinks up soppy titles for her book:

“Chi,” I am ecstatic. “I’ve got the perfect title... *House Hexed by Woe*. What do you think?” “get serious!” Chi chopping chives. [...] I am standing at the counter beside her, staring hard into the woodgrain of my mother’s cabinets, trying to imagine an enticing movie poster with a title like *Temple of Wonged Women*, in romantic script: “They were full of ornament, devoid of truth!”<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> DMC 208-209



The passage goes on with Kae reminding Chi of a prophecy she was told by her as a child, and to which Chi responds it was just a story: There are no mythical Chinese traditions that help you reconstruct a marginalized identity in *Disappearing Moon Café*, Kae's search for them is unmasked as a search for phantasms. This, however, is counter-pointed by Gwei Chang's searching for the actual bones of the CPR workers – the remains of actual Chinese Canadian history. Again, simple judgements and conclusions are deferred.

Lee's awareness of the market-value of ethnicity is a feature that keeps her book from falling into another "identity trap" in which an acceptance by society of an "authentic" ethnicity is used as a strategy to keep the status quo, to keep the ethnic writer "special".

This feature of Lee's novel and the author's self-awareness that her book might build another ethnic edifice, "suggests that the fictions minorities write about themselves – their insistence, as it were, on the marketable embroidered blouses and the exotic recipes – may represent their greatest danger". (Condé 2000 186)

The awareness of this danger that mere factual "voicing" of an experience of history kept in silence by the ruling forces of society might harm this experience can be seen in connection to Naomi's problems with the strategy of Aunt Emily in *Obasan*, whose documents fail to score their aiming for the heart. (See OBA 49) Also, aiming for exotic instincts in a white audience in order to voice one's experience is unmasked by the trickster novel structure of *Disappearing Moon Café* as another danger.

Still, this is a multi-generational family novel, and it speaks elaborately of the Chinese Canadian experience. But by working with ironies and tricks, and thereby playing with the concept of story, its own story and the reader, *Disappearing Moon Café* can be seen as a novel with no "inherent justice".<sup>73</sup> It thereby shares the focus of contemporary Canadian women's fiction as a whole on, as Alice Munro states:

---

<sup>73</sup> See Condé, Mary. "Visible Immigrants in Three Canadian Women's Fictions". *Canadian Studies* 34 (1993): 91-100: 95

Those shifts of emphasis that throw the storyline open to question, disarrangements which demand new judgements and solutions, and throw the windows open on inappropriate unforgettable scenery<sup>74</sup>

These “disarrangements which demand new judgements” are used in *Disappearing Moon Café* to point to an idea of identity, both personal and as part of a society, as constructed and non-static. This non-static quality makes it possible to see, as Graham Huggan has done, Kae’s narrative as “recuperating an ancestral past while remaining free to fashion the future”. (Huggan 38)

The awareness of the marketability of an ethnic identity in Canadian society today is also linked to the discontents of many critics of the official multiculturalism policy of the Canadian state. In the last passage of this essay, I will return to questions of a possible Canadian identity linked to multiculturalism. What does the understanding of identity which the novels I discussed offer regarding a possible new construction of national identity for the Canadian state? The discussed novels apply narrative strategies by which monolithic, Euro-centric understandings of Canadian history are shifted and scrambled. They offer new perspectives by which what has been understood as common knowledge about Canada is changed.

Can this changed perception be incorporated into a new perception of “Canadianness”, and, if this is possible, what concepts and ideas might be helpful to articulate this new perception? Is the very concept of “nation” flexible enough at all to be able to incorporate an understanding of identity as a dynamic and ambiguous process, as I have postulated it throughout this essay? How can the experiences of people with hybrid heritages be incorporated into a discursive self-construction of a society without construction them again along hegemonic lines? I have, of course, no hope to answer any of these many questions in the remainder of this essay.

---

<sup>74</sup> Munro, Alice. ‘Simon’s Luck’, *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose*. London: Penguin, 1980: 177, quoted in Condé 1993 94

What I wish to do is to review the attempt of Canadian politics to assess the hybrid make-up of its population, namely official multiculturalism and possible problems of this attempt. Following this, I want to look at some ideas linked to these questions which could be further discussed in order to find further strategies for a re-negotiation of identity.

## 4. “What does it mean to be Canadian?”<sup>75</sup> – Chances for Transcultural Identities

### 4.1. Canadian Multiculturalism

Thou shalt be ethnic, our legislators say; thou shalt honour thy mother tongue; thou shalt celebrate thy difference in folk festivals, and thou shalt receive monies to write about thy difference.<sup>76</sup>

In the first part of this essay, I have talked about some features of Canada which make a construction of a Canadian national identity difficult, if it was attempted by applying unifying strategies as they were constitutive in the discursive construction of “traditional”, or older, nations. As mentioned above, a Canadian identity can neither be explained by features such as a long, common history (as this is too short and too complex), nor by settlement on a common territory (as this was too big). Nevertheless, something like a Canadian national identity has developed or is in the process of development. One of the features that led to the development of a national identity was the necessity to stay “identifiable” in comparison with the influential neighbour, the USA. For this reason, Canadians tend to state their identity *ex negativo*, stating first what they are not, namely that they are not (US-) Americans. A stress, in defining Canadian identity is put on difference, rather than on commonality.

The cultural dualism, due to the French element, which existed from the beginning, served as difference marker in comparison to the United States. The early biculturalism of the Founding Nations maybe also served as a feature that made Canadian discourse more sensitive towards the acceptance of cultural differences and a first step to the Canadian self-image as a “cultural mosaic”. The acceptance of the French “difference” by official policies led to a demand of other ethnic groups for an acceptance of their difference and

---

<sup>75</sup> Beedham, Matthew. “Obasan and Hybridity: Necessary Cultural Strategies”. Payant, Katherine B. and Toby Rose (eds.). *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature*. London: Greenwood, 1999: 139-149: 148

<sup>76</sup> Kamboureli, Smaro. “Of Black Angels and Melancholy Lovers: Ethnicity and Writing in Canada”. Collier, Gordon. (ed.) *Us/Them: Translation, Transcription and Identity in Post-Colonial Literary Cultures*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992: 51-62: 53, quoted in Condé 2000 172

cultural specificity, which was indeed addressed by the policy of multiculturalism. The policy of multiculturalism and the ideology of the “cultural mosaic”, debatable as both might be, served to develop a new image of Canadian society, which was and is leading to a development and a re-negotiation of an “over-all“ Canadian identity<sup>77</sup>. Because there was no consensus about the “substance” of Canadian identity or culture, the idea of multiculturalism could fill a vacuum: “Multiculturalism fills a void, defining Canadian culture in terms of the legitimate ancestral cultures which are the legacy of every Canadian: defining the whole through the sum of its parts.”<sup>78</sup>

Seen in this way, the complex plurality itself can be seen as the basis of Canadian identity. That this attempt at plurality has proved successful at least in the creation of art which discusses further the complex issues of identity and plurality, can be seen by the large output of Canadian literature assessing the plurality of the countries past, and the manifold myths and histories that stem from this plurality.

Not only the novels I discussed have to be seen in this context, but also novels by Michael Ondaatje, for example, who works intertextually with the manifold stories and heritages of Canada in the novel *In the Skin of a Lion* and re-discusses his family’s Sri Lankan heritage in the novel *Running in the Family*. Like the novels I discussed, Ondaatje explores personal and public mythologies. All of these works address, in this sense, the “Canadian issue” of identity in a polyvalent, highly reflected way. However, as my discussion of the critical assessment of “multicultural Canadianness” in Lee’s and Kogawa’s work has shown, none of these writers appear as “happy campers” in an official multicultural landscape, so to speak.

The term “multiculturalism” carries, at least, three different semantic values: it can, firstly, describe the named political programme of the Canadian government since 1971; secondly, it can describe the reality of Canadian society as multicultural in the make-up of its population; and thirdly, the term describes an ideology, namely the ideology that the conservation of the cultural

---

<sup>77</sup> See Mintzel 586-587

<sup>78</sup> Weinfeld, Morton. “Myth and Reality in the Canadian Mosaic: ‘Affective Ethnicity’”. Bienvenue, Rita M. and Jay E. Goldstein (eds.). *Ethnicity and Ethnic Relations in Canada*. Toronto: Butterworth, 1985: 65-86: 79-80, quoted in Mintzel 587

identity of all members of society and the acceptance of cultural plurality and emancipation were the guiding motive of Canadian societal policy<sup>79</sup>.

Due to the ideological weight of the term, a discrepancy between idea and reality is constructed. It raises hopes among ethnic minorities for a social and political restructuring that addresses and changes their status within society. A restructuring of power relations would however not be in the interest of the dominant Founding Nations. The impression that the multiculturalism policy clears the way for a restructuring or breakdown of social hierarchies and borders that stand on ethnic grounds is not validated by Canadian social reality.

The interest of multicultural policies focused on cultural and linguistic emancipation, but the political and economic emancipation of ethnic minorities was not addressed. For example, Li notes in his study on ethnic relations in Canada that “the net differences in earnings indicate that [...] blacks, Chinese and Greeks face the most discrimination because of their origin”<sup>80</sup>. These factors add to the suspicion of critics that Canadian multiculturalism acts as a falsifying discourse: by highlighting cultural issues, political and economic issues are kept in the dark, as “such a policy is no more than a compensation in the cultural domain for political and economic deprivations, it is a mechanism of exclusion in the guise of inclusion”<sup>81</sup>. Canadian multiculturalism has not succeeded in generating real participation and emancipation.

The policy of cultural pluralism often served to “mask the reality of dominant-conformity (with institutional support for folkloric cultures). [...] This Anglo-conformity is clearly evident in large work organizations [...] where [...] adaption to the (Anglo) organizational culture is the *sine qua non* of a successful working life”<sup>82</sup>.

---

<sup>79</sup> See Mintzel 593

<sup>80</sup> Li, Peter S. (ed.). *Race and Ethnic Relations in Canada*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988: 127, quoted in Mintzel 593

<sup>81</sup> Dahlie, Jorgen and Tissa Fernando (eds.). *Ethnicity, Power and Politics in Canada*. Toronto: Methuen, 1981: 2, quoted in Mintzel 593

<sup>82</sup> Symons, Gladys. *The Social Construction of Race and Ethnicity in Canadian Society*. Typescript: 1991, quoted in Groß, Konrad. “Identity, Identities: Infamous Canadian Pastime, Venerable Quest, or Trivial Pursuit?”. Carlson, Joern (ed.). *O Canada: Essays on Canadian Literature and Culture*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1995: 26-37: 35

In the business world, then, Euro-centrism stays the norm – another way of doing things, a confusing of priorities is not permitted. As narrator Kae remarks in *Disappearing Moon Café*: “I never lost my perspective in the business world. It was as two-dimensional as computer print-out.” (DMC 123)

In economic life, members of ethnic minorities are ordered to what Homi Bhabha has called “camouflage, mimicry, black skins / white masks”<sup>83</sup>. It is in these environments where large parts of people’s identity are cut away, where Kae acts “cool, powdered, inhuman” (DMC 123) and Naomi’s brother Stephen alienates himself from his Japanese heritage, culminating in deliberately loosing his ability to speak Japanese. (OBA 231)

In the cultural domain, official multiculturalism is feared to pen in members of minorities within their assigned shard of the Canadian mosaic, thereby demobilising them and their cultures. This is rendered by Naomi in *Obasan* when she remarks that the authorship white Canadians grant themselves about “Our Indians” or “Our Japanese” – which creates a relationship of authority and subordinate – make her feel like “being offered a pair of crutches while I’m striding down the street”. (OBA 270)

Janice Kulyk Keefer has noted that political multiculturalism is freezing cultures, making them undynamic. By this, cultures are rendered folkloristic or museal, and members are prevented from “crossing cultural borderlines in a transcultural step”<sup>84</sup>.

Instead of the image of the “cultural mosaic”, Kulyk Keefer promotes the idea of a “transcultural kaleidoscope”:

The user of a kaleidoscope can make out separate pieces, none of which is more privileged than any other, a changing and infinitely variable pattern precisely because the shifting parts are held together by the cylinder that contains them. And that cylinder [...] we might liken to Canada<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994: 120

<sup>84</sup> Groß 35-36

<sup>85</sup> Kulyk Keefer, Janice. “From Mosaic to Kaleidoscope: Out of the Multicultural Past Comes a Vision of a Transcultural Future”. *Books in Canada* 20 (6) (1991): 13-16: 16

## 4.2. Transcultural Hybridity?

I would like to think further, for the moment, about Kulyk Keefer's image of a transcultural kaleidoscope. I think that the focus this image throws on the infinitely changing patterns this kaleidoscope might produce is actually quite fitting in a re-assessment of an idea of a national identity which would understand the task of creating itself as one of potentially perpetual expansion and renewal to include manifold experiences. Also, pieces of a kaleidoscope tend to overlap frequently, creating a new, hybrid shape out of different parts without a dissolving or melting of the parts. A hierarchical order of the pieces can be disrupted by a turning of the kaleidoscope.

The idea of cultural hybridity has been discussed in recent years in the connection with the work of theorist Homi K. Bhabha, but was also applied in the sense of a force in multivocal narration which enables a disruption and transfiguring of power by Mikhail Bakhtin in his idea of the carnivalesque, which has been mentioned above<sup>86</sup>.

Bhabha stresses the interdependence of margin / centre relations, or coloniser / colonised relations, and "the mutual construction of their subjectivities"<sup>87</sup>. The source for the construction of cultural statements and systems lies for Bhabha in the ambiguous and often contradictory "Third Space of Enunciation" (Bhabha 37):

Cultural identity always emerges in this contradictory and ambivalent space, which for Bhabha makes the claim to hierarchal 'purity' of cultures untenable. For him, the recognition of this ambivalent space of cultural identity may help us to overcome the exoticism of cultural diversity in favour of the recognition of an empowering hybridity within which cultural difference may operate: 'It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory [...] may open the way to conceptualising an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*.'<sup>88</sup>

The importance of Bhabha's notion of hybridity is the focus on the "in-between" space as the locator of the meaning of cultures. With this, the term

---

<sup>86</sup> See page 41 of this essay

<sup>87</sup> Ashcroft et al. 118

<sup>88</sup> Ashcroft et al. 118-119, they quote from Bhabha 38



gains its disrupting potential and also the potential to acknowledge the understanding of identity formation as a dynamic process. The focus on the “in-between” I found also akin to the demand of a break-up of fixed ontological structures which can be read out of this passage from Deleuze / Guattari’s concept of rhizomes:

A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance. The tree imposes the verb ‘to be’, but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, ‘and...and...and’. This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb ‘to be’.<sup>89</sup>

Both Bhabha and Deleuze / Guattari point, I believe, to a focus on the relational forces between signifiers, which cannot denote unconnected to other signifiers. Due to culture’s expression through speech acts, this relational force is also seen to be at work in the self-constructions between cultures. An acknowledging of these relational forces might actually work towards not a mere exchange between different cultures, but a new understanding of culture and cultural identity.

This new understanding would accept and acknowledge differences, but would not see them as monolithic. It would also make possible a new culture and identity which would acknowledge expansion, change and diffusion. It would enable to put into vision a concept such as “Canadian identity” with a double-sight, or a multiple-sight, where this concept turns from being one set of features to a “more-than-oneness”: maybe as a plant that you observe changes in your vision when you change the vantage point of your observation, and is therefore multiple though it is still the same plant.

But how could such an openness in vision and understanding be imported into a concept as “nation”, which markets itself as “non-rhizoid”, which markets itself as a stable entity? Would, to come back to Kulyk Keefer’s image, the kaleidoscope pieces not become so dynamic that they would burst the kaleidoscope container “Canada” and we would have to find another concept, different from the idea of “nation”? This question will have to be

---

<sup>89</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987: 24

pondered elsewhere, as it leads into discussions that would explode the scope of this essay. For now, I merely wish to note that Canadian multiculturalism should not be seen as the last step in a development which gears towards a destabilization of racial hierarchies, rather, as a creaky step in a ladder which has yet to be climbed fully.

The vision from atop this ladder on the surrounding landscape has not yet come into sight. It is important, in this context, to note again that hegemonic discourses are also able to change shape, and resurface in new disguises. Therefore, subversive discourse has to stay keen and find new ways in attacking its complexities. Novels such as *Obasan* and *Disappearing Moon Café* show a structure that is open and complex enough to prompt and demand an ongoing discussion and re-assembling of realities and identities. The concept of fluid and dynamic identity is a tool that can serve to debunk the seeming authority and stability of other concepts. The novels also work towards an understanding where “the oft-asked question, ‘what does it mean to be Canadian?’ has to be seen as having a plethora of answers, and our inability to answer should not be seen as a problem”. (Beedham 148)

## Final Remarks

He closed his eyes, the heavy chant of the storyteller turning to mist in his head.<sup>90</sup>

The aim of this essay was to show how the novels *Obasan* and *Disappearing Moon Café* employ strategies that break apart monolithic concepts about identity, and how they assess questions of both ethnic and national identity by destabilising essentialising notions and re-surfacing histories not previously discussed. *Obasan* addresses history, and our understanding of history, by intertextuality and displays features of “historiographic metafiction”. Thereby, it inscribes the experience of the Japanese Canadian community into the history of Canada. *Disappearing Moon Café* employs trickster strategies to exceed monologic views on ethnic identity. The construction of identity in the two novels foregrounds aspects of cultural resistance as well as being able to link individual and community. Both novels are highly self-reflective and do not fall into the trap of creating counter-icons. They do not only change and prompt a change of the understanding of Canadian history, they also inscribe new stories and myths into Canadian culture. The importance of stories and myth for identity constructions cannot be undermined, and incorporating new stories changes identities. For example, with *Obasan* entering the curriculum of Canadian schools<sup>91</sup>, the fairytale of Momotaro, which Naomi reads as a child, is now, in my view, also a Canadian story. The novels do not only add to a view of Canada, they also actively change it. Working with these novels has certainly changed mine. Novels from new vantage points are not merely “new voices”, as minority literature is sometimes called. They are voices which change our own.

Questions of identity and identity constructions have frequently been discussed and worked upon in cultural studies in recent years. They will not stop to occupy us. With nations losing their borders more and more with the rise of global economies and increasing global migration, we will have to continue in the future to find new ways to express these developments in

---

<sup>90</sup> DMC 237

<sup>91</sup> See Lo 101

literary and cultural studies. The way Canadian literature and culture deal with these developments can act as a vital test ground in a world where more and more nations are becoming “multicultural” or transcultural, and will have to assess this change. Developing new stories will be a necessity if we want to keep the narration of our identities alive.

## **Bibliography**

Lee, Sky. *Disappearing Moon Café*. Seattle: Seal, 1991

Kogawa, Joy. *Obasan*. New York: Anchor, 1994

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London, Routledge, 1998

Assmann, Aleida. *Erinnerungsräume*. München: C.H. Beck, 1999

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. Holquist, Michael (ed.). Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981

Beauregard, Guy. „After Obasan: Kogawa Criticism and Its Futures“. *Studies in Canadian Literature* 26/2 (2001): 5-21

Beauregard, Guy. “The Emergence of ‘Asian Canadian Literature’: Can Lit’s Obscene Supplement?”. *Essays on Canadian Writing* 67 (1999): 53-75

Beautell, Eva Darias. “The Imaginary Ethnic”. Rocio, Davis (ed.). *Tricks with a Glass*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000: 191-207

Beedham, Matthew. “Obasan and Hybridity: Necessary Cultural Strategies. Payant, Katherine B. and Toby Rose (eds.). *The Immigrant Experience in North American Literature*. London: Greenwood, 1999: 139-149

Boelhower, William. “Ethnographic Politics: The Uses of Memory in Ethnic Fiction”. Singh, A. et al. (eds.). *Memory and Cultural Politics*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996: 19-39

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994

Bronfen, Elisabeth, Benjamin Marius and Therese Steffen (ed.). *Hybride Kulturen*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1997

Brownstein, Marilyn Rhiel. "Catastrophic Encounters' – Postmodern Biography as Witness to History". Mary and David Suchoff (eds.). *The Seductions of Biography*. London: Routledge, 1996: 185-201

*Canada Handbook 1981*. Hull: Canadian Government Publishing Centre, 1981

Chao, Lien. "Anthologizing the Collective". *Essays in Canadian Writing* 57 (1999): 145-170

Chao, Lien. "The Collective Self: A Narrative Paradigm in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*". Hawley, John (ed.) *Cross-addressing: Resistance Literature and Cultural Borders*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996: 237- 255

Cheung, King-Kok. *Articulate Silences*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993

Condé, Mary. "Marketing Ethnicity: Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*". Davis, Rocio (ed.). *Tricks with a Glass*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000: 171-189

Condé, Mary. "Visible Immigrants in Three Canadian Women's Fictions". *Canadian Studies* (1993): 91-100

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983

Francis, Daniel. *National Dreams*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 1997

Goellnicht, Donald C.. "Father Land and Mother Tongue: The Divided Female Subject in Kogawa's *Obasan* and Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*" Morgan, Janice and Colette T. Hall (eds.). *Gender and Genre in Literature*. New York: Garland, 1991: 119-134

Goellnicht, Donald C.. „Minority History as Metafiction: Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*". *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 8/2 (1989): 287-306

Groß, Konrad. "Identity, Identities: Infamous Canadian Pastime, Venerable Quest, or Trivial Pursuit?". Carlson, Joern (ed.). *O Canada: Essays on Canadian Literature and Culture*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1995: 26-37

Hall, Stuart. "Who Needs 'Identity'?". Hall, Stuart and Paul du Gay (eds.). *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, 1996: 1-18

Huggan, Graham. "The Latitudes of Romance: Representations of Chinese Canada in Bowering's *To All Appearances a Lady* and Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*". *Canadian Literature* 140 (1994): 34-48

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1988

Hutcheon, Linda. *The Canadian Postmodern*. Ontario: Oxford University Press, 1988

Kristeva, Julia. "From One Identity to an Other". Lucy, Niall (ed.). *Postmodern Literary Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000: 69-92

Kruk, Laurie. "Voices of Stone: The Power of Poetry in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*". *ARIEL* Vol. 30/4 (1999): 75-94

Kuester, Martin and Wolfram R. Keller (eds.). *Writing Canadians*. Marburg: Universitätsbibliothek Marburg, 2002

Kulyk Keefer, Janice. "From Mosaic to Kaleidoscope: Out of the Multicultural Past Comes a Vision of a Transcultural Future". *Books in Canada* 20/6 (1991): 13-16

Lee, Sky et al. (eds.). *Telling It: Women and Language across Cultures*. Vancouver: Press Gang, 1990

Lee, Robert A. "Imagined Cities of China". *Hitting Critical Mass: a Journal of Asian American Cultural Criticism* 4/1 (1996): 103-119

Lo, Marie. "Obasan by Joy Kogawa". Sau-ling Cynthia Wong and Stephen H. Sumida (eds.). *A Resource Guide to Asian American Literature*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2001

McAfee, Noëlle. *Julia Kristeva*. London: Routledge, 2004

Mintzel, Alf. *Multikulturelle Gesellschaften in Europa und Nordamerika: Konzepte, Streitfragen, Analysen, Befunde*. Passau: Rothe, 1997

Morgan, Janice. "Subject to Subject / Voice to Voice: Twentieth Century Autobiographical Fiction by Women Writers". Morgan, Janice and Colette T. Hall (eds.). *Gender and Genre in Literature*. New York: Garland, 1991: 3-19

New, William H. *Borderlands: How we talk about Canada*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1998

Pache, Walter. "Literatur Kanadas – Die Andere Nordamerikanische Literatur". Zapf, Hubert (Hrsg.). *Amerikanische Literaturgeschichte*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997: 520-558

Palumbo-Liu, David. "The Politics of Memory: Remembering History in Alice Walker and Joy Kogawa". Singh, Amritjit et al. (eds.). *Memory and Cultural Politics*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996: 210-226



Quimby, Karen. "This is my own, my native land': Constructions of Identity and landscape in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*". Hawley, John (ed.). *Cross-addressing: Resistance Literature and Cultural Borders*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996: 257-270

Sarup, Madan. *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988

Said, Edward W. "Identity, Authority and Freedom: The Potentate and the Traveler". *Boundary 2* 21/3 (1994): 2-17

Smith, Jeanne Rosier. "The Trickster Aesthetic: A Cross-Cultural Feminist Theory". Smith Rosier, Jeanne. *Writing Tricksters. Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature*. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press, 1997: 1-30

Straub, Jürgen. „Personale und kollektive Identität: zur Analyse eines theoretischen Begriffs. Assmann, Aleida and Heidrun Frieze (Hrsg.). *Identitäten: Erinnerung, Geschichte, Identität* 3. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998: 73-104

Thomas, Ulrike. *Trickster Texts and Trickster Figures*. Magisterarbeit Universität Konstanz. Konstanz, 2003

Vautier, Marie. *New World Myth: Postmodernism and Postcolonialism in Canadian Fiction*. London, McGill – Queens University Press, 1998

Zwicker, Heather. "Multiculturalism: Pied Piper of Canadian Nationalism". *ARIEL* 32/4 (2001): 147-175

## **Web Resources**

[http://archives.cbc.ca/IDD-1-71-568/conflict\\_war/internment/](http://archives.cbc.ca/IDD-1-71-568/conflict_war/internment/) [20.05.05]

<http://www.wheresjames.com/index.php?page=bg> [26.06.05] (source of title illustration)

## Anhang 1: Deutsche Zusammenfassung

### Identität in den Romanen *Obasan* von Joy Kogawa und *Disappearing Moon Café* von Sky Lee

Die Arbeit behandelt literarische Ausdrücke verschiedener Identitätsdiskurse anhand der im Titel genannten Romane, die von Minderheitserfahrungen in Kanada handeln.

Im ersten Teil der Arbeit wird nach dem Versuch einer Definition von „Identität“ im personalen wie im kollektiven Sinne darauf hingewiesen, wie sich die Konstruktion von personaler, kollektiver und nationaler Identität für Minoritäten, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der multikulturellen Gesellschaft Kanadas, erschwert. Minoritäten wie die japanisch-kanadische und die chinesisch-kanadische haben in jüngerer Zeit durch literarische Produktion auf sich und ihre Geschichte aufmerksam gemacht und sind damit in der kanadischen Kulturproduktion stärker in Erscheinung getreten. Bei der Betrachtung dieser literarischen Produktionen, wie der behandelten Romane, fällt auf, dass die Autorinnen sich der konstruierten, narrativen Struktur von Identität, wie sie in theoretischen Diskursen herausgestellt wird, bewusst sind und diese Merkmale für die narrative Strategie ihrer Romane nutzen.

Dabei geht es den Romanen um eine Neuverhandlung personaler, kollektiver und nationaler Identität unter den Eindrücken der Erfahrung von Diskriminierung und Ausgrenzung.

Es wird eine narrative Strategie verfolgt, welche versucht, eine Gegendarstellung zum offiziellen Bild der Identität der jeweiligen Gruppen zu schaffen, die trotzdem nicht die gleichen allgemeinen Gültigkeitsansprüche erhebt wie der offizielle Diskurs, die offen und erneuerbar bleibt.

Die behandelten Romane unterlaufen ein Festschreiben einer bestimmten Identität durch narrative Elemente wie etwa der Nicht-Linearität, der Intertextualität, der Ironie. Diese Aspekte werden im zweiten und im dritten Teil der Arbeit, welche die Romane jeweils diskutieren, herausgestellt. Dabei wird beschrieben, wie die Romane immer wieder den Charakter

moderner Identitätserfahrung herausstellen, welche von Ambiguität und Dynamik geprägt ist.

Aufgrund dieses allgemeinen Charakters von moderner Identität könnte eine stärkere Anerkennung von Alteritätserfahrungen und Hybriditätserfahrungen in der Ausformung von nationaler Identität erreicht werden. Eine größere Offenheit im Bezug auf die Zuschreibungen von nationaler Identität, welche sich immer wieder erneuern und neu definieren könnte, um Erfahrungen verschiedener Gruppen einzubinden anstatt diese zu exkludieren, wird im letzten Teil der Arbeit im Zusammenhang mit der kanadischen Multikulturalismuspolitik diskutiert.

## **Anhang 2: Erklärung**

1. Ich versichere hiermit, das ich die anliegende Magisterarbeit mit dem Thema:

Identity in Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*

selbstständig verfasst und keine anderen Hilfsmittel als die angegebenen benutzt habe.

Die Stellen, die anderen Werken (einschließlich des Internets und anderer elektronischer Text- und Datensammlungen) dem Wortlaut oder dem Sinn nach entnommen sind, habe ich in jedem einzelnen Fall durch Angabe der Quelle bzw. der Sekundärliteratur als Entlehnung kenntlich gemacht.

Weiterhin versichere ich hiermit, dass die o.g. Arbeit bei keiner anderen Prüfungsbehörde zur Begutachtung vorgelegen hat bzw. vorliegt.

2. Diese Arbeit wird nach Abschluss des Prüfungsverfahrens der Universitätsbibliothek Konstanz übergeben und ist durch Einsicht und Ausleihe somit der Öffentlichkeit zugänglich. Als Urheberin der anliegenden Arbeit stimme ich diesem Verfahren zu.

---

(Unterschrift)

---

(Ort, Datum)