

Kicking Up the Dust

Generic Spectrality in Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*— An “Asian Canadian Prairie” Novel?

“[B]ut Habermas is his field, he says, and at this stage of his life he will be offered no other to roam in. Is he a man or a pony?”

—Rachel Cusk, *Outline*

At the conclusion of Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*, the character Naoe appears riding a bucking bull at the Calgary Stampede. Naoe narrates her ride:

A funnel forms from where we spin and spreads outward with dust and howling. Blowing blowing spinning round and cowboy hats swirl in dizzy circles. . . . We spin tighter, tighter, an infinite source of wind and dust. . . . Weather patterns will be affected for the next five years and no one will know the reason. It makes me laugh and I'm still riding, the bull is still beneath me. (224)

Goto's recasting of Naoe as cowboy in *Chorus of Mushrooms* has reverberations longer than “five years” from its first publication date. My paper begins with Naoe, an elderly *issei* woman, configured by Goto in the role of cowboy, a role usually associated with rugged white men. I read Naoe-as-cowboy as a metonym for *Chorus of Mushrooms*' institutional reception in the field of Canadian literature. While Goto's figure reconceptualizes a seminal Canadian prairie trope of the man on his horse, I interrogate why this text has thus far been omitted as a work of Canadian prairie literature. In the afterword to NeWest's twentieth anniversary edition of *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Larissa Lai writes that the text has “remained important . . . inside the academy, where it is taught all over the world through a range of different kinds of courses: including Introduction to Literary Study, Western Canadian Literature, Comparative Canadian Literature, Food and Multiculturalism, Women in Literature, and Asian Canadian Literature” (239). In spite of its appearance on Western Canadian Literature course syllabi, the text remains to be considered as a work of Canadian prairie

literature.¹ In fact, the majority of scholarship on *Chorus of Mushrooms* codifies this text as a work of Asian Canadian literature and therefore locates the subsequent scholarship within the corpus of Asian Canadian critique.

Chorus' omission from the Canadian prairie literary canon is not a coercive act of generic prohibition—the text's codification is a product of its heated and influential historical context. The year of the novel's first publication, 1994, marked six years since the passing of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988); according to Donald Goellnicht, "The Protracted Birth of Asian Canadian Literature" occurred in 1993; and *Chorus* appeared thirteen years after Joy Kogawa's heralded *Obasan* was published in 1981.² Further, the controversial Writing Thru Race (WTR) conference took place in 1994 and Goto attended the incendiary proceedings. The WTR controversy illuminates the fraught racialized atmosphere of 1990s Canada; it is in the context of what Larissa Lai has termed the cries of "reverse racism," which arose during the WTR conference,³ that *Chorus* appeared.

Chorus is an endemic text of Asian Canadian literature and a key cultural artifact of 1990s Canada. It is bound up with the struggle, activism, and political efforts of minority authors determined to gain recognition, funding, and representation in this country's literary landscape. Despite ideologically sound intentions, Asian Canadian literature and critique are fraught enterprises within the field of Canadian literature. For Donald Goellnicht, writing in 2000, the term Asian Canadian literature "has validity only if it can be made to work for the benefit of Asian Canadians by performing as a sign under which forces fighting racism, classicism, sexism, and colonialism can find some form of solidarity for the purposes of resistance to the dominant hegemony" (29). A recent special issue of *Canadian Literature* entitled *Asian Canadian Critique Beyond the Nation* interrogates the efficacy and futurity of terms such as Asian Canadian literature and Asian Canadian critique. The compendium of scholars in the "Asian Canadian Critique Forum," especially, expertly point to the value of these terms in promoting activist movements and ideologies within the aesthetic sphere, while also highlighting their potentially restrictive faculties. Robert Diaz explains that

[i]n order for Asian Canadian critique to be truly radical and capacious then, we must continually question the ways in which these terms . . . exist within a nationalist paradigm that functions through the continued disempowerment of certain communities and the privileging of others. (191-93)

To be clear, I do not label *Chorus of Mushrooms*' codification as a work of Asian Canadian literature as an act of "disempowerment." Instead, my

argument interrogates generic intersections between Asian Canadian and Canadian prairie literature in terms of the analysis of this text, thus challenging potentially reductive readings. In a recent interview with Tina Northrup, Goto states: “The problem with labels, across the board, is that they can be used in reductive ways . . . I don’t think of genres as mutually exclusive. It’s a spectrum, kind of like sexuality” (n.pag.). Like the literal dust that plagues the Tonkatsu family in Goto’s novel, the generic dust that swirls around this text has archived its place in English Canadian literature according to aspects like the historical context of its publication date and the Japanese Canadian ancestry of its author. My method kicks up this generic dust by demonstrating the text’s deconstruction and reconfiguration of Canadian prairie tropes. *Chorus of Mushrooms* is a masterwork of Asian Canadian, Canadian prairie, Canadian regional, and Canadian feminist writing. My article thus seeks to broaden this text’s generic spectrality, therefore enriching its critical purchase.

I: Ties That Bind and Occlude—Spatial and Generic Signifiers

In *Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities* (2005) Justin D. Edwards and Douglas Ivison explain that eighty percent of Canadians live in cities (3). However, just five years before *Chorus of Mushrooms* was published, late prairie author and critic Robert Kroetsch wrote that the “rural or small-town setting somehow remains the basic place of Canadian fiction” (“No Name” 46). While the “rural” has long been a popular national literary setting, the rise of “regionalism” has also operated to market certain “rural” areas as “regions,” especially in terms of tourism, and economic and cultural production. The development of regionalism within English Canadian literature originated as a series of nodal, aesthetic reactions by authors in provinces outside Ontario in the mid-to-late twentieth century. Such authors were compelled to create works of literature that more acutely represented their own experiences, as opposed to the experiences solely of Ontario writers. Regionalist literary efforts were not wholeheartedly embraced since some critics interrogated regionalism as parochial.

Other critics, notably Frank Davey, pointed out that popular anthologies including *The Prairie Experience* and *Western Windows* took for granted that the regions they depict possess stable meanings. Davey allied himself with critics such as George Amabile who objected to the notion of a singular “prairie voice,” labelling it “conformist and prescriptive” (1). As such, Davey’s important essay “Towards the End of Regionalism” considered

both regions and regionalism as “ideological response[s]” (5) or “social creations” (2) as opposed to “locations”—as signifiers that act to distinguish an area by geographic location rather than by gender, class, or age, among others. Davey formulates his “ideological” interpretation of regionalism as “territorialization” via Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari:

regionalism operates as a transformation of geography into a sign that can conceal the presence of ideology. The individual called to by regionalism is invited to hold certain restraining and shaping beliefs not because of political difference, but because such beliefs are perceived as ‘true’ or ‘natural’ to the inhabiting of specific geography. (3)

Thus, in Davey’s schema, geography acts as a metonym for social identification. However, these zones of social identification also serve the economic drives of the nation state. While regions serve these efforts, their cultural and aesthetic productions can also act as forms of resistance to such homogenizing processes. Since “regionalisms” often operate as regulating forces, Davey suggests a move towards the term “regionalities,” which he views as open to “internal differentiation” and “ideological diversity” (8). Conceiving of *Chorus of Mushrooms* as connotive of a “regional” presents a step towards the text’s viability as a text of Canadian prairie, and thus Canadian regional, writing.

Scott Herring’s pivotal *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* develops a theory of the “rural” as an “anti-urban space.” Similar to Davey, Herring views the “rural” as an “ideological” rather than a geographic region, writing that the “‘urban/rural’ distinction is as much context-specific, phantasmatic, performative, subjective, and . . . standardizing as it is geographically verifiable” (8). In Herring’s in-depth etymological research, the “rural” and the “urban” are always juxtaposed as binaries and are often presented as analogous to the “country” and the “city,” opposing affective/ideological/spatial spheres interrogated by Raymond Williams in his *The Country and The City*. Herring’s text takes as its origin “the dismissal of rurality” in “recent strains of queer theory and recent forms of LGBTQ politics” (5). In order to recuperate the “rural,” to evince its complexity and deconstruct its supposed “backwardness,” Herring advocates dismantling the urban/rural binary by viewing the terms, instead, as “materialized social space[s]” rather than identifiable geographic spaces. Jigna Desai and Khyati Y. Joshi’s *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South* calls for a similar reconceptualization of a specific “rural” space, the American South, in light of its presumed demographic as starkly black or white. Harkening to Herring’s “anti-urbanism,” Desai and

Joshi pose this question: “If we begin with the premise that the South historically is a space of transnationalism, contact, intimacy, and presence rather than isolationism and absence, how might we understand the Asian American South differently?” (6). The American South and the Canadian prairies possess dramatically different histories, literatures, terrains, ideologies, and critical frameworks for analysis. By citing eminent American critical regionalists, I gesture towards possibilities for kicking up the generic dust that has settled upon *Chorus of Mushrooms*. Goto’s novel represents the migratory, cultural, racial, and feminist complexity of the work’s setting. Critically locating this text within the Canadian prairies demands that scholars and readers engage with the complexity of this region.

Kristen Warder’s 2007 article “(Un)Settling the [Canadian] Prairies” illustrates a shift to interrogating Canadian prairie literature for privileging white heterosexual authors and themes, and for failing to depict the social diversity and complexity of prairie realities about the waves of international immigration that have led to large populations of first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants inhabiting “rural” parts of Canada (Loewen and Friesen). Warder’s reading of Shane Rhodes’s *The Wireless Room* functions to “re-spatialize the gay imaginary” onto the Canadian prairie, thus challenging the “often simplified portrayals of prairie society in contemporary Canadian public culture” (129). Warder attests that “cultural representations play a central role in determining the identities of places” (116); therefore, re-representing the Canadian prairies through the diversification of its cultural production may well produce changes in the social demographics of the region.

The historical demographics of the Canadian prairies reveal that the region has been a transnational, multi-ethnic space for a hundred and fifty years and yet it is only recently that the label of Canadian prairie literature has been applied to texts by authors of colour and Indigenous authors, thanks to important scholarship by Warder, Fred Wah, Karina Vernon, and Jenny Kerber, to name a few key critics. Broadening the generic scope of Canadian prairie writing to include authors of colour alters the fates of individual texts and university course syllabi. Further, in line with Warder’s argument, such broadening may also lead to social effects for the text’s regional setting and inhabitants.

The epigraph to this article, from British Canadian author Rachel Cusk’s *Outline* (2014), speaks to the concept of scholarly fields as physical entities that cordon off certain bodies, thinkers, texts, aesthetic productions, and arguments from interacting or overlapping with each other. For example,

just as Scott Herring views queer criticism and politics as relegated to urban spaces, Asian Canadian literature has the propensity to be relegated to the realm of “area studies,” which can prevent its texts from being analyzed according to their cultural specificity, while also foregoing their generic and formal lineages. Smaro Kamboureli explains that Asian Canadian literature has been “othered” through its categorization as “area studies,” which “delimits its object of study by the geographical terrain it inhabits, a terrain that also reflects and inflects the identity formations and histories it accommodates” (“Reading Closely” 59).⁴ Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms* illuminates the dangers of conceiving of both Asian Canadian literature and critique as lump sum signifiers which encapsulate the entirety of Asia, its peoples, and its diasporas as their “areas.” One of the most frequently analyzed scenes in this text is the one in which Murasaki is interrogated by a white shopper in a grocery store who wants her to explain the differences between Asian and Western vegetables. Eleanor Ty diagnoses this scene in her article “Thrumming Songs,” writing that “innocent signs at a supermarket are indirect, daily reminders of the tenuous position of Japanese culture in Canada in the past and today” (158). Murasaki’s Japanese Canadian identity is thus negated by her white interlocutor since she is read, generically, as Asian. Similarly, Roy Miki analyzes Murasaki’s encounter with the white shopper in the Canadian grocery store as a scene of “vegetable politics.” He writes,

“Vegetable politics” is another way of pointing towards “race politics,” or “ethnic politics” or “cultural politics.” . . . The Asian inside Canada, which is to say, the fabricated Asian, has functioned less as a descriptive term and more as the sign of the not-white—the formative lack—against which the white settler body has been valorized as a centralizing figure. (“Can Asian” 97)

In this essay, Miki underscores another danger complicit with the arrival of “Asian Canadian” as a literary/cultural signifier into the late-twentieth-century Canadian cultural landscape, one permeated by official multiculturalism. He writes that the sign assumes “that such an identity has a stable point of reference and is not the outcome of the constitutive process and thus a representation that is always subject to change and negotiation” (93). Such “stable point[s] of reference” include the co-opting of “Asian Canadian” as a codifier for “visible minority,” in opposition to centralized “white” citizens, and the fetishization of minority groups and their cultural productions in a nation impelled by its self-congratulatory “multiculturalism.”⁵ In 2000, six years after the publication of *Chorus of Mushrooms*, Himani Bannerji argued that “[a]s long as ‘multiculturalism’ only skims the surface of society, expressing itself as

traditional ethics, such as arranged marriages, and ethnic food, clothes, songs, and dances (thus facilitating tourism), it is tolerated by the state and ‘Canadians’ as non-threatening” (296). Bannerji echoed Miki’s caution of the dangers of dominant Canada idealizing or cordoning off minority cultural production as uniform or “stable.”

When the terms Asian Canadian literature and Asian Canadian critique are reconfigured through settler-driven official multiculturalism—thus “stabilized” and sterilized—they are often used to homogenize difference. Further, these terms can be defused of their ability to be “truly radical and capacious,” to cite Diaz. Iyko Day contends that “Asian Canadian critique was forged as a challenge to the fictive unity of the settler nation and in opposition to the mandates of liberal multiculturalism” (198). The generic codification of *Chorus of Mushrooms* as a work of Asian Canadian literature was and is a salutary act insofar as such a label is utilized by Asian Canadian and other minority critics, scholars, and artists for the purposes of coalition, empowerment, visibility, and politicization. The critical lineage of this text must corroborate the ideologies present in the text itself, thus enacting Day’s notion of challenging the fictive unity propagated by official multiculturalism, instead of enabling the text to become sidelined as an Asian Canadian cultural supplement to a settler practice of denaturing minority literatures under policies reminiscent of Bill C-93.

My outlining of both the dangers and the possibilities of the terms Asian Canadian literature and Asian Canadian critique notwithstanding, I return to the thus far critical omission of *Chorus of Mushrooms* as a work of Canadian prairie literature. My intention is not to dismantle the Asian Canadian critical history of this text; it is to offer *Chorus of Mushrooms* another field in which to roam, echoing Cusk. I argue that *Chorus of Mushrooms* belongs both to Asian Canadian, as well as to Canadian prairie literatures.

II: Where Have All the Asian Canadian Cow[girls] Gone?⁶

Laurence Ricou’s *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* (1973) was one of the first regionalist studies of Canadian prairie literature. While the Canadian landscape was generally thought to incite fear in its inhabitants (read: “white” settlers) through pervasive thematic tropes such as Northrop Frye’s “garrison mentality” and Margaret Atwood’s “survival,” Ricou viewed inhabitants of the Canadian prairies, gleaned through twentieth-century fiction that is set in and/or produced by white-settler “natives” of the region, as “wishing to meet the challenge[s] of the land . . . by raising a crop or

monument, by interpreting his experience in paint or words” (111). Ricou conceived of the overlying unity of Canadian prairie fiction: “[M]an’s nature or outlook will be linked to his curiously abrupt position in a vast and uninterrupted landscape. . . . In the best of Canadian prairie writers . . . universal expression [is achieved] through a consideration of the particular situation of man on the wide land . . . marked by an enduring sensitivity and power” (137).

Robert Kroetsch’s seminal essay “The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space” appeared in 1979, six years after Ricou’s *Vertical Man*. The essay presents a controversial reading of prairie fiction—employing the masculinist undertones of Ricou’s text and enacting them as method. In Kroetsch’s schema, the tension in prairie fiction is the conflict between a man’s love of a woman and his fear of her as “the figure who controls the space of the house” and who “speaks the silence” (76). Kroetsch’s essay invokes his famous horse/house binary that metaphorically links men with horses as symbols of mobility and women with “the house,” which he interprets as a symbol of stasis/fixity. According to his essay’s logic, men’s sexual anxieties towards women translate into their “fear[s]” of the prairie landscape: “[h]ow do you establish any sort of close relationship in a landscape, in a physical situation whose primary characteristic is distance?” (74). Kroetsch’s antidote to strained human relations in the face of a bewildering physical setting is for fiction to produce an “erotics of space,” which operates to reconnect the two genders. For both Ricou and Kroetsch the production of art (in this case, literature) unifies people in spite of an antagonistic physical environment that defies human connection.

Goto’s novel both reinforces and reimagines time-honoured Canadian prairie literary tropes such as: the realist depiction of the prairie landscape; the creation of art by way of overcoming the physical and social distance of the landscape; and the stark gender binaries posited by Kroetsch’s paradigm. Kroetsch’s notion that the prairies’ undeveloped physical distances enact affective strains on human relations is realized in the heteronormative relationship between Murasaki’s parents since her mother, Keiko/Kay, becomes synonymous with “the house.” *Chorus of Mushrooms* is a text that counters different oppressions of the prairie landscape than in Ricou’s paradigm—oppressions specific to its female characters of the diaspora. Naoe describes the impetus behind her creative language, a hybrid mixture of Japanese and English: “You cannot move to a foreign land and call that place home because you parrot the words around you. Find your home inside yourself first, I say. Let your home words grow out from the inside, not

the outside in” (56). In these lines, Naoe is critiquing her daughter Keiko/Kay, whom she calls “a child from my body, but not from my mouth” (56), because her daughter so readily conforms to occidental cultural practices of their adopted Albertan home, especially in regards to her privileging of English and her Western cooking practices. I read Goto’s creation of *Chorus of Mushrooms* as “words” (literature) that grow from the inside of an author and her imagined characters and rise up to create a monument to challenges of prairie living that are induced not only by the physical landscape, but also by the cultural landscape, thus developing Ricou’s schema. Prevailing associations between man and landscape within early Canadian prairie criticism are deconstructed and reconstituted in the novel via female characters who are multiply subjugated—not only by gender, but also by race and sexuality. As with Naoe, who “scrape[s] [her] heel into the black ice on the highway and inscribe[s] [her] name across this country” (114), Goto’s text inscribes itself in the Canadian literary landscape, defying imposed labels.

Two key prairie tropes, the description of the landscape and the impulse to create art to combat the solitude and overwhelming expanse of the landscape, are features integral to both Goto’s text and to W. O. Mitchell’s *Who Has Seen the Wind* (1947)—an iconic Canadian prairie text. In one of his conceits of the landscape, Mitchell writes: “the prairie was forever, with its wind whispering through the long, dead grasses, through the long and endless silence” (246-47). Susan Gingell writes of Mitchell’s novel that “[t]he poetry of the prairies is nowhere better captured than in [his] description of the landscape” (2). Invoking the conventional prairie homage to the wind, Part One of *Chorus* begins with Naoe’s first-person narration: “[a]hhhhh this unrelenting, dust-driven, crack your fingers dry wind has withered my wits, I’m certain . . . Don’t bother dusting, I say. It’ll come back, surely. Let the piles of dust grow and mound and I’ll plant *daikon* and eggplant seeds. Let something grow from this daily curse” (15). Naoe’s fury at the wind is exacerbated by her family’s inability to understand her Japanese language. As a young girl in Japan, she experienced the wind as “[g]entle as a wish, as thought and [there was] certainly no need to challenge it with my voice” (17); however, as a woman in Nanton, Alberta, she experiences the wind as a combative force: “[s]omeone, something must stand against this wind and I will. I am” (16). As Naoe’s rebellion grows and she moves closer to becoming “someone” who will stand against her family’s cultural capsizing into the “Canadian melting pot” (179), she begins to perceive the wind differently. Naoe explains: “The wind in Alberta is harsh, but he is also constant. The wind will wear away at

soil, paint, skin, but he will never blow with guile” (79). Once on the road, Naoe’s affective reaction to the wind changes yet again: “Funny how I hated the wind so much when I was sitting still. I guess it is an easy thing to read what you will when you can only see it from one side of your face. But a body can never be objective. . . . Easy now to admire the wind, sitting inside a warm cab of a truck, beer in the belly, and a cigarette between my lips!” (143).

The trajectory from Naoe’s viewing of the wind as a “daily curse,” to a male personified wind that “will never blow with guile,” to a force she can “admire” is directly influenced by the character’s increasing mobility. Naoe is housebound, even chair-bound, at the novel’s opening, evoking Kroetsch’s woman/house model. She calls the wind “guile[less]” as she prepares to leave Nanton; in my reading, Naoe warms to the wind’s endless whipping because it acts as a catalyst for her transformation. By the time Naoe is on the road she experiences the wind as sensationally different because she is in motion. Though she is driving a truck and not riding a horse, Naoe is expressing her vigour and autonomy against the landscape and its gender roles, in effect inverting Kroetsch’s schema.

For Mitchell in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, the prairie wind represents eternity and is admired for its “endless[ness].” The wind acts to further stifle Naoe’s speech, reminding her of the oppressive “agricultural hell” she inhabits within the “great Canadian melting pot” (179). Mitchell reveres the wind, infusing it with Christian undertones; Naoe suggests planting *daikon* in the piles of gathering dust gusted by the wind. This response represents an ironic twist on Ricou’s conceptualization since the planted *daikon* could act as a small monument/crop grown to combat the oppressive landscape. In *Chorus*, then, the landscape is not to be venerated; it is to be challenged as another tool of Canadian colonization. Like in Ricou’s and Kroetsch’s readings, the landscape must be overcome through creativity, but *Chorus*’ spatial anxiety is propelled by motivations divergent from a white cowboy’s intimidation at the sight of a white woman through a ranch house window. Naoe explains: “A body isn’t meant to be brittle dry. It’s hard to keep the words flowing if you have to lick them, moisten them with your tongue before they can leave your lips” (18). This paragraph begins with “*Pichi pichi, chappu chappu*,” Naoe expressing herself in her native language. It is “hard” for Naoe to keep her language “flowing” in a landscape that is drying up her culture and her passion. Her landscape attempts to enclose and wither her: “No. I cannot sit here forever. The prairie wind will dry me out. . . . I’ll be trapped for eternity uttering hollow sounds, words without substance” (81).

The prairie landscape is the antithesis of Japan's, which is subsumed by potent water imagery. Wetness, moistness, and water enable transformations for Goto's Japanese Canadian characters, re-triggering their sexuality and reuniting them with their dissipating culture.⁷ Before Naoe leaves for her journey she undertakes a sensual rediscovery in the realm of "fungal silence": the mushroom nursery. Elated by her entry into the "world of moist" (92), Naoe's "hands smoothed down, down, swell of the belly, curving to her pleasure. Softly, softly, her hands, her fingers, the moisture" (93). Naoe's sexual renaissance climaxes in this scene (pun intended), which Eleanor Ty reads as challenging stereotypes of Asian female sexuality. While the Asian female body is conventionally encrypted as both "submissive" and "exotic" (160), Goto's Naoe defies such markers as she is an old woman who is granted not only the "power of speech" but also the "possibility of enacting [her] desires" (161), according to Ty.⁸ Goto's novel does not merely reconstruct Asian female sexuality, but also confronts the resident white heteronormative sexuality of Canadian prairie literature. Naoe is not only a masturbating geriatric female, but she also drives the truck with a cigarette dangling from her lips while a man rides shotgun. These signifiers lead up to her climax at the novel's conclusion: riding a bull at the Calgary Stampede and, thus, embodying conventionally male stereotypes, both of mobility and the cowboy.

III: Invasive Species/Invasive Genres

The back matter of the twentieth-anniversary edition of *Chorus of Mushrooms* includes an interview with Goto by the edition's editor, Smaro Kamboureli. Kamboureli asks "[w]hy a mushroom farm?" to which the author responds:

I grew up on a mushroom farm in Alberta and so the environment informed me on many levels. . . . A mushroom farm is an . . . environment "foreign" to the dry prairie [that] must be manufactured in order for growth to happen. . . . I think of this as a metaphor in relation to immigration and immigrant experience. . . . This isn't to say that mushrooms are "better" than wheat but, introducing a different "crop" in the narrative of settlement unsettles a master narrative. (266-67)

That the Tonkatsus' mushroom farm is "manufactured" suggests myriad symbolic possibilities for interpreting *Chorus* through the prism of the Canadian "immigrant experience." Amidst the incessantly dry prairie wind, the mushroom nursery is its own moist and separate ecosystem. The Tonkatsus' choice to undertake farm life, common to many prairie-dwelling Canadians, speaks to Naoe's daughter Keiko/Kay's determination to integrate within her host culture. Farming is heavily coded for Japanese Canadians:

Lisa Harris suggests that “[t]he racism of internment was partially re-inscribed through food since the labour camps forced workers into food production, and many Japanese Canadian families have their history tied to farming and food production as a result” (8). Despite not being set during internment, Guy Beauregard reads the farm setting of *Chorus of Mushrooms* as intertextual with *Obasan* due to the consonant names of the prairie towns: “a beet farm near the town of Granton in *Obasan* [becomes] a mushroom farm near the town of Nanton in *Chorus*” (“Hiromi Goto’s” 52). However, the crop the family chooses to nurture is an invasive species, one that is not native to the region, which presents a literal enactment of the “monstrous”-ness of “the ‘asian’ inside ‘canadian’” (Miki “Can I” 208). The new crop raised by the Tonkatsus, just like Goto’s novel, unsettles the master narrative of what constitutes “native” Canadian.

Murasaki wants her mother Keiko/Kay to tell her stories, “but no compound sentences for that woman, she thrived on subject verb object” (74); “the only make-believe she knew was thinking she was as white as her neighbour” (39). Keiko becomes an “other” (45), in the eyes of her daughter and mother, since she uses an “Occidental” (193) version of her name, Kay, and ceases to cook Japanese food or speak her native language. Kay’s justification appears in *The Herald* newspaper under the headline “The Multicultural Voices of Alberta, Part 4: Japanese Canadians Today”: “When I decided to immigrate, I decided to be at home in my new country” (193). For Kay, being at “home” is “liv[ing] like everyone else”: “[i]f you live in Canada, you should live like a Canadian” (193). Apparently, for Kay, being a “Canadian” in Nanton, Alberta entails being a white farmer, and imbuing one’s work with “Baptist attitudes” of “responsibility,” “patience,” and “forbearance” (42). Despite Kay’s efforts at becoming a whitewashed model minority, the Tonkatsus evince signs of difference. Murasaki’s classmate Patricia questions “[w]hat’s that funny smell?” of the Tonkatsus’ home. Goto explains Murasaki’s horror at Patricia’s olfactory discovery:

Something so insidious tattooed into the walls of our home, the upholstery in our car, the very pores in our skin. . . . For all that Mom had done to cover up our Oriental tracks, she’d overlooked the one thing that people always unconsciously register in any encounter. We had been betrayed by what we smelled like. We had been betrayed by what we grew. (68)

The smell of the foreign crop of mushrooms in the Tonkatsu home thus functions as a portent of the many differences Keiko/Kay attempts to conceal from the family’s Nanton community.

Royden Loewen and Gerald Friesen's "The Global South in Calgary and Edmonton" is a historiographic look at the sudden transformations in the prairie cities of Calgary and Edmonton, and their suburban areas, in the last third of the twentieth century, due, in large part, to the passing of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988. According to Loewen and Friesen, by the end of the century "old immigrant societies were replaced by a dynamic web" and the image of Albertan society was "plural, open, and cosmopolitan" (119).⁹ While their archival work offers a portrait of late-twentieth-century Alberta as "open," *Chorus* details an alternative narrative of exclusion for its protagonist, Murasaki: "Life is hard in Canada, once you come to an age when you find out that people think certain things of you just because your hair is black and they have watched *Shōgun, the Mini Series* . . . The place where we lived didn't foster cultural difference. It only had room for cultural integration" (193-94). Murasaki's sexual *bildungsroman* is affected by her cultural "difference." Her first boyfriend, Hank, asks her to have "Oriental sex" with him, "[l]ike on *Shōgun*" (126), which she denies knowledge of and, thus, refuses to partake in, ending their relationship. Murasaki explains that Hank "was getting grouchy with my obtuseness, my unlearned innate sexuality" (126); he expects Murasaki to perform "Oriental sex," while Murasaki conceives of herself as "Canadian." Prior to Hank, Murasaki "held hands, once" (129) with a Chinese Canadian boy named Shane Wu. The handholding could not continue, however, for Murasaki admits that "being seen with [Shane] would lessen my chances of being in the popular crowd. The Oriental people in single doses were well enough, but any hint of a group and it was all over" (129). Murasaki's best hope to "fit in" in her society is to attempt cross-pollination, since she foresees that forming a colony would preclude her chances of popularity.

The Tonkatsus, as an example of a minority Canadian family in prairie Canada, and analogous to the mushrooms they grow, are an *invasive* species. Miki writes, "[t]he colonial legacy manifested the 'not-white' body as a sign of the monstrous 'asiatic,' then later as a deviancy to be assimilated" ("Can I" 208). The pressure to assimilate is depicted in Murasaki's avoidance of Shane, despite a burgeoning friendship. However, invasion can also act as *renewal*. In his more recent ecocritical work, Laurie Ricou has discussed "habitat studies." Ricou writes:

Disturbance . . . for an ecologist allows or necessitates a new succession of species. So disturbance enables renewal. But the human animal is the ultimate and most aggressive of disturbers, and often its disturbance allows for an invasion, in which a monoculture replaces a rich biodiversity. Hence, we have the "problem" of invasive species. ("Disturbance Loving Species" 164)

Murasaki is alerted to an “invasive species”: a salamander found in the mushroom nursery, which she cups protectively “in the palm of [her] hands” (111). Murasaki wonders: “How could it have been in the peat moss when the peat moss came from west of Edmonton? How would it get there in the first place? . . . Where did the creature come from? Displaced amphibian” (111). Upon seeing the salamander, the farmhand Joe states: “It’s very far from home, huh,” which causes Murasaki to experience “something dawning” (112) in her mind. Murasaki’s dawning empathy for the salamander speaks to universal feelings of displacement for those “far from home,” attempting to adapt to new environments. Her care and interest in the salamander’s particular journey enacts the treatment she wishes her family received in Nanton. Murasaki’s assiduousness towards the small amphibian is the same that should be offered to Goto’s *Chorus of Mushrooms*. The novel acts as an *invasive* genre, since it is outwardly labelled as Asian Canadian and inwardly constructive of tropes from Canadian prairie literature. *Chorus* prompts “renewal,” to cite Ricou’s term, at the levels of both spatial and generic criticism, offering “diversity” to “monoculture[al]” canons. In keeping with Davey’s and Herring’s spatial reformulations, *Chorus* presents a work of “regionality” which depicts an “anti-urban” space, since these terms possess ideological flexibility and accommodate diversity of inhabitants and their cultural productions within formerly homogenized zones. While Goto is of Japanese Canadian heritage, *Chorus* pushes back against representations of Asian Canadians under official multiculturalism, which often attempt to stabilize the signifier Asian Canadian as a singular referent; instead, the text demonstrates that “representation” of cultural groups “is always subject to change and negotiation” (“Can Asian” 93), to cite Miki.

Situating *Chorus* in a liminal space, between Canadian prairie literature and Asian Canadian literature, between a whitewashed “rural” setting and widespread “multicultural” reception (that ignores its “country” roots), enables the text’s spectral vision. By opening up its imposed categorization, I have offered a reading of *Chorus* as a text invested in the power of stories and their ability to open peoples’ minds, despite the generic labels that settle upon or elude them.

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NOTES

- 1 In keeping with such institutional propagation, *Chorus* has been the subject of academic articles on: diaspora/immigration (Pavlina Radia 2009); aging female bodies (Markus M. Müller 2010); psychoanalysis and eating/abjection (Heather Latimer 2006); Japanese Canadian intercultural and interfamilial relations (Mary Condé 2001; Anne-Marie Lee-Loy 2010); storytelling/fables/magical realism (Steve McCullough 2003; Marc Colavincenzo 2005; Pilar Cuder-Domínguez 2008); and Asian Canadian Literature (Eva Darias-Beutell 2003).
- 2 In 2001 Beauregard counted fifty-three academic articles and chapters on *Obasan* and cites the text's double mentions in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* ("After *Obasan*" 53). This critical attention stems beyond the Canadian context to the US, Europe, and Asia. Beauregard cites Miki, "[t]he now canonic status of *Obasan* in Asian American literature courses . . . has resulted in the erasure of difference that 'nationalisms' make" (qtd. in Beauregard 8).
- 3 Lai writes: "as an organizer and participant in this conference, I experienced it as a devastating turning point in anti-racist cultural organizing in Canada" (214). The daytime sessions were limited to First Nations writers and writers of colour; however, such actions were interpreted by the media as a "no whites" policy, which triggered the pulling of federal funding. Lai divulges that the "charge of reverse racism [was] deeply damaging . . . because of its refusal to recognize historic racisms and the deep embeddedness of white privilege into Canadian society" (220).
- 4 In the same essay, Kamboureli describes Asian Canadian literature as a diverse yet distinct corpus of literary works gathered together by virtue of their Chinese and Japanese cultural signatures. This corpus's critical discourses are primarily concerned with the historical, socio-political, and cultural conditions of its production (44).
- 5 In posing this term through Bannerji, I am indicating the cultural effects of the passing of Bill C-93, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, in 1988. This official policy had and continues to have widespread repercussions in the nation's cultural spheres, which Canadian writers and critics such as Bannerji, Kamboureli, etc., have elucidated at length.
- 6 Paula Cole. "Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?" *This Fire*. Warner Bros., 1996. CD.
- 7 In Goto's novel *The Kappa Child*, the author employs the trickster figure of the Kappa to counterbalance the dryness of the Canadian prairies (Cuder-Domínguez 2008).
- 8 Ty explains Nao's "sensual awakening" as an "experience of becoming, perhaps becoming a virgin" via Luce Irigaray's essay "How Old Are You?" As such, the character reconstitutes the "Orientalist gaze" (168), opening up new possibilities for Asian female sexuality.
- 9 Loewen and Friesen's research is founded upon primary source documents such as newspapers and civic by-laws, as well as the histories of ethnic associations in the region.

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