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Intentional Solidarity as a Decolonizing Practice

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Article abstract

This article conceptualizes what a border literate reading looks like through a re-reading of Sky Lee's 1990 novel *Disappearing Moon Café*. Using postcolonial feminist understanding of transnational literacy, with the help of queer scholarship on intimacy, I explore the difficulty of seeing the intersectionality of struggles of Chinese Canadian and Indigenous women. I argue that a border literacy alone may not be enough to propel us towards investing in these encounters. A deliberate intentionality that is based on a desire for a specific kind of future is necessary in how we retrace the past and in turn give shape to a different solidarity in the present that is not based only on the needs of the ally but a vulnerability and openness for new knowledges and different ways of being.

Intentional Solidarity as a Decolonizing Practice¹

JANE KU

DECOLONIZING SOLIDARITY

I n the wake of the report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada,² I am concerned that reconciliation efforts are instituted as a top-down process³ and may thus depoliticize the long histories of struggles and the report's radical potential. My own participation in my academic unit's Truth and Reconciliation Committee, which was established to decolonize the curriculum and related pedagogic practices, was motivated at least partly by the institutionalized discourse of reconciliation, rather than by Indigenous activism. From the non-performativity of institutionalized "antiracism" I have learned that institutions can fail to do what they say they aim to do. Declarations of commitment to antiracism through documents and reports do not lead to concrete action because the right conditions are not there; for example, mis-defining racism as discrete individual acts leads to mis-targeted antiracism or shields the institution from actually implementing

¹ I am indebted to Matthew Chin, Izumi Sakamoto, Jeffrey Tanaka, and Ai Yamamoto, members of the Japanese Canadian Art and Activism Project, for pushing me to explore some of the issues discussed in this article.

² The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) reports can be found on the website of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation: www.nctr.ca (accessed 24 March 2020).

³ The discourse of reconciliation has been critiqued at the wake of the TRC Reports; see Victoria Freeman, "In Defence of Reconciliation," *Canadian Journal of Law and Jurisprudence*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2014, p. 213–23; Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, p. 1–40; Lynne Davis, Chris Hiller, Cherylanne James, Kristen Lloyd, Tessa Nasca, and Sara Taylor, "Complicated Pathways: Settler Canadians Learning to Re/Frame Themselves and Their Relationships with Indigenous Peoples," *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2017, p. 398–414.

antiracist practices.⁴ The institutional naming and doing of decolonizing practice may also be about *not* producing reconciliation where statements of commitment to reconciliation come to stand in for actual decolonization. The question of how to avoid non-performativity of decolonization is an important starting point of this inquiry. In other words, as institutional actors, how can we create solidarity politics that is actually decolonizing?

52 With this in mind, in this article I explore how my autobiographical narrative has been shaped by the ways in which I have understood (or ignored) Indigenous lives and histories, and whether and how exploring my settler identity development can contribute to a better understanding of how to create mutually beneficial solidarities. I have been inspired to reinterpret my autobiography as a method to develop linkages and intersections with different histories towards opening possibilities for alternative affiliations and collaborations.⁵ This allows me to look at the invisibilities and legibilities of my autobiographical narrative as strategic choices, but also as a production based upon different available identifications and histories locally possible in Canada and transnationally. Which histories and milestones did I adopt, which ones did I drop, what new history was I able to construct? Here I explore my use of Sky Lee's 1990 novel *Disappearing Moon Café* in my MA thesis as a moment of comprehension and consolidation of myself as Chinese Canadian feminist—a moment made possible through a form of multiculturalism that could not incorporate Indigenous histories. Thus, I reflect on how identity constructions⁶ are bordering practices and sites of auto/biographical narratives that require sensitivity to how historical relationships emerge and recede in our biographies. The goal here is to see what can be learned about developing solidarity politics through more ethical encounters with those with whom we want to build solidarity.

⁴ Sara Ahmed, "Nonperformativity of Antiracism," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2006, p. 104–126.

⁵ I have been inspired to follow this path upon reading Dean Saranillio, "Why Asian Settler Colonialism Matters," *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3–4, November 2013, p. 280–294. In this article, Saranillio explores the incorporation of Asian Americans into American nationalist narrative through the dispossession of Kanaka 'Ōiwi in the Hawaiian context.

⁶ For a good discussion of the limitations of the political uses of identity, see Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Late Identity," *Journal of Critical Ethnic Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2017, p. 1–19.

93 Relying on postcolonial and transnational feminist understanding of solidarity politics, I use a border literate perspective to re-read *Disappearing Moon Café* and how I constructed my encounters with different groups of people in my engagement with the novel. This highlights how bordering practices shape the histories that we use to construct our identities and biographies. This perspective is informed by scholarship on agency in postcolonialism and intimacy,⁷ especially those encounters, relations, that intersect or imbricate, but unsanctioned, dismissed, illicit, or beyond legibility. Using this framework, I explore how the affiliations I construct are premised upon sanctioned intimacies and identify encounters that haunt my present, but that have not been fully fleshed out, existing far outside my autobiographical narrative. In recuperating some of these hauntings, I reconsolidate myself in new ways in the current political context with the hope that a different path and latitude can be forged towards the future. This is also about a reworking of the past where alliances and attachments that have been dismissed or made unimportant can be strategically materialized and reinvested to craft transformative solidarities with different groups of people.

BORDERS AND BORDERING

94 Postcolonial and transnational feminists working on solidarity politics have engaged with borders in at least two ways. One is to conceptualize borders as barriers, boundaries, and categories (national, spatial, conceptual, ideological) that restrict movements, ideas, and subjective development; thus, transcending and transgressing borders has been an important consideration in feminist literature in the field of

⁷ For postcolonial agency, see Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*, Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1993; Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Basingstoke, UK, Macmillan Education, 1988, p. 271–313; Gayatri Spivak, "Scattered Speculations of the Subaltern and the Popular," *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 8, no. 5, 2005, p. 475–486; Gayatri Spivak, "Questioned on Translation," *Public Culture*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2001, p. 13–22; Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1999. For intimacy scholarship, see Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1998, p. 547–566; Gayatri Gopinath, "Archive, Affect and the Everyday: Queer Diasporic Re-Visions," in Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds (eds.), *Political Emotions*, New York, Routledge, 2010.

diaspora and transnationalism.⁸ For people with precarious status, whose rights, citizenship as well as their sense of belonging have been put on hold, borders represent concrete barriers that exert physical, psychological, and epistemological violence. Chandra Mohanty conceptualizes a kind of solidarity that transcends divisions of nations, work, class, ideological categories, and identities.⁹ Identities often act as essentializing categories that confine by taking for granted who we are, thus becoming a “substitute for the analysis that needs to be done.”¹⁰ In this way, borders limit us from doing the work necessary to destabilize categories and create multiversal solidarities.¹¹ Bordering also arrests Third World and Indigenous cultures and peoples in the past and in “undeveloped” spaces.¹² Despite postcolonial acknowledgement of the fluidity of past, present, and future and the demystification of national borders and spaces that mark the undeveloped from the developed, the ongoing colonialism in settler societies is neglected when the “post” in postcolonialism roots colonialism as a historical point from which the West has progressed.¹³

95 The second orientation to borders is contradistinctive—but not always independent or separate—way of thinking from the first. Borders are zones of

⁸ For this orientation to borders, see Bridget Anderson, Nandita Sharma, and Cynthia Wright, “Why No Borders?” *Refuge*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2009, p. 5–18; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2003; Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism*, Chico, California, AK Press, 2013. I also derive much of this discussion from the chapter on “Culture” in Spivak, 1999.

⁹ Chandra Mohanty, “Women Workers, Capitalist Scripts, Ideologies of Domination, Common Interests, and the Politics of Solidarity,” in M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (eds.), *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 3–29; Angela Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine and the Foundations of a Movement*, Chicago, Haymarket, 2016.

¹⁰ Tuck and Yang, 2017, p. 7.

¹¹ Also see Saranillio, 2013, p. 286.

¹² Jodi Byrd and Michael Roth, “Between Subalternity and Indigeneity,” *Interventions*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2011, p. 1–12; Jodie Dean, “Feminist Solidarity, Reflective Solidarity: Theorizing Connections after Identity Politics,” *Women and Politics*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1998, p. 1–26. Tuck and Yang, 2017, p. 3–7 also write of identity as temporal as well as spatial—a “place holding” term that often fixes identity in its place.

¹³ Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill, “Decolonizing Feminism, Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy,” *Feminist Formations*, vol. 25, no. 1, Spring 2013, p. 9.

ambiguities, creativity, fluidity, hybridity, proliferating humanity and identities, moving topographies and temporalities, double and multiple consciousness, and multiple connections. They represent both opportunities and risks, where crystallization and institutionalization can be imminent, but also subject to forces of resistance and counter-influences. Here, the oppressed can produce counter-narratives and create ironic performances.¹⁴ There is, however, a distinct possibility of over-celebrating creativity and hybridity at the cost of acknowledging the significant constraints confronting the postcolonial and the Indigenous subject who lives without sovereignty in her own land.¹⁵ As Nancy Naples points out, the proliferation of deterritorialization talk and slogans, the emphasis on fluidity and on border crossing may reduce the complexities and differences of experience among diverse women in different localities; this can potentially lead to privileging the border-crosser as the universal subject to the detriment of those who are held captive and immobile or forced to relocate.¹⁶

56 In summary, borders are zones of both privileges and miseries. They are sites where one can encounter and recognize various contradictions, fissures, and inconsistencies between dominant culture and knowledge and those of Indigenous and immigrant groups.¹⁷ This makes it possible to unsettle settler consciousness and to account for contradictions and irresolutions. Borders can thus be sites of radical political subjectivity, even as they limit.

57 The proliferation and transcendence of borders creates “scattered hegemonies”¹⁸: myriads forms of power and manifestations of differences,

¹⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1987; Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, New York, Routledge, 1994. See the use of “copresence” to conceptualize colonial hybridity and creativity in Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, New York, Routledge, 1992.

¹⁵ For a discussion on the borderline figure and celebration of hybridity, see Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 129–140.

¹⁶ Nancy Naples, “Crossing Borders: Community Activism, Globalization, and Social Justice,” *Social Problems*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2009, p. 7–9.

¹⁷ Chris Hiller, “Tracing the Spirals of Unsettlement,” *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2017, p. 420–422.

¹⁸ Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, Minneapolis, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

oppressions, and identities. Intersectionality is used to comprehend women's lives and diversity that are generally abstracted into unrepresentative identities—ethnic, racial, gender, or diasporic ones.¹⁹ Angela Davis takes us beyond intersections as individual static identities to explore “intersectionality of struggles,” how political struggles, histories, and oppressions are connected or how they can perhaps be brought together.²⁰ She uses the example of the “prison industrial complex,” a concept that describes how multiple sources of oppressive practices intersect in the lives of people as diverse as the African American prison population, children in American public schools, and Palestinians fighting for their homeland. Like Mohanty, Davis reminds us to look for connections where none seem to exist: Why are the same private companies operating in the American prison and education systems and also in the patrolling of Gaza? The experiences delimited as different can then be tackled in solidarity through the targeting of carceral practices and ideologies. We can identify and develop an analysis and a shared understanding about the “common context of struggle”²¹ among these different movements and orientations.

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One could argue that postcolonialism focuses on temporalizing borders while transnational critiques spatialize them. The work of scholars on transnational feminism like Chandra Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, and Angela Davis have also been informed by postcolonial perspectives, and they tend to think in both temporal and spatial terms. Thus, I sometimes use transnational and postcolonial feminism interchangeably as both postcolonial and transnational critiques are present in the work of scholars from whom I learned much about anticolonialism and anti-imperialism. These scholars treat borders as sites where political agencies can be negotiated and exercised to create alternatives that go beyond either rejecting or assimilating, transcendence or immobility, and construct new modes of being that are not arrested by static identity choices. In short, border literacy marks their conception of political agency.

¹⁹ For a review of feminist concepts of intersectionality, see Jane Ku, “Journeys to a Diasporic Ethnic Self,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2019, p. 137–154.

²⁰ Mohanty, 1997; Davis, 2016, p. 104–110.

²¹ Mohanty, 1997, p. 5–7.

POSTCOLONIAL AGENCY

99 I conceptualize border literate political agency with the help of Gayatri Spivak's notion of "transnational literacy."²² We can learn about transnationally literate agency by exploring the relationship between the quintessential postcolonial agent, the native informant (the cultural broker and translator), and the subaltern (the represented non-agent). Thus, the native informant is the available, albeit limited, political agency for the postcolonial allowing her to negotiate the problems of translation and incommensurability in postcolonial encounters.²³ The subaltern on the other hand is the unrepresentable subject who is made "legible" through the native informant assumed to have close and transparent ties with the subaltern; thus the native informant can profit from trading the subaltern whom she represents.²⁴ The onus is then on the diasporic-turned-native-informant (the hegemonic subaltern) to be conversant with and critical of the "burden of transnationality" that is also the source of her speech privilege.²⁵ Whenever the diasporic speaks, she is heard as representing the whole community and she is in demand as a cultural broker in the multicultural order. At the same time, as a migrant and diasporic herself, she is also struggling to become incorporated into the westernized field of representation and knowledge production.

100 Being transnationally literate involves a persistent critique and understanding of the work of global capital, the politics of postcolonial speech and reception, and the imperative to rethink oneself as a possible agent of exploitation rather than just a victim. Spivak calls this literacy "transnational" since she sees the nation-state as "still a good abstract category for transnational discrimination,"²⁶ and notes that the construction of our histories remain tied to national ones. These borders produce the native informant's capacity to exploit and, conversely, the potential to destabilize

²² Spivak, 1999, p. 402.

²³ Spivak, 1988, p. 271-313. For more on the subaltern and the relationship with the native informant, see Spivak, 2005, p. 475-486; Spivak, 2001, p. 13-22.

²⁴ Chow, 1993, p. 13-14. Chow explains "self-subalternization" as a method of deriving surplus value through placing one closer to "Chinese" and protector of authentic Chineseness. However, she also points to how Western Sinologists appropriate this translation role by constructing contemporary Chinese informants as having lost their Chineseness in comparison to authentic Chineseness.

²⁵ Spivak, 1999, p. 401.

²⁶ Spivak, 2001, p. 15.

categories and hierarchies. Yet this cannot be the only way she asserts herself. Spivak proposes that we “name a different strategic situation from only our desire to be the agent of a developing civil society which we need not give up; but let us want a different agency.”²⁷ Wanting a different agency other than the desire for full citizenship in the West includes a desire for something more—a persistent critique that attends to responsibility and the burden of transnationality, to privileges and limitations, and being cognizant of one’s agency rather than just victimhood.

511 I take border literacy to mean being attentive to the contradictory demands and privileges that the native informant and other intersectional subjects face. It takes up connected struggles²⁸ and identifies their intersections, rather than seeing them only as parallel formations. However, the question of postcolonial speech is not only about who speaks, what is being said, and how one is heard, but also about how one should and can listen if the postcolonial is to meet the decolonial imperative challenging settler colonialism.²⁹ Instead of reifying borders and failing to creatively engage with issues, experiences, and peoples outside our borders, affiliations that are unsanctioned and as yet unimaginable can be made more visible.

INTIMACY AS TRANSNATIONAL LITERACY

512 While transnational literacy encourages us to recognize the connections and disconnections among different histories, struggles, and sanctioned visibilities, the focus on public histories can omit subjective experiences and stories that are not always readily translated into public or official histories, especially when they are persecuted as illicit relationships that exist in the margin or underground, therefore private and personal and thus beyond recognizability and public acknowledgment or language. A challenge to this has been put forward through the queer diasporic

²⁷ Spivak, 1999, p. 357–358.

²⁸ This line of thinking has affinity with the method of “connected sociologies,” which critiques modernities and nation-states that are understood as plural and independent but parallel effects instead of seeing how imperialism organizes the relationships and connected histories of different nation-states. See Gurinder K. Bhambra, “Comparative Historical Sociology and the State: Problems of Method,” *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2016, p. 335–351.

²⁹ See Byrd and Roth, 2011, for a critique of how the postcolonial fails to listen.

method,³⁰ which is derived from postcolonial critiques and queer studies to critically engage with intimacy as both public and private relationships and their regulation and governance.³¹ The queer diasporic method is a way of seeing that destabilizes categories and borders, a method to explore alternative historical routes, alternative spaces, publics, and communities. Queering intimacies takes as starting point the perspective that the queer world is a common context and culture that summons “more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as birthright.”³² In other words, the publics we construct through our speech include many more intimacies than are recognized and they crisscross borders created by artificial separations between spaces—political, economic, domestic, and personal. Making a public speech is about speaking to strangers who have the potential of being social instead of always being beyond intimacy.³³ The native informant may be constructed as a stranger through her lack of belonging, but it is also she who constructs and relates to other strangers who are in the margins of belonging.³⁴ Thus, using voice and speech to attend to “fleeting intimacies”³⁵ with strangers is an important extension of postcolonial communication that allows us to look at intimacies as forging different relationships among strangers who are not yet recognized. Intimacies can be seen as “dividing practices”³⁶ that render certain

³⁰ Gopinath, 2010.

³¹ Supra note 7. For works bridging intimacy and postcolonialism, also see Jacqui Alexander, “Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice in the Bahamas Tourist Economy,” in Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (eds.), *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 63–100; Lisa Lowe, “The Intimacy of Four Continents,” in Anne Laura Stoler (ed.) *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacies in North American History*, Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 2006, p. 191–212; Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and Intimate Colonial Rule*, Berkeley, California, University of California Press, 2010.

³² Berland and Warner, 1997, p. 558.

³³ Michael Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Public Culture*, vol. 14, no. 1, Winter 2002, pp. 49–90.

³⁴ For a different sense of the stranger as someone already recognized, see Sara Ahmed, “Who Knows? Knowing Strangers and Strangeness,” *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 15, no. 31, 2000, p. 49–68.

³⁵ Gopinath, 2010, p. 168.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry*, transl. by Leslie Sawyer, vol. 8, no. 4, Summer 1982, p. 777.

encounters insignificant or meaningless, while others are given emotional, political, social, and economic investments.

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Queer culture does not adhere to clearly demarcated public and private zones of intimacies and relationships,³⁷ thus disrupting the public-private divide and its bordering practices. Moreover, queering intimacies also reminds us of the impossibility of origins, thus holding at bay and out of reach the comfortable fiction of belonging.³⁸ Instead, we can follow Minal Hajratwala's method of writing intimate histories that stay open to different knowledges and histories by valuing vulnerability in combination with research and speculation as ways to disrupt singular origin stories.³⁹ Also, speaking publicly about private matters can involve losing credibility in professional spaces, but it opens up a different way of speaking and knowing, and the possibility of eliciting stories from other strangers with which the native informant engages by listening. This openness and crossover between public and private speech makes one vulnerable, but extends postcolonial speech across different spaces and times. This kind of retracing and remapping furthermore facilitates seeing and identifying different encounters even with strangers whom we do not recognize as being present.

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I use my reading of Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* to search for intimacies that specifically focus on the ambivalent presence of the Indigenous woman. The novel and my own interpretations are embedded in the social and political context of their construction. Through this analysis, I offer a take on border literate political agency as conscious of its limitations, but always seeking to negotiate different openings for accountable action and solidarity. Also, if we (transnational and postcolonial feminists) are to construct affiliations and relationalities that can challenge hegemonic knowledges that produce amnesias and bordering practices, we have to examine how we exercise agency and put under erasure our strategic choices and identities that we use to secure and consolidate our belonging. Thus I claim to be a "Chinese Canadian feminist" with the purpose of undermining it. Furthermore, if personal biographies are imbricated with the collective biography and public history we create, then individual practices can inform and transform collective action.

³⁷ Berland and Warner, 1997, p. 553.

³⁸ Gopinath, 2010, p. 284.

³⁹ Minal Hajratwala, "Intimate History: Reweaving Diaspora Narratives," *Cultural Dynamics*, vol. 19, no. 2/3, 2007, p. 301-307.

A BORDER LITERATE CHINESE CANADIAN FEMINIST READING

§15 I picked up Sky Lee's book at a time when, as a graduate student, I was deeply involved in researching the experiences of racism of Chinese Canadian women. I was fortunate enough to have a supervisor who allowed me to incorporate the novel into my MA thesis as part of my review of academic research on Chinese Canadian women's experiences, given the paucity of such work.⁴⁰

§16 My use and interpretation of *Disappearing Moon Café* has to be understood not just as a reading from the perspective of being Chinese, Canadian, and feminist, but as a reading that consolidated my identity as a "Chinese Canadian feminist," tied to the social and political context of multicultural Toronto where I found myself. My desire for another agency rather than the one automatically available to me was the choice to be Chinese Canadian feminist, constructed as rebellious and non-conformist, but conforming nevertheless to a narrative structure. It spelled out the historical origins and markers I would take up as significant, where I begin my story, the path back to history I would carve out and the future I thought I was forging—all within a rather narrowly focused nation-bound discourse.⁴¹ This limited my capacity to recognize and acknowledge Indigenous lives in my initial reading and use of the novel.

§17 As a newcomer to Canada in the late 1980s, my initial orientation towards the future was about becoming Canadian. Being Chinese was not something I had to assert; in fact, it was something I avoided. My family's circuitous and diasporic route to Canada was easily reducible to "Chinese" despite my never having stepped foot in China or that I was mostly alienated from the largely Cantonese-speaking Chinese community in Toronto, resenting them for asserting that *they* were Chinese, more so than I was. In my effort to avoid ethnic or Chinese encounters, I searched out all sorts of activities and organizations to become more involved in "Canadian" life. Feminist empowerment came in the form of helping "others" and thus the very first declarative act was to become a youth volunteer mentor for disadvantaged and troubled youth.

⁴⁰ Jane Ku, *Chinese Women's Experiences of Racism in Education*, Master's Thesis, University of Toronto, 1994.

⁴¹ It has been pointed out that *Disappearing Moon Café* can be read through two lenses: diasporic or nationalistic (or in sociological language, one limited by methodological nationalism). See Lindsay Diehl, "Disrupting the National Frame: A Postcolonial, Diasporic Re/Reading of Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* and Denise Chong's *Concubine Children*," *English Studies in Canada*, vol. 43, no. 3-4, 2016, p. 99-118.

It allowed me to move into “Canadian” spaces through class privilege. I fell quite readily into counterposing my feminist modernity against ethnic traditionality, conforming to conventional orientalist conception of ethnic cultures as backward and needing development. By the time I got to graduate school, I had become “Chinese Canadian” and “feminist of colour,” inspired in my intellectual and activist history by black and postcolonial feminists and other feminists of colour from different parts of the English-speaking world.

518 *Disappearing Moon Café* is at its heart a book about maintaining Chinese Canadian respectability.⁴² This respectability includes versions of acceptable Chineseness and it presupposes endorsing and becoming part of the Canadian project. The marriages and relationships between Chinese men and Indigenous women form the basis of the generational drama unfolding in the book’s narrative, but indigeneity exists only as a haunting presence. After the patriarch Wong Gwei Chang’s relationship with “wild injun” Kelora Chen, this branch of the family died out with the “last male’s” death at birth, while Kelora’s son Ting An and grandson Morgan died of (or would probably die of) “drinking too much.”⁴³ In the narrative structure, Gwei Chang’s relationship with Kelora bookends the generational trauma, the original sin, and the resolution of the drama that caused pain for every successive generation of women. However, Kelora’s presence spills into the lives of four generations of women in the novel who focus on protecting the family’s respectability and bloodline through illicit liaisons and repression of unpleasant memories. Kelora’s bloodline would be safely domesticated in Kae, the narrator, now thoroughly incorporated into Chinese Canadian life and poised to be the cosmopolitan Chinese Canadian as much at home in Vancouver as in Hong Kong and China. Her story unfolds even as Kelora’s is safely ensconced in the past.

519 To me, Lee’s book offered an emotional bridge to Chinese Canadian history, allowing me to feel the oppressive conditions of Chinese Canadian life. This does not mean that I saw the book as populated by people who looked and acted like my uncles, aunts, or other people from my close social circle I had known and grown up

⁴² Malissa Phung suggests Asian Canadian self-critique in “Asian-Indigenous Relationalities: Literary Gestures of Respect and Gratitude,” *Canadian Literature*, no. 227, 2015, p. 56–72.

⁴³ *Disappearing Moon Café*, Sky Lee, 1990, Vancouver, Douglas and McIntyre, p. 3; for a description of the family tree, see p. 166.

with. The power and affluence of the family described in Lee's book were beyond my experience. The Cantonese expressions were only vaguely familiar. I had not heard about the Chinese Exclusion era until I started my research. The lack of authenticity I felt about being "Chinese" and "Chinese Canadian" were also barriers to my identifying with Chinese Canadian history and experience. The two most marginalized Chinese women characters in the story—the waitress Song Ang, whose desperation leads her to agree to be used as a surrogate womb, and the constant and loyal companion Seto Chi who is happy just serving Beatrice (Kae's mother) with no dreams of her own—are both marginally Chinese. Song Ang is from the minority Hakka community (my own background); she is described as pitiful, wretched, with no pretty face to help herself, clumsy, shuffled about, impervious to struggles and lewd remarks from men, always dumb and mute in misery, and thought of as a "diseased slut" or "Choy Fuk's whore." When she was lusted after, she was viewed as impenetrable by Choy Fuk, Gwei Chang's son.⁴⁴ Seto Chi was born in Malaya, rather than China or Hong Kong, properly Chinese places, and was adopted by a Hindu family, therefore considered as not really Chinese. She is described as someone who has an unlucky pock-marked face, tender heart, enormous thick lips, and snaky hair twist, but who grew a bit more attractive with age.⁴⁵ She is, however, a solid dependable rock and is profoundly happy to stay umbilically attached to Beatrice. Later in the novel, Song Ang becomes a central character when she defies both Mui Lan and Choy Fuk, but her Hakkaness and voice is peripheral to the novel, and she remains a distant character as her thoughts are never revealed and her speech is always represented by someone else. To avoid being affronted by the representation of these women, I had to dissociate from them and focus on the strength of the book as a good source of knowledge for the lives and experiences of Chinese Canadian women. I was also protective of a novel that at least offered a different perspective and experience at a time when I was looking for a more meaningful way of naming my history. What I found was the possibility of integrating my history into the Chinese Canadian one that fit within the multicultural story of progress, feminism, and antiracism. The contradictory familiarities propelled me towards closing the gaps and treading over the intimacies with the "Chinese Canadian feminist." Instead of narrating my biography from the standpoint of immigration to Canada or my family's history of

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 92–93; p. 103–110.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 127–131; p. 209.

multiple generations in India, I sutured my history to that of Chinese Canadians. Disavowing and forgetting Kelora was easily accomplished. I had no such personal affiliations with or knowledge of Indigenous peoples, except as a woman, but Kelora was a haunting presence rather than an embodied one.

920 Kelora unsettles, and focusing on her haunting presence could offer us new ways of rethinking our relationships. She is only mentioned in the beginning and in the epilogue of the book, yet it is her presence throughout that the family is attempting to forget and erase. With each generation of Wong women, the sin of erasing her seems to diminish. Kae describes her great grandmother, the matriarch Mui Lan, as “the tip of the funneling storm.”⁴⁶ She sets in motion a series of entanglements that the younger generations, Kae and her mother Bea or Beatrice, would have to suffer for. In other words, Mui Lan and her daughter-in-law Fong Mei are the main culprits, although Fong Mei is described as always missing her sister and her home in China and never feeling at home in Vancouver. She is also brutalized by Mui Lan in the early part of the novel, justifying her actions. Beatrice suffers from the guilt of her sister’s suicide, but is mainly a victim of her ancestors. It is not exactly clear whether Beatrice’s sister Suzie, Kae’s aunt died at childbirth or had committed suicide. Kae, in the meantime, with childbirth, is deemed worthy of being entrusted with the family secret, not so much to keep it as a secret, but to resolve the family trauma. By acknowledging it, but essentially keeping it in the past, she is ready for another life with wealthy Hermia in Hong Kong, to “live in a grand novel” rather than write one.⁴⁷

921 Kelora is the biological matriarch, but not in name—this is arguably the real secret and the original sin of the Wongs. The resolution that Kae makes is to look outward to another country, another woman. Hermia, the daughter of a gangster, who Kae meets in China and who becomes respected in the high-powered financial world of Hong Kong and opens doors for Kae’s professional success, represents the cosmopolitan Chineseness that has overtaken the inward-looking one. The figure of the Railway Worker, represented by the “little old men” loitering in Chinatown give Kae the “creeps.”⁴⁸ No longer struggling against “growing up dark-skinned and as

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 261; for further description of Hermia, see p. 38–41; p. 214–216.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

wild as Indians,”⁴⁹ Kae’s story transcends these parochial struggles. One must also be sufficiently Canadian in order to cross borders and return at will. Kelora then belongs to that other history of the nationalist project that even Canada has left behind, but one that Indigenous peoples are now claiming through their sovereignty struggles, which are different from other forms of nationalism. Kae, ever the border-crosser, transcends both time and space. Kae’s story unfolds into a future that revisits her history that has evidence of multiple border crossings. She discovers many letters from her grandmother in China and even a pair of Canadian plaid socks sent to her grandmother’s sister in China. To be able to retrieve one’s *Canadian* past in China is a resounding assertion of one’s Canadianness.

§22 The key to the family struggle and survival for Kae is that women’s lives are linked together, but Kelora did not exist as a *woman* as such in the network of women.⁵⁰ Her presence is represented by her son Wong Ting An and grandson Morgan Wong, the focal point of hatred and disgust. Feminist reading can miss the significance of the oppression of men in stories about women. As bell hooks points out, when feminism is defined exclusively in terms of women or gender, it is not very useful in engaging with intersectionally lived realities. Kelora becomes a superfluous encounter as her blood was not the visible source of the conflict; the struggles were about incest that focused on Mui Lan’s and Fong Mei’s sins. Existing in the borders of the Wong family, Kelora is not the point of the origin of struggle, but Mui Lan is. It is also Ting An who is the source of Fong Mei’s regret over her youthful indiscretion and who is ultimately acknowledged as Kae’s grandfather. Kelora’s role as the great grandmother seems irrelevant by contrast because she is in the story only as an outsider.

§23 In looking at other absences, the nameless son of Kae’s aunt Suzie was only mentioned in the family tree, his fleeting existence recounted mostly through Suzie’s pregnancy outside of marriage. He would have represented a consolidation of Kelora’s bloodline as the two branches of the family come together. He is the future of these intersections, but it is also not a possible future. Instead, the future lies in Kae embarking on a new journey with Hermia and a newborn son, likely in Hong Kong. Suzie was doomed from the beginning. She was “restless, wild, and lost” and “crazier

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

than a bedbug.” Suzie would rather be pregnant at seventeen and marry for love than end up like her mother: “dried up and hateful” and only in the pursuit of money.⁵¹ Her tragedy marked Morgan and in turn paved the way for Kae to relinquish her infatuation with Morgan. Suzie’s predicament also led Beatrice to make a stand and marry against Fong Mei’s wishes. Suzie, in her attempt to get out of the family, allowed the family to thrive. At the end of the novel, Wong Gwei Chang, whose betrayal of Kelora and their son Ting An, is redeemed in his regret and his respectable position in Chinatown through reuniting with Kelora in his dreams and memories.

924 My life paralleled my reading of the novel. Being Chinese Canadian was also constructed out of being an activist, a Chinese Canadian feminist. Joining the Chinese Canadian National Council (CCNC), an advocacy organization that began its life challenging the racism that thwarted middle-class Chinese Canadian educational aspirations, I became more solidly Chinese Canadian. One of its projects at the time was to seek redress for those who had been directly affected by the Head Tax levied on the earlier Chinese immigrants to Canada. Most of the volunteers and activists at CCNC were professionals from Hong Kong; this helped focus my attention to a broader sense of “Chineseness” instead of “internal” ethnic tensions. My identity as a feminist allowed me to tighten my relationship to feminism as a Canadian product. In reconstructing my life around Chinese Canadian feminism, *Disappearing Moon Café* became my Chinese Canadian feminist origin story where there was little sustained interaction with other women who did not fit neatly into this history, such as Kelora.

925 The hegemonic Chinese Canadian story was that it began with the Railway Worker, coolies, and the search for Gum San (Gold Mountain). This history was revised through a feminist and gendered lens to include Chinese Canadian women.⁵² This sanctioned intimacy with Chinese Canadian history I readily recognized allowed me to develop a political and collective consciousness around the hegemonic Chinese

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 174–178.

⁵² Anthony Chan, *Gold Mountain*, Vancouver, New Star Books, 1988; Dora Nipp, “But Women Did Come: Working Chinese Women in the Inter-War Years,” in Jean Burnet (ed.), *Looking into My Sister’s Eyes: An Exploration in Women’s History*, Toronto, The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1986, p. 179–194; Chinese Canadian National Council, *Jin Guo: Voices of Chinese Canadian Women*, Toronto, Women’s Press. For recent reinterpretation, see Peter Li, “Reconciling History: The Chinese Canadian Head Tax Redress,” *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2008, p. 127–140.

Canadian woman and pitched my agency as a feminist. Glimpses into other histories were ushered out of the Chinese Canadian biography, as disquieting personal responses find no expressions or recognizability. I could, like Kae, construct my biography through outward and future orientation with a domesticated Indigenous presence—then the erasure continues. My previous reading was tied to wanting a different agency, that of a feminist and antiracist Chinese Canadian; thus, I am not so sure that without the recent developments and the constellation of strong Indigenous voices and critiques, border literacy alone can bring us to attend to these foundational amnesias. Would I have desired a different agency that has yet no name? Moreover, we still frame our relationship through the modernity and progress narrative of Western civil society.

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If we are to truly act out reconciliation, it involves constructing a future where Indigenous peoples are fully present as the basis of re-working the past. Otherwise, we could end up non-performing decolonialism precisely because we only demonstrate a commitment without the conditions for the actual work to be done. Kae transcended the haunting through border crossing, which is what I am able to do now as well. We have to use our border-crossing potential strategically. The possibility of uncovering and rewriting alternative intimacies through this history requires a deliberate intention to do so; it means that we must repeatedly revisit this history and reimagine the future to reconstruct what is possible in the present. My previous failure to grasp other intimacies is also tied to how I was not able to imagine sharing my future with Indigenous presence. This is a reminder that reading, historicizing, and understanding are skills that we have to continue to acquire and practice through a conscious moving between past, present, and future.

A RE-EMERGENCE

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There is a Moon Festival ritual performed by the Hakka people to speak to the dead; it is becoming rare, but some of us still practice it. The dead are alive in these encounters; they communicate their afterlife and even demand things from the living who in turn may comply.⁵³ The ritual maintains a link with the past and with the dead. I have avoided this practice for many reasons; it is a secret of my traditionality

⁵³ For example, during these ritual encounters the dead may ask for money, clothing, or even food or give news about other dead relatives and friends.

and exotica. As I deliberately explore the ways I build my biography, I find new salience in different repressed encounters, practices, and memories. This ritual is one of them. This repetition and ritualization of revisiting our past has been lost through denial, ignorance, and repression, their use long forgotten in modern life. If I cannot imagine how my cultural knowledge has a place in my modern future, then it has no place in my present. In forging a different agency, we have to go beyond revising our biographies, which we sometimes do without premeditation. A more deliberate communicative practice of visiting the past through a different desire for the future, which includes Indigenous peoples, demands that we move back and forth between multiple times and spaces with purpose. Solidarity in the present is constructed through these temporal crossings and a new way of imagining spaces. Our political and subjective homes ground our actions, but allow for multiple entrances, exits, milestones, and lines of horizons to rewrite our spatiality and temporality. Being vulnerable and open to different knowledges and illegitimate encounters is one way of crafting an intentional solidarity built upon strategic crafting of our pasts and our futures. A deliberate intentionality to build a specific kind of future requires addressing the omissions in our history in order to give shape to a different solidarity in the present that is not based only on consolidating ourselves as allies, but on a vulnerability and openness for new knowledges and different ways of being, and seeking meaningful encounters and interactions with indigenous peoples in the present beyond just as fictional characters.

Intentional Solidarity as a Decolonizing Practice

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ABSTRACT

This article conceptualizes what a border literate reading looks like through a re-reading of Sky Lee's 1990 novel *Disappearing Moon Café*. Using postcolonial feminist understanding of transnational literacy, with the help of queer scholarship on intimacy, I explore the difficulty of seeing the intersectionality of struggles of Chinese Canadian and Indigenous women. I argue that a border literacy alone may not be enough to propel us towards investing in these encounters. A deliberate intentionality that is based on a desire for a specific kind of future is necessary in how we retrace the past and in turn give shape to a different solidarity in the present that is not based only on the needs of the ally but a vulnerability and openness for new knowledges and different ways of being.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article conceptualise à quoi peut ressembler une lecture avertie de la notion de frontière à travers le prisme d'une re-lecture du roman *Disappearing Moon Café* de Sky Lee (1990). En recourant aux perspectives féministes post-coloniales sur la littératie transnationale (*transnational literacy*) et à la lumière des recherches *queer* sur l'intimité, j'explore les tensions inhérentes à l'intersectionnalité des luttes des femmes sino-canadiennes et autochtones. Je soutiens qu'une approche éclairée uniquement par la notion de frontière ne saurait être suffisante à l'investissement de ces croisements. Une intentionnalité délibérée, reposant sur le désir d'un avenir spécifique, s'avère nécessaire pour raconter le passé. Ainsi est rendue possible la formation d'une solidarité au présent qui ne soit plus seulement basée sur les besoins des alliés, mais qui mise aussi sur la vulnérabilité et l'ouverture, pour aboutir à de nouveaux savoirs et à de nouvelles façons d'être.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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