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Automobility or Flight: Transportation and Agency in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*

Carl Watts

Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is in some ways the quintessential Vancouver Chinatown novel. Its nuanced exploration of family, sexuality, migration, and race has been read as presenting "multiple possibilities" for Chinese Canadian identity (Goellnicht 315) or as resisting static conceptions of Canadian multiculturalism (Martin 85). Other critics have engaged with the historical specificities of the Chinatown of which Lee writes. Tanis MacDonald reads the 1924 Janet Smith murder case as a correlative to the history of the Wong family and at once a "contaminant" infecting the novel's characters and a "catalyst" inspiring "their familial regeneration and prosperity" (32), for example, whereas Neta Gordon finds that the novel negotiates both the "territory of a conservative familial system" and the "effects of reading the territory disobediently," in turn endorsing a "more inclusive sense of familial continuity" rather than dismantling the latter (166).[1] Such analyses have found a great deal of nuance in Lee's navigation of Asian Canadian identity and West Coast diversity. Yet, thirty years after its publication, *Disappearing Moon Cafe* remains notable as well for its strange singularity — its dispassionate portraits of urban and rural environments, for instance, and the at times blankly picaresque nature of its characters' movements, both quotidian and geographically expansive.

The critical apparatus included in the welcome 2017 reissue of the novel by NeWest Press to some extent reassesses this consensus.[2] For the most part, it reiterates the importance of the text by locating it in relation to the struggles for social justice unfolding in the present day: Christopher Lee's afterword draws attention to nuances such as Gwei Chang's attitude toward Kelora and Ting An, which works as an allegory for the "complicity of Chinese settlers in past injustices and their ongoing indebtedness to First Nations" and marks the novel as a "milestone for re-imagining the relationship between Chinese settlers

and Indigenous peoples" (299). Lee argues that the novel today is "no less disruptive when it comes to challenging our assumptions about desire, power, history, and identity" (282); however, his discussion of the novel's relevance in the context of intersectional activism also detects a more robust engagement with Chinatown and its environs, which he notes were the site of larger, "protracted struggles against poverty, neglect, and top-down urban development" (284).

I want to make the case that it is precisely this kind of engagement with historically located processes of development, and the ability of the latter either to enhance or to diminish the agency of individuals (including racialized individuals), that define the novel's unique contribution. Specifically, I want to focus on those mid-twentieth-century advances in infrastructure and mobility that granted a wide variety of subjects not only a higher standard of living but also, as discussed in the work of Faye Hammill and Michelle Smith as well as Catherine Gudis, a greater perceived agency (particularly evident in changes in modes of transit, especially mass automobility). *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, in registering this dynamic, is exemplary in terms of its time and genre yet also more unique and more radical than is suggested by arguments for its multiple possibilities for identity or even by Christopher Lee's re-evaluation. As I will argue in the pages that follow, the novel's multivalently mobile Chinese Canadian characters experience tenuous inclusion in a nationally defined space that has the potential to free itself of national or settler-colonial prejudices, with this potentiality indicated by the unsettling of clear distinctions between individual and collective identities. Yet, in locating this moment of foreclosed possibility in the postwar expansion and subsequent decline of mobile mass society and the expanded middle class that it implied, the text depicts the social advances of Canada's twentieth-century settler-colonial project as inevitably regressing into resurgent ethnonationalism (whether in the form of the systemic racism that, for example, prevents the movement of racialized subjects across borders or in the form of the in-group chauvinism that causes Gwei Chang's abandonment of Kelora) as well as a more generalized reassertion of inequality and historical forms of class hierarchy.

Focusing on these aspects of postwar modernization and development is in no way at odds with acknowledging the novel's intersectional politics. My approach follows not only the work of Hammill and Smith and Gudis but also Judith Butler's exploration of "precariousness," "pre-

carity," and the ways in which these terms refer to different types of insecurity. Butler distinguishes, on the one hand, between a generalized state of precariousness that defines all lives and, on the other, precarity, a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support" (25). With the private automobile granting Lee's Chinese Canadian characters readier access to social mobility and a greater degree of agency, the conditions that the novel depicts seem to be different from a state of precarity in which populations suffering from state violence "have no other option than to appeal to the very state from which they need protection" (Butler 26). Nevertheless, given the tenuous, unsteady, or already foreclosed nature of these gains, the novel highlights what Butler describes as a larger state of precariousness at risk of lapsing into conditions that induce greater precarity for vulnerable groups — racialized subjects such as Chinese Canadians as much as those of lower socio-economic status generally. Attending to these material developments and the heightened agency that they brought to a large swath of the population connects individual Chinese characters' navigation and transgression of individual and collective identities (and their indication of the same heightened agency visible in more tangible terms in their mobility) with the sweep of hardship, prosperity, and decline that defined a still larger segment of Canadian society in the twentieth century.[3] What is more, Lee herself stated in a 1992 interview (cited also in Christopher Lee's afterword) that, when she was growing up, she "didn't really have an identity problem" because her family was "so poor — so obviously from the wrong side of the tracks that there was no use wasting time feeling ashamed. Our family was just concerned about surviving" ("Sharon Lee" 92). The absence of "an identity problem" here is not a perceived lack of identity but the latter's greater immediacy (or unequivocality) given its reinforcement by social class, economic situation, and the quotidian mechanics of sustenance, habitation, and mobility: that is, all those aspects of life shaped by participation in, or exclusion from, the society of a highly developed country in the twentieth century. Focusing on automobility as a category of postwar technological and social developments thus enhances rather than undermines readings of *Disappearing Moon Cafe*'s intersectionality.

Few critics have engaged with these developments directly, yet one does find occasional recognition of the novel's registering of the broader

mechanics of social mobility as opposed to identity-related matters. In addition to Christopher Lee's references to the socio-economic processes in which Lee's narrative plays out, an early response to the novel by Karin Aguilar-San Juan identifies an "ambivalence" (939) related to Lee's treatment of sexual identity in the context of the social transactions and acts of mobility (social and literal) that make up daily life in North America. She notes that *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is "not a novel about lesbian life" but that, on a practical level, "more woman-bonding occurs here" than in comparable works by Maxine Hong Kingston and Louise Erdrich (938). Rocío G. Davis acknowledges that the novel depicts Chinatown as a place that "produces and is marked by particular forms of travel and transitivity" (121); still, her argument focuses on the borders between Chinatown and the rest of Vancouver as opposed to the ways in which Lee's characters navigate these physical and conceptual spaces.

Although it would miss the point of Lee's novel to shift the focus away from the transnational experience of Chinese migrants to Vancouver, I would argue that the criticism treating these themes has nevertheless neglected to locate these experiences in relation to the backdrop of BC society more generally. Particularly relevant in this regard are the forms of mobility that structure participation in this society as well as represent Lee's Chinese characters' navigation of different modes of affiliation. Lee herself states in a recent interview with Smaro Kamboureli that she "was part of the first wave of what I call 'mass educated' Canadian women. I was a child of the public library. No matter how poor or down and out I was, there was that public space of knowledge and learning, one of the most essential bastions of democracy" (306). It is perhaps odd to consider at present, as societies across the West slide into neoliberal individualism, but the kind of mass experience that Lee describes here structured the larger middle class of North America, aided the extensive prosperity of the decades following the Second World War, and was regarded as broadly inclusive and liberatory, even if it is hard at present to ignore the overwhelming whiteness of the expanded, so-called middle class at the centre of this broad technological and social development.

Investigations of the wider middle-class prosperity enabled by the mass production and purchasing of automobiles have often conceived of the latter as bound up with concepts of a Canadian "mainstream," a

construction that has long been coded white. Eva Mackey makes perhaps the most succinct of a set of related arguments to this effect, suggesting that whiteness structures the "unmarked" group that forms the centre or "core" of anglophone Canada (157). As part of the country's official multiculturalism, immigrants function as bearers of cultural difference that in their alterity sustain the notion of whiteness as normative: that is, defined solely by its modernity or specifically its supposed embodiment of liberal values of "rationality, efficiency, equality, and economic progress" (160). Sunera Thobani takes this argument further, seeing Canadian multiculturalism as enforcing white hegemony not passively, as in Mackey's formulation, but actively and even violently, constructing the European-descended anglophone Canadian subject as "exalted" (5). The "tenuous and conditional inclusion" (18) that Thobani sees granted to racialized immigrants, meanwhile, enables the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, made "sacred" after their dispossession and ongoing marginalization have been normativized (40). More recently, Audra Simpson has unpacked settler-colonial political leaders' apologies, which construct acts of violence as having occurred in a past in which the perpetrators existed in a state of ignorance that, at the time of the apology, has been rectified, therefore establishing a history of semi-acknowledged violence and indefinitely retaining "the possibility of a prior sense of good" (438-39).[4] In Simpson's formulation, mainstream society is the steady process of capital accumulation premised on this dispossession: that is, an inherently violent and exclusionary system whose markedly "human" flaws indicate its ostensible beneficence.

Regarding the society that benefited from broad material development of the sort that resulted in mass automobility as a construction that inscribes and maintains the whiteness of the settler state is useful insofar as it sheds light on how settler-colonial dispossession is an ongoing process. Still, the phenomenon of an expanded postwar middle class, especially insofar as this expansion to some extent benefited at least some marginalized groups, is far from an immutable constant that exists solely to enforce whiteness by way of constructing a normative conception of the mainstream. I thus want to depart from Mackey's ascription of vague, intangibly "modern" qualities to an ostensibly unmarked white national core and look instead at Lee's depictions of the material process of modernization: that is, the comparatively tangible

categories of technology, infrastructure, transportation, and mobility and the attendant reshaping of geography and labour. In this context, the mainstream society that scholars such as Mackey and Simpson use as a backdrop for their arguments seems to be insufficiently nuanced — an unchanging, timeless entity characterized only by its internal homogeneity and its exclusion or marginalization of those defined or constructed as other. The critical consensus on *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, despite the complexities that it has revealed about the text, makes a similar assumption: although several critics read the novel in light of historical specificities such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Janet Smith case,[5] these interpretations tend to regard this larger society and its relationship with marginalized peoples as dehistoricized and abstract. Accordingly, they pay inadequate attention to the overarching, historically and spatially specific measures of development, infrastructure, and mobility in which these conceptions of self and community are located and against which they must be defined. As I contend in my reading of *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, such approaches fail to register the allure and inherently foreclosed potentiality that the novel reveals in the mass automobility of the postwar boom years.

In other words, the novel is unique precisely because Lee depicts this society not as a homogeneous, normative, and exclusionary force but as a temporally, technologically, and economically located version of life in a mass society — one that, in terms of economic, social, and physical mobility, lends a limited acknowledgement of and opportunity for the non-European subject willing to participate in this project. It anticipates Thobani's contention that Canadian settler-colonialism in this sense grants a conditional inclusion to its racialized immigrant subjects as well as sheds further light on the possibilities and terms of that admission. Specifically, I believe that *Disappearing Moon Cafe* depicts the brief moment of postwar social mobility — encapsulated in mass automobility — as promising but keeping just out of reach for Lee's Chinese characters participation in a national body of mobile individuals. Meanwhile, the collective travel of immigration and, eventually, Kae and Hermia's transnational self-actualization paradoxically engender an individual, incipient cosmopolitan identity. These newly porous modes of affiliation represent the possibility that obtains in the social, economic, and technological conditions in the postwar era's expansion of the middle class into a mobile mass society. Yet, in narrativizing them

in the unattainable promise of automobility followed by an embrace of transnational or cosmopolitan individualism, the novel conceives of settler-colonial society as unstable and inevitably regressing, on the one hand, into intensified systemic racism as well as resurgent ethnonationalist bigotries of the kind that have long afflicted the Canadian Chinatown from without and within[6] and, on the other, into a more generalized re-entrenchment of inequality, and even historically identifiable forms of class hierarchy, that would emerge as the counterpart of an increasingly comprehensive globalization.

Hammill and Smith take a unique approach to the increased agency fostered by twentieth-century modernization as well as the transportation-oriented imagery and narrative elements that structure *Disappearing Moon Café*'s engagement with this aspect of Canadian society. They describe the relationship between physical and social mobility in their study of six "middlebrow" Canadian magazines in the early to mid-twentieth century, finding that the concept of middlebrow culture circulated by these magazines depended on the "link between geographical mobility and upward mobility" (1) forged in large part by mass automobility. Describing the "aspirational culture of the middlebrow," they note that such magazines addressed their readers as "potential or actual transatlantic tourists" (14, 15): that is, the travel and transit choices enabled by increasing access to private automobiles gave rise to a culture in which this self-actualization, however limited, was construed from the beginning as a stage in the increasingly mobile subject's evolution toward the greater economic agency associated with a cosmopolitan identity. Lee's novel taps into a similar dynamic given that — as I will discuss shortly — it does not embrace transnational individualism as much as mourn the lost potentiality of the inclusive, literally and socially mobile society that Hammill and Smith unpack in the magazine culture leading up to the postwar era.

Gudis's work on automobility finds a similar relationship in both the more specific realm of travel associated with autonomous motorists and the larger context of twentieth-century North America; it is relevant to *Disappearing Moon Cafe* because of the extent to which Gudis's conception of automobility involves the experience of an individual agency paradoxically based on membership in an abstract collective of such agents. Writing about this phenomenon as it unfolded in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century, Gudis describes the

heightened sense of simultaneous collectivity and autonomy that results from the ability of a larger class of automobile travellers to "choose their own views, change direction at will, and probe distant areas" (59). Notions of autonomy, rationality, and empirical observation and exploration come together in the automobile, putting into action for twentieth-century Canadian society the same supposedly universal values that Mackey sees as structuring conceptions of a national core. This connection is by no means tenuous or coincidental: some conceptions of modernism and modernity also prize similar tenets of efficiency, likely as a result of their temporal and spatial proximity to the socio-economic and technological developments structuring the larger society that Lee depicts. Evelyn Cobley has written of the internalization of efficiency that obtained in modernism as a result of Fordism, finding that this ideology extended into working and consumer society as a result of the efficient production and higher wages that allowed those employed in the automotive industry to purchase the products of their labour (55-56). It should come as no surprise that this kind of technological and socio-economic feedback loop (however synchronic, unsustainable, or predatorily capitalistic) should have a bearing on the formation of subjectivity — in this case, the dynamic of individual and collective identity inhering in the moment of foreclosed potentiality that emerges from Lee's allusions to life in the era of automobility.

It is in this context that *Disappearing Moon Cafe*'s references to the automobile and to other, more group-based modes of transit register matrices of individual and collective agency. These modes of transit are distinguished according to whether they emphasize a traveller's final destination or the travel experience itself. Lee's focus on speed, flux, and points of arrival expresses a rejection of territorially anchored cultural or ethnic identities — take, for instance, the airplanes and seafaring vessels that enable the most important migrations in *Disappearing Moon Cafe* and that gesture toward a rejection of concepts of the nation that bear the marks of Euro-Canadian hegemony, or the end of the novel, when the union between Kae and Hermia actualizes the sexually transgressive agency that plays a role in defining the cosmopolitan subject. Meanwhile, mass automobility evokes those characteristics unpacked by Gudis and Hammill and Smith, thus functioning as a foil to cosmopolitanism or, more specifically, a synecdoche for the freedom of spatial movement and the postwar era's promise of social mobility. The motor-

ist's self-directed mobility gestures toward inclusion in a national-multicultural space, but the novel also makes clear that its Chinese and Euro-Canadian characters are not granted the same access to this dynamic. Even the moment of potentiality enabled by mass automobility remains riven by the systemic racism that, for Lee's Chinese characters, exists alongside the more generalized process of socio-economic stratification into which this potentiality is portrayed as being at risk of disappearing.

In other words, *Disappearing Moon Cafe* depicts a process of rapid modernization, accompanied by an unprecedented increase in mobility and agency, using two different types of mobility: on the one hand, travel that renders movement as abstract (e.g., sitting in an airplane), which privileges personal, interior experience and radical individualism; on the other, travel via the automobile, in which individual action takes place on the road, amid other similarly autonomous individuals, and thereby emphasizes membership in a national collective of mobile subjects. The paradox that results — in which collective transportation is represented as engendering a greater sense of individuality, whereas individual transportation engenders collectivity — reappropriates the imagery of second-class status frequently associated with mass-travel vessels such as trains, ocean liners, and airplanes, using it ultimately to express the novel's racialized subjects' movement away from the Euro-Canadian (or -American) model of mass national participation, thus anticipating the cosmopolitan and transnational identities endemic to globalization. What results is a picture of the fleeting possibilities of a postwar society in which multiple options for literal and social mobility can scramble the commonly accepted binary between individual identity and collective identity. The novel is permeated with this moment of foreclosed potentiality, almost mourning it even as its configuration of transit-based imagery points to its foreclosure as an inclusive social model.

The narrative begins with Gwei Chang hauling loads of human bones through the backwoods of British Columbia, where they are put on a ship to be returned to China. The journey of the bones through the West Coast landscape is most relevant for its destination, for Gwei Chang notes that the Chinese associations gave no "specific instructions on how to get the bones to Victoria. The assumption had been that the first bone searchers would find their own way, with the minimum of expense and manpower" (Lee, *Disappearing* 19). Accordingly,

this journey immediately inscribes conceptions of homeland and return rather than a narrative of integration, with the "other chinamen" warning Gwei Chang that, "If you capsize and spill your cracked brains, that's O.K. by us, but if you lose any bones, you're condemning human spirits to ten thousand years of aimless wandering" (20). Generations of Chinese Canadians, "desperately weaving tenuous, invisible threads over the ocean, to cling cobweblike to their men and sons in the Gold Mountains" (31), make for a vivid portrait of marginalized people mired in an incipient globalism that refuses at this point to admit them as empowered agents.

Meanwhile, Kae's eventual partner, Hermia, who disconnects herself at the end of the novel from all traditional notions of community, is introduced with text that reads like a curriculum vitae in its listing of accomplishments and places of residence: "During my first year at the Peking Language Institute, I had a roommate, an overseas chinese from Switzerland named Hermia Chow. Today she is Dr. H.Y.L. Chow, M.D., Ph.D., F.R.C.P. (London)" (46). The novel thus begins with an arrival that, in the finality of the decision and its determination of individual opportunity and outcome, is inseparable from the departure; it ends with a picture of cosmopolitan identities for which individualism — and its uprooting and distancing from communities of family and ethnicity — are actualized via a planned succession of departures and arrivals. Lee's emphasis on international travel via sea or air, in other words, reflects her characters' exclusion from a modern Canadian nation that is premised on a mass physical and social mobility available to European-descended subjects and that in turn defines itself based on exclusionary practices. With its marginalized Chinese Canadian characters experiencing a collective identity that restricts rather than accommodates individual mobility, the novel positions transnational or global identities as the means of resisting and transcending this conception of an enduring ethnonationalism,[7] at first as a necessary response to racial discrimination and, later, in the case of Kae and Hermia, flight from the disappearing potential for sustained participation in the relatively prosperous society represented by mass automobility.

When the novel's Chinese characters make use of terrestrial forms of transportation, they often struggle to exercise to its full extent the agency offered by participation in mass automobility. Although the broadly middle-class, mid-twentieth-century Canadian society depicted

in the novel mirrors Gudis's conception of the United States as a nation of mobile subjects, it is rendered as only partially accessible to marginalized peoples. Gudis describes the beginnings of mass American automobility in a way that draws attention to elements of mobility and self-direction that exist in stark contrast to either the restricted, one-way ticket of the novel's first generation of Chinese Canadians or the constant, yet professionally prescribed, peregrinations of Kae and Hermia:

> Being able to travel at one's own speed . . . gave a motorist the impression of slowing down or speeding up time and of extending or shrinking space at will. And even though both the train and the car were products of industrial technology, motorists could claim a closer connection to nature, and a *more palpable sense of place*: they were nearer to the ground, and could feel the wind blowing in their hair or the change in terrain and climate of driving from "pines to palms," deserts to mountains. (41)

Regarding the tension between an ostensibly individual experience and the fact that large groups of people have the same experience, Gudis explains that "Even the full knowledge that one was part of the automobile masses did not squelch the sense of independence. Automobility allowed one to imagine being part of a collective, yet still offered social atomism" (46). In this sense, tropes of automobility again support Mackey's conception of a core Euro-Canadian collectivity that defines itself based on an embodiment of vaguely liberal, supposedly universal values.

This paradox of collectivity and individuality makes sense in light of automobility's economics. Gudis writes that, ultimately, "the democracy envisioned by outdoor advertisers was one of dollars and egalitarian audience attention. By locating their audience as any mobile population, billboard advertisers claimed they addressed everyone equally. Every person walking, riding, or driving down the street — any street — constituted its audience" (47). In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, however, this kind of mass automobility — the starting point of such a process of mass individualization — is repeatedly foreclosed. "Having recently broken up with my steady, Terry Paling," Kae has lost her "cosy ride home every day"; subsequently, she turns to her family: "Morgan was actually my uncle, even though I wasn't supposed to know that" (77). Compare Gudis's picture of the collective autonomy that results from mainstream automobility with Kae's explicit connection of Morgan's stalled social

mobility with his lemon of an automobile. "Morgan, at twenty-nine years old, you're too old to be a perpetual student," Kae imagines herself telling him, "and I don't care how graduate! And besides, I just don't feel like push-starting that stupid ancient Morgan you drive when it conks out." This episode of self-indulgent venting ends with the words "Cute! A Morgan driving a Morgan — both wounded, helpless dinosaurs" (78).

This statement is more than just a one-liner — Lee's narrative is littered with broken-down automobiles. Mr. Niu, for instance, speaks of a Japanese fruit peddler's truck breaking down: "[H]e climbs out to fix it, thereby slowing down the traffic. As he is kneeling beside his truck, this huge white woman . . . suddenly jumps out of a car. She starts beating him with her heavy purse. . . . The driver of the car, perhaps her husband, just sits behind the wheel and watches. Then she jumps back in, and they drive off" (86). Morgan destroys his car by driving "under a '48 Ford pickup which had gone dead"; in the crash, his "nose hit the dashboard with a sickening thud. I lost consciousness" (105). Featuring a loss rather than a heightening of consciousness, this scene indicates the extent to which the social ideology of mass automobility is denied to Lee's main characters. The parts of the novel that take place in the 1920s — a key decade in the history of Fordism — also foreground its Chinese characters' exclusion: "These days, Ting An had no other ambition than to stay crouched in a pedlar's wagon behind a clip-clopping horse and stare blankly into a pearly grey fogbank" (139); "Don't suppose you brought along one of the new trucks, A Ting?" (140). "[C]lip-clopping" through streets beginning to be populated by automobiles keeps Ting An within Chinatown's geographical boundaries. His only prospects for wider travel are bound to work assignments: "It wasn't as though Ting An didn't ever have a wandering heart. Sure, he'd like to leave this Chinatown, go up north, maybe work in a logging camp for a while" (140).

For Lee's Chinese characters, references to automobility just as frequently indicate the oppressive qualities of the very Canadian state whose free-market economy and prosperity asymmetrically benefited its white population even as it began extending limited opportunities to certain groups of racialized others. At one point, Morgan insists on borrowing Keeman's car even though he does not have a licence; later, as they drive in one of Suzie's parents' successive new cars and are stopped by the police, Suzie states that "It was dark countryside around us, and

we were about to get caught at the border" (234). In spite of the greater degree of autonomy that gets them to their destination, their mobility is limited by their racialized status as well as their failure to anticipate the difficulties that would attend their crossing. Suzie notes the disadvantage of their "[b]eing chinese for one thing, being chinese and looking even younger than we were for another!"; she subsequently laments that, "If we had really thought things out, we would have decked ourselves out in a tuxedo and evening wear and told him that we were headed for a very exclusive party in San Francisco — Chinatown, of course" (234). The episode ends when "hordes of cops" have caught Morgan and "pinned him down like a dangerous animal" (235), the dehumanizing treatment a reminder that Lee's racialized subjects must still contend with the militarized border regimes of the international order. Suzie's description of the events also minimizes the chance associated with navigating such a system, construing success or failure as instead a function of an individual's skill or intelligence in fooling the officers in question. The potentiality associated with mass automobility thus contains within it indications of both persistent racism and conceptions of individual merit used to justify social stratification.

Another limitation that structures Chinese Canadian participation in the economy of automobility results from the disintegration of the family unit, when Chi's family "tearfully split up to find employment where they could"; Chi moved to Vancouver, and her "mother and two brothers moved out to Saskatchewan, where they operated a Texaco garage on a long lonely stretch of the TransCanada for years" (155). Fong Mei, meanwhile, begins having children and has "learned to drive a car"; after being detained by immigration services, however, and never attaining acceptance into mainstream Canadian society, she logically takes the next step and transforms her share of the family business into "the most lucrative one of all — real estate" (161). Her only "automobile journey" requires "[m]uch preparation and planning" (183) and takes place as part of the aborted attempt to bring Keeman Woo to Chinatown, where he can be passed off as her son. Accordingly, Fong Mei sends her daughter Beatrice (Kae's mother) to "one of the best British-run young ladies' finishing academies in Hong Kong" (167). This dissolution of the standard coming-of-age narrative structured by the subject's induction into the automobile economy, like the isolated garage that functions as a last-resort form of subsistence employment

for some remnants of the Chi family, indicates that not everyone has equal access to the ostensible prosperity and collectivity enabled by mass automobility. Even amid gradual improvements in the lives of many characters, the individual stories of success and failure (in business as in aleatory encounters with border-enforcement agents) indicate a latent process of restratification, culminating in the re-emergence of historical forms of class hierarchy that betray the wide-ranging extension of agency initially associated with mass automobility.

Given these drive-by assaults and breakdowns, it makes sense that Chapter 4 is entitled "Ties to the Land — A Ticket Out." Anticipating the novel's concluding gesture toward an inevitably transnational Chinese Canadian identity, this section begins with Kae's staccato narration, in which ellipses followed by exclamations form a "narrative of arrivals" rather than a complete, spatio-temporal narrative: "When I was little, I refused to go to sleep because I had to stay up to wait for . . . it, I guess! An event or whatever!" (145). Kae comes of age and begins driving, but her few descriptions of it emphasize destination and escape as opposed to the agency of driving itself: "I'd driven three thousand miles, six days of speedometer fatigue, to sit on barstools with him [Morgan], filthy cavelike arches over us. . . . Then I left him for dead in that dead city-arena. Sped out of that scene in my little red Mustang time capsule" (191-92). Kae then describes driving the Mustang: "It was like something unthrottled in my head, and the vehicle flew through space that wasn't distance and didn't matter any more. The TransCanada a satin ribbon trance. It beckoned me on and on" (193). This passage also refers to her "sheer ecstasy in the car's hypnotic rhythm of freedom," in a sense updating Gudis's descriptions of the sensation of freedom to mirror automobility's evolution in tandem with the youth culture that would later manifest itself in the early stages of a neoliberal reduction of the social mobility of the expanded middle class. The driver's "ecstasy" here arises from her disconnection from her surroundings — "space that wasn't distance." Rather than approximating a leisurely, open-ended form of temporal control via the driver's ability to accelerate or decelerate at will, the journey is significant for its collapse of the spatio-temporal distances between destinations that fit into her emerging goals. Automobility in this instance registers the precariousness of social advancement by foreshadowing the transnational migrations of

neoliberal globalization and the cosmopolitan elite created by its attendant inequalities.

The next paragraph marks Kae as the product of a transnational family whose past has been, and whose future is expected to be, structured by rigorous planning as opposed to the leisurely aimlessness of the mobility afforded to the driving subject: "Wait a minute! I went back to my bank, then I went home, left Chi (my parents were in H.K.) a daring note that said I would phone from wherever I was going to be that evening" (193). Increasingly from this point on, images of Chinese Canadian characters' use of the automobile signify the family obligations from which the younger generation is eager to extricate itself. Beatrice complains about "piling Suzie, Keeman and herself all back into that old jalopy to go back to her mother's to explain" (211); Suzie waits in a stationary car as her family members argue, "hands up against the sides of my head and press[ing] as hard as I could" (231); a ride back to Keeman and Beatrice's apartment takes place "in a total silence that sucked at us like a vacuum. I kept thinking the whole passenger compartment of the car might collapse inward, onto our heads" (232). Although Kae talks about purchasing her own car after Morgan's crash, she progresses quickly to the next step in a narrative of moving beyond the group experience of mass automobility, opting instead for the heightened sense of individuality engendered by collective transportation. She exclaims, "I'm the fourth generation. My actual life, and what I do in it, is the real resolution to this story. The onus is entirely on me" (248). Kae's section ends with "now I know I'm ready to make another journey" (249) — to Hong Kong, a destination that is fundamentally different from the vast expanse of independently navigable space associated with mass automobility and that itself evokes the class hierarchies defining both historical British colonialism and the intensifying inequalities of the era of globalization. Fittingly, the chapter disintegrates into a series of letters, telegrams, and overseas phone calls about journeys by airplane, its transoceanic form and transnational content matching the privilege of the globe-trotting, cosmopolitan subject.

This rejection of family is juxtaposed with a brief epilogue in which the exclusivity of a cultural community forecloses the freedom that Kae and Hermia actualize with their departure. What they have left behind is a Chinatown in which familial relations are faked or denied for the purpose of adhering to a pre-existing social order. In another

indication of both the ongoing oppression of racialized subjects and the threat of a more generalized reassertion of social stratification, Kelora is not only left for dead but also, in the form of the imagined conversation between her and Gwei Chang that closes the novel, inscribed as both excluded and subsequently made sacred. (Indeed, Gwei Chang's admissions that he "surely did leave you," punctuated with lines such as "You told me that Indians have another name for the eagle — the one who stays perched on a tree, who doesn't fly" [278], demonstrate Thobani's theorization of this process with a chilling degree of accuracy.) Positions like those of Goellnicht and Martin — that Lee's novel ultimately emphasizes a kind of unlimited resistance or sense of possibility associated with Chinese Canadian identity — are thus correct, yet the closing stages of the novel reveal a larger dynamic involving the site of foreclosed possibility associated with the era of mass automobility and economic participation. Many of the novel's Chinese characters are constrained by the limited extent to which this participation has been extended to them, yet at the same time Chinatown as an ethnic enclave itself represents the risk that ethnically oriented nationalisms and bigotries will intensify in response to the ongoing systemic racism of the settler state.

Another step in Kae's goal-based process of self-discovery points to the lost potentiality of mass automobility, or at least to its theoretically inclusive ideal. At several points, Kae explicitly compares the motorist's freedom of self-directed travel with the quixotic self-actualization of the diary-keeping subject: "In writing, I feel like a drunk weaving all over the road" (220). Shortly afterward, a telegram from Hermia doubles down on this mockery of the slowly evolving writing subject: "WOULD YOU RATHER LIVE A GREAT NOVEL OR WRITE ONE stop" (256). This closing section sketches cosmopolitan or globally oriented identities but less as liberatory or utopian than as one of the possible futures in which the potential for social mobility attending participation in mass society has begun to recede. In this case, individual desires can be actualized only in the context of the privileged participant in global cosmopolitanism, a figure who remains disconnected from meaningful collective bonds and whose agency is sustained by the aggravated inequalities of neoliberalism, represented throughout by Kae's frantic, always-in-motion quest for achievement and self-improvement. Guy Beauregard refers to this concluding episode as a "moment of utopian

diasporic wish-fulfilment" in which a Chinese Canadian subject is empowered enough to transcend even her professional status in order to pursue her desires (65). By extension, he regards Kae's actions as reflecting not a "simple teleology in which succeeding generations become progressively more empowered" (65) but the ambivalence associated with the term "progress" (66). I agree with Beauregard's reading of Kae's departure as signifying the importance of remaining attuned to individual experiences and histories as well as the larger narratives that connect them, but I would also argue that her situation says something about the possibilities for empowerment afforded by the historical moment of this episode. Kae has reached this condition of radical autonomy as the result of a family history and a series of achievements coded as upper class and British (the empowered Hermia's comically archaic string of initials and credentials, Kae's family's association with a Hong Kong finishing school). Kae's empowered navigation of individual and collective identity is thus haunted by the trace of the possibility of reprieve from the twin afflictions of ongoing ethnonationalism and ostensibly individualized striving and achievement that go hand in hand with a reassertion of historical forms of hierarchy and social class. This process of restratification was endemic to the neoliberal rollback of rights that followed the age of the automobile.

Disappearing Moon Cafe thus uses newly accessible forms of transportation to represent both increased mobility and, in its characters' ability to unsettle distinctions between individual and collective identity, heightened agency. In doing so, however, it also remains attuned to the risk that this potentiality is not only constrained by ongoing systemic limitations on racialized subjects but also at risk of disappearing into a still more intensified oppression as well as a generalized re-entrenchment of class divisions. Yet the nearly parodic, never-look-back smugness of its concluding passages itself makes visible precisely that moment of possibility — a promise of self-actualization the sustainability and inclusivity of which are uncertain but that is palpable nonetheless. The holding out of this possibility of inclusive prosperity, and the simultaneous revelation of the latter as inherently flawed and engendering multiple violences, make the novel especially prescient and instructive, especially at a time when seemingly any sense of opportunity or possibility is disappearing into a newly normative neoliberalism (and attendant spasms of ethnonationalist backlash). Its very doing so thus resists oppressive nationalisms

and the more insidious and enduring settler-colonialism that assumes whiteness as normative; perhaps most notably, in the process it avoids reifying static constructions of centre and margin that hamper our ability to unpack and dismantle these oppressive structures. For this reason, *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is even better positioned to engage in the social justice struggles of both the present and the future than either the early critical enthusiasm or Christopher Lee's generous afterword posits.

Notes

[1] Gordon's argument also extends (and modifies) Graham Huggan's contention that the novel is a subversive take on the genre of the genealogical romance (35-36).

[2] This apparatus consists of an afterword by Christopher Lee and an interview with SKY Lee conducted by Smaro Kamboureli in 2016.

[3] In this respect, my argument extends Guy Beauregard's claim that Lee's novel is an "attempt to work through the specificities of individual historical moments while at the same time making bold, sweeping connections between them" (66).

[4] This emphasis on the open-ended, future element of what Simpson describes as settler-colonialism's ability to "name what happened and is still happening in spaces seized away from people in ongoing projects to mask that seizure while attending to capital accumulation under another name" (440) is especially valuable for its recognition of settler-colonialism as an extension of the chronopolitics of nationalism proper — or what Benedict Anderson has identified as the dual temporality of the nation (11-12).

[5] The passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923 was responsible, in Alison Calder's words, for "effectively shutting down the possibility of movement between China and Canada" (8). The death of Janet Smith in 1924, blamed on Wong Foon Sing, a Chinese domestic worker employed in the residence in which Smith worked as a nursemaid, resulted in the same year's "Janet Smith Bill," which, despite failing to pass, was proposed, as MacDonald puts it, to "prohibit white women from working with Chinese men" (36).

[6] Calder acknowledges the existence of flawed "narratives underlying ideologies of racial purity" (7) in Chinese as well as white comunities; Davis suggests that such narratives might exist as a result of the Chinese community's enclosure in a "diaspora space that promotes the enactment of ethnicity" (119); Maria Noëlle Ng argues that Lee's use of long-running Chinese stereotypes, including characters who are "vindictive, superstitious, and sometimes physically repulsive" (164), is more problematic than subversive.

[7] Much has been written on the distinction between civic and ethnic nationalisms (e.g., Ignatieff). I attempt to circumvent this debate by using the term "ethnonationalism," which, as used by Anthony Smith in *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, reflects the fact that ethnic identity is at once constructed yet central to any conception of nation.

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