

The Latitudes of Romance:

Representations of Chinese Canada
in Bowering's *To All Appearances*
A Lady and Lee's
Disappearing Moon Café

Chinese immigrants in Canada, and their naturalized descendants, have struggled to assert themselves in a country of transplanted Europeans who have tended to ignore them or, worse, to demonize them as an irreducible, threatening “other,”¹ which Canadian literature has played its part in fanning the flames of racial resentment. Exotic—mostly negative—stereotypes abound in Canadian representations of China and the Chinese, providing spurious legitimation for a history of mistreatment.² Exoticism derives its greatest pleasures from the feeling of detachment; it seeks solace in the absent, in the *latitudes* of romance. The Far East can thus be apprehended as a source of romantic mysteries: mysteries all the more enticing when they are pondered from a distance. What happens when these ghostly foreign presences take on a greater substance; when these mysteries are transplanted onto home or native soil? Here, the appeal begins to pall: the objectification of the exotic “other” serves a different ideological purpose. Contact contaminates; romance plays out the darker themes of tainted love, miscegenation, incest. These themes come together in the figure of the Canadian *Chinatown*: a collective symbol of white European fantasies and fears of degradation. Here, from David Lai’s study of Canadian Chinatowns, is a white woman’s romantically-heightened perception of turn-of-the-century Vancouver:

Secret tunnels. Opium dens. White slavery. Inscrutable celestials in pigtailed with knives hidden up their silk sleeves. Gorgeous slant-eyed beauties with bound feet. Shadowy, sinister doorways. Ancient love drugs. Medicines made from the tongues of wild serpents. (Quoted in Lai, 70)

A familiar litany, in short, of exotic myths and stereotypes of the “treacherous Oriental”;³ and proof (if proof were needed) of the capacity of romance to turn attraction to revulsion: to transform the object of desire into a vehicle of loathing. For exoticist romance—like the genre of romance itself—is dangerously double-sided. In exotic literature, says Tzvetan Todorov, the tendency is to glorify foreigners; in colonial literature it is to denigrate them. But the contradiction is only apparent:

Once the author has declared that he himself is the only subject ... and that the others have been reduced to the role of objects, it is often of secondary concern whether those objects are loved or despised. The essential point is that they are not full-fledged human beings. (323)

“Not full-fledged human beings”: such—without undue romantic exaggeration—was an all too common assessment of Canada’s early Chinese immigrants.⁴ Brought over in the mid- to late nineteenth century to work in the mines and on the railroads, later recruited to low-paid jobs unfilled by the white European workforce, many of these indentured Chinese labourers were not considered “immigrants” at all. Instead, they were seen as “sojourners”; they were expected, in time, to return to the wives and children they had left behind in China—expectations frustrated, on one notorious occasion, by CP Rail’s withdrawal of its promise to pay its workers’ passage home. As Chinese communities in Canada began to grow and, gradually, to prosper, they became subject to increasingly discriminatory legislation. This culminated in the passing of the 1923 Immigration Act, which decreed that, until further notice, there would be no more Chinese immigration into Canada (the Act was not repealed until 1947). And it was not until after the Second World War that the Chinese in Canada acquired the right to vote. “Aside from the indigenous people,” says Peter Li in his sociological survey of Chinese communities in Canada, “no other racial or ethnic group ha[s] experienced such harsh treatment in Canada as the Chinese” (1).

Two recent fictional accounts of the Chinese presence in Canada, Marilyn Bowering’s *To All Appearances A Lady* (1989) and Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990), appear against this background. Both books are, to some extent, “realistic” family sagas, drawing on historical record to place their tales of domestic discord within a wider context of social struggle. Both might be more accurately located, however, within the deliberately hyperbolic tradition of *genealogical romance*: a tradition in which romantic

(mis)adventures are assimilated to identitary fable, and the generational conflicts of an extended family are contained within a redemptive structure of collective—"group"—endeavour.⁵ Yet while *To All Appearances A Lady* and *Disappearing Moon Café* draw on this tradition, they also subvert it, using the disruptive potential of the romance form to cut across its own idealist pretensions. Both writers use the ambivalent aesthetics of romance to challenge homogenizing myths of racial purity and/or superiority, and to open up an agonistic space in which European and Chinese Canadians confront one another on contested "New World" soil. They use the discontinuous structure of romance to dispute the patriarchal law of genealogical descent, confirming Janice Radway's view that "the struggle over the romance is ... part of [a] wider struggle for the right to define and to control female sexuality" (17).⁶ Finally, they read the contradictory temporal codes of romance—its counter-impulses toward retreat and toward (imagined) revolution—as a means of recuperating and memorializing an ancestral past, while remaining free to fashion a different, as yet indeterminate, future.

Much of the action of *To All Appearances A Lady* takes place, significantly, on the border. As protagonist Robert Louis Lam steers a passage through the tricky coastal seas of British Columbia, he simultaneously navigates a path through the troubled waters of his past. Guided by the spirit of his Chinese stepmother Lam Fan, the woman who previously raised him, Robert relives the painful history of his own divided family. Much of this history, too, has to do with borders; as his boat skirts the official boundary between Canada and the United States, Robert pauses repeatedly to consider "where on the border he really is" (32). The more he considers, the more he realizes—as did his namesake before him, his mother's former lover, Robert Louis Haack—that borders make little sense (141). He himself is the product of two officially distinct, but increasingly cross-fertilized, cultural heritages: that of his expatriate English mother, the reformist India Thackeray, and that of his exiled Chinese father, the leper Ng Chung—themselves the ambivalent products of unlikely family backgrounds. Such doubled identitary formulae and preposterously contrived narrative schemata are, of course, the stock-in-trade of romance; so it comes as no surprise to learn that Robert Louis takes his name from Haack's acquaintance, the writer R.L. Stevenson. Lam is, in fact, the product of two very different nineteenth-century literary ancestors—his mother, India *Thackeray*,

gives away the name of the other. And the disjointed narrative of Lam's family turns out to be an amalgam of the two writers' various romances (*Kidnapped*, *Treasure Island*; *The History of Henry Esmond*, *The Virginians*). In the figure of Robert Louis Lam, then, the Stevensonian *Doppelgänger* meets the ambivalent frontier hero.⁷ This play of doublings and divisions is deliberately overdrawn. The simultaneous deployment and deflation of romance gives Bowering opportunity for a ludic meditation on the phenomenon of mixed ancestry: one which repeatedly "crosses the border" on issues of official racial difference, and which clears a space to negotiate the tensions in Canada's hybrid (East/West) cultural inheritance.

Bowering's ironic manipulation of the ambivalence already inscribed within the romance form thus serves the political purpose of undercutting colonial pretensions to racial hierarchy and/or exclusivity. (It also undercuts the late nineteenth-century ideal of liberal reform, India Thackeray's circular journey from Victoria [Hong Kong] to Victoria [B.C.] neatly controverting her inherited belief in the possibilities of [New World] progress.)⁸ Like Bowering, Lee uses the ultimately self-defeating project of constructing the exotic "other" as a means of exposing the contradictions in colonial attitudes to race.⁹ Whereas Bowering parodies European textual constructions of the "frontier" and/or the "Orient," Lee inverts the white colonial perspective, standing binaries on their heads. "Here we are living on the frontier with barbarians," says the Wong family matriarch, the redoubtable Mui Lan. "We [tang people] stick together" (61). More pointedly still, in the opening sequence, Wong Gwei Chang recalls his chance encounter with the Native Indian, Kelora, and the comic exchange of racial epithets that follows fast upon it:

"Look, a Chinaman!" She crept up behind him and spoke in his language.

.....

"You speak Chinese," he said, indignant, unwilling to believe what he saw before him.

"My father is a Chinaman, like you. His eyes are slits like yours. He speaks like you."

.....

"But you're a wild injun." He spilled out the insults in front of her, but they were meaningless to her. In Chinese, the words mocked, slang-like, "yin-chin."

"You look hungry, Chinaman.... My father tells me Chinamen are always hungry."

"I am not hungry," he shot back. He could tell she was teasing him, and he was offended that she knew more than he did. She could tell he was hungry, that he had no more power left, that in this wilderness he was lost.

"Ahh, he has no manners," she exclaimed. He could only blink, astonished by this elegant rebuke from a "siwashee," a girl, younger than he. It made him feel

uncivilized, uncouth; the very qualities he had assigned to thoughtlessly to her, he realized, she was watching for in him. (3-4)

Apart from staging a brilliant parody of the White Man's racial thinking, this opening scene also sets the tone for the hybrid narrative that follows it. Through an ironic displacement of the totems and taboos of the European cross-cultural romance—(Chateaubriand's *Atala* is one of the examples that comes most readily to mind)—Lee produces a chaotic family narrative that exhibits and applauds its own mixed ancestry. Like Bowering's Robert Louis Lam, Lee's Kae Yin Woo learns to overcome the colonial stigma associated with mixed blood. One of the means she adopts to do so is through parodying the—already parodic—nomenclature of the Harlequin romance. Discussing possible titles of her book with the family nanny, Seto Chi, Kae comes up with the following:

"Chi," I am ecstatic. "I've got the perfect title ... House Hexed by Woe. What do you think?"

"Get serious!" Chi chopping chives.

"I am serious. I've never been more serious in my entire life." I am standing at the counter beside her, staring hard into the woodgrain of my mother's cabinets, trying to imagine an enticing movie poster with a title like *Temple of Wounded Women*, in romantic script. "They were full of ornament, devoid of truth!" (208-9).

By converting her disastrous family history into the stuff of domestic melodrama, Kae—and, by extension, Sky Lee—counteract the negative impulse to wallow in self-pity (174). Like Bowering, Lee uses the inclusiveness of romance—its capacity to combine aspects of tragedy and comedy within an interwoven pattern—as a means of transforming a divisive history into unifying myth.¹⁰ But whereas Bowering's romantic models are of European origin, Lee's are half (North) American, half (North) Americanized Chinese. "Life is an afternoon T.V. screen" (22), muses Kae in contemplating the latest family mishap. The already embellished world of the North American T.V. soaps is given further romantic glitter by being wedded to the extravagance of transplanted Chinese opera.¹¹ And so, amid much clashing of metaphorical gongs and cymbals, the melodrama proceeds. Romance outdoes itself; produces a many-headed monster, a hybrid tribute to excess. Yet, as in Bowering's fiction, such romantic excesses have a liberating function: they allow their practitioners to go beyond the limits that others impose upon their lives. By giving the protagonists of Lee's and Bowering's fictions a stage upon which to *perform* their racial/cultural "otherness," romance enacts a Camp subversion of the processes through which that "otherness" is created.¹²

Lee and Bowering also use romance as a lens to focus on the “otherness” of female gender. The question asked here by both writers is: Does romance provide an outlet for the liberation of women’s desire, a means of reclaiming self-identity through the fulfilment of romantic fantasy; or does such vicarious self-fulfilment displace women’s capacity for action onto the symbolic realm, and thereby reconfirm their subordinate status in the social status quo? Most commentators on romance have emphasized the genre’s conservatism; yet as Janice Radway, among others, points out, the ability of romance to effect social change or to restrict it is obviously dependent on who controls its signifying codes.¹³ In *To All Appearances A Lady*, this issue of control revolves around the figure of India Thackeray, and, more specifically, around her struggle to define her sexual identity in a male-dominated society. (Naming is a crucial component in the process; it is significant that her given name connects her to a history of male reformism, while her Christian name provides an allegorical marker of the feminization of a colony.)¹⁴ India Thackeray carries the symbolic weight of other people’s expectations: born in 1857, the year of the Indian Mutiny and the riots in Hong Kong, “she stood for any number of contraries: Christian forgiveness, for example, or Chinese barbarianism” (33). Throughout India Thackeray’s life, and the narrative that derives from it, she is apparently kept prisoner to these imposed symbolic codes; thus, even when she makes her “escape” to D’arcy Island (and to her “forbidden” lover there, Ng Chung), that island still remains the product of a man’s view of romance [see, for instance, the Stevensonian romantic myths of *Kidnapped* and *Treasure Island*]. Yet if India remains, throughout, the object of a male defining gaze—to all appearances a lady—she at least manages to transgress the paternal code of “civilized” behaviour. However, that very act of transgression remains subject to a male controlling imagination, suggesting that the symbolic realm of literary romance is by no means unassailable to patriarchal interference. (India eventually dies with the signs of incipient leprosy on her flesh: in a familiar romantic motif, the woman’s body becomes an overdetermined site of racial/sexual “contamination.”)

In *Disappearing Moon Café*, that metaphorical “contamination” spreads to the collective body of the Chinese-Canadian community. Whereas Bowering illustrates the effects of that “unpardonable sin,” miscegenation, inscribed as a mark of symbolic punishment on the European woman’s body, Lee charts the contradictions in the European fetishization of the gen-

dered ethnic body: a process which allows the desired exotic “other” to be simultaneously seen *as the carrier of a disease*. A primary vehicle for this racist/sexist fantasy is that other “unpardonable sin,” incest. Incest, as Lee shows in *Disappearing Moon Café*, is a reaction to intolerable outside pressures; it spreads within a marginalized community that is forced back on its own resources (147). But this does not prevent it being seen by others as a self-inflicted condition—(hence the white colonial perception of Chinatown as intrinsically *decadent*, as carrying within it the seeds of its own destruction). The Wong family, in *Disappearing Moon Café*, hides a history of incest and illegitimacy: a history brought out into the open by the “scandalous revelations” of romance. Lee adapts these romantic codes to suit her own subversive purpose. By exploiting the rebellious tendencies within the Freudian family romance, Lee links the symbolic entrapment of women to the law of patrilineal descent.¹⁵ How is it possible, asks Lee throughout the fiction, to recapture the spirit of one’s ethnic forebears without obeying their paternal mandates? And it is here that, paradoxically, romance proves to be most useful. For romance patterns itself on the *discontinuous*: it rejects—explicitly or implicitly—the “genealogical imperative,” whereby “the individual member [within the extended family] is guaranteed both identity and legitimacy through the tracing of [his/her] lineage back to the founding father, the family’s origin and first cause” (Tobin 7). As Patricia Tobin argues, the structure of realistic narrative is pervaded by this “lineal decorum”:

All possibly random events and gratuitous details are brought into an alignment of relevance, so that at the point of conclusion all possibility has been converted into necessity within a line of kinship—the subsequent having been referred to the prior, the end to the beginning, the progeny to the father. Thus in life and literature, a line has become legitimized because our causal understanding, always for the West the better part of knowledge, has been conditioned by our existential experience of genealogical descent. (7-8)

Such demands do not apply to the romance form, however; as Gillian Beer observes, “the rhythms of the interwoven stories in the typical romance construction correspond to the way we interpret our own experience as multiple, endlessly penetrating stories, rather than simply a procession of banal happenings” (9). This understanding of romance is crucial to Lee’s revisionist project: it serves the dual function of allowing her to “disobey” the genealogical imperative—which might otherwise force her to see the history of her own community in prescribed evolutionary terms—and of

freeing her to reinterpret that history as a time-defying network of interconnected stories. These stories, in *Disappearing Moon Café*, are mostly told by women. Here, for example, is Beatrice Wong's interpretation:

In the telling of [the] stories [of the women in my family], I get sucked into criticizing their actions, but how can I allow my grandmother and great-grandmother to stay maligned? Perhaps ... they were ungrounded women, living with displaced Chinamen, and everyone trapped by circumstances. I prefer to romanticize them as a lineage of women with passion and fierceness in their veins. In each of their woman-hating worlds, each did what she could. If there is a simple truth beneath their survival stories, then it must be that women's lives, being what they are, are linked together. (145-6)

Romance is thus conscripted into the service of generating female solidarity. By recreating "a lineage of women with passion and fierceness in their veins," Beatrice Wong implicitly appeals to a wider female interpretive community. This extended lineage of women does not merely replicate the law of patrilineal descent; instead, it creates a pattern of allegiances which spans—encircles—time. Lee mounts a further challenge to the genealogical imperative by undercutting the stable linear structure of the conventional family saga. As in *To All Appearances A Lady*, the *duplicities* of romance prove more than adequate to the task. "All my life I saw double," says Kae. "All I ever wanted was authenticity; meanwhile, the people around me wore two-faced masks, and they played their lifelong roles to artistic perfection. No wonder no one writes family sagas any more!" (128). Kae's search for "authenticity" indicates the temptation that exists within beleaguered ethnic communities to fall back on nostalgic myths of pure identity which only replicate the structure of the dominant culture.¹⁶ (An alternative danger seems to exist for ethnic individuals such as Bowering's Robert Louis Lam, whose narrative holds him hostage to his desire to discover his true origins.) This dilemma is addressed, in *Disappearing Moon Café*, by providing a series of contending—often contradictory—narratives. None of these narratives is authentic, or complete, or even reliable: none can be traced back to a single source, or to an identifiable point of origin. As Gwei Chang remarks of the multiple stories that are told him by Old Man Chen: "Who knows which ones were true and which ones were fragments of his own fantasy?" (7).

The question is, of course, rhetorical: the gradual *hermeneutic* process, in *To All Appearances A Lady*, whereby Robert Louis Lam pieces together his past from the fragments of his mother's diary, in

Disappearing Moon Café, into an inconclusive *heuristic* linkage in which past and present intermingle in the lived experience of story. In both cases, a careful balance is maintained between retrieving the past and reinventing it. Romance mediates the tensions between these alternative temporal projects. The cyclical structure of romance places emphasis on the potential for regeneration (Frye); and in that restricted sense, *To All Appearances A Lady* and *Disappearing Moon Café* both end where they began.¹⁷ But what interests both writers most is the “in-betweenness” of romance: the opportunity it affords to bridge an imagined past to an unknown future. Lee and Bowering are both sceptical toward the innovatory claims of a form which seems, all too often, to be self-evidently conservative; this scepticism is expressed in their parodic recitations of the clichés of the western frontier romance. “When I was a girl,” says Lam Fan in *To All Appearances A Lady*, “I wanted to do something, anything that no one had ever done before. I didn’t know what it was, I just wanted to be the first at something new” (74). Robert’s response is characteristically sarcastic: “And so you started smoking opium” (74). Compare this with Fong Mei’s ironic flight of fancy, in *Disappearing Moon Café*:

Imagine, I could have run away with any one of those lonely Gold Mountain men, all without mothers-in-law. This was a land of fresh starts; I could have lived in the mountains like an Indian woman legend. If men didn’t make me happy enough, then I could have moved on. Imagine, I could have had children all over me—on my shoulders, in my arms, at my breasts, in my belly. I was good at childbirth. And in turn, they could have chosen whomever and how many times they fancied, and I would have had hundreds of pretty grandchildren. I wouldn’t have died of loneliness. (188)

The pseudo-psychological put-down follows: “Kae asks Hermia: ‘Is this what they call a *forward* kind of identity?’” (189). Bowering and Lee are both adept at teasing out the contradictions in romantic wish-fulfilment; it seems no less than fitting that D’arcy (Treasure?) Island should eventually yield a cache of opium. Do romances really rebel, or do they seek disguises for acceptance? Do romances really remember, or do they provide a license to forget? These structural contradictions are contained within what Fredric Jameson has called the “transitional moment” of romance. The practitioners of the romance form, argues Jameson, “must feel their society torn between past and future in such a way that the alternatives are grasped as hostile but somehow unrelated worlds” (158). Hence the tendency to *with-drawal*: the sense in which romance will often masquerade as an attempted

engagement with the past while providing a convenient pretext for escaping from the confines of the present.

By turning the contradictions within the romance form effectively against themselves, Lee and Bowering clear a space to explore the provisionality of ethnicity. The constituency of the ethnic, argues the cultural theorist R. Radhakrishnan,

occupies quite literally a “prepost”-erous space where it has to actualize, enfranchise and empower its own “identity” and coextensively engage in the deconstruction of the very logic of “identity” and its binary and exclusionary politics. Failure to achieve this doubleness can only result in the formation of ethnicity as yet another “identical” and hegemonic structure. (199)

For Bowering, ethnic self-identity is necessarily mediated through the agency of the “other”: Robert locates his own life-story in the interstices of another’s narratives. Romance becomes a vehicle for this dialectical transformation: it enacts the transitional moment between alternative identity formations. Bowering’s focus is on the deconstruction of European exotic binaries; Lee’s is on the presentation of an indeterminate ethnic subject. The doubleness of romance allows Lee to celebrate the collective identity of an ethnic (Chinese-Canadian) community, without isolating that community from its wider social context or attempting, through the mystifications of memory, to mould it into a harmonious whole. Romance also allows Lee to uncover the repressed history of the Chinese-Canadian community, without indulging in the false glories of nostalgia or succumbing to the paralysis of remorse. Romance *exceeds* these emotive categories: “It offers comedy; it includes suffering. Yet it does not have the concentration of comedy or the finality of tragedy. It celebrates—by the processes of its art as much as by its individual stories—fecundity, freedom, and survival” (Beer 29). In *Disappearing Moon Café*, Lee co-opts romance aesthetics into a politics of ethnic writing in which the search for self-identity is necessarily provisional. Eli Mandel has described this writing well. Ethnic literature, says Mandel, is “a literature existing at an interface of two cultures, a form concerned to define itself, its voice, in the dialectic of self and other and the duplicities of self-creation, transformation and identities” (99).¹⁸ Romance provides a useful medium for an understanding of those duplicities. It also allows for an understanding of the doubleness of the European exotic project. “The category of the exotic as it emerged in [eighteenth-century] Europe,” say G.S. Rousseau and Roy Porter in their introduction to a

collection of essays on Enlightenment exoticism,

traded on the ambiguity created by the dialectical interplay of diachronic history (fact) and imagination (fiction). The exotic was the fantastic realised beyond the horizons of the normal everyday world the Europeans knew. (15)

The exotic, as it rematerialised later in nineteenth-century romantic fantasy, provided an imaginary justification for colonial intervention; and for the kinds of exclusionary racial policies that, in Canada, were directed against the Chinese. Romance has certainly played its part in the construction of the Oriental “other”; yet as Lee and Bowering show, it may also play a rôle in the *undermining* of that construction. In adjusting the expectations of romance to the task of social liberation, Lee and Bowering recognise that there is no simple means of escape from the system of stereotypical representations produced by the colonial past. Both writers choose instead to work *within* a genre which has historically participated in that system. But instead of deploying the latitudes of romance as a pretext for perpetuating myths of cultural incommensurability, Lee and Bowering negotiate that intervening distance as a means of bridging “East” and “West,” and of positing a hybrid space between them that exceeds all fixed identitary categories.

NOTES

- ¹ The concept of “othering” is taken from the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; see, for example, the introduction to *In Other Worlds*. For a general discussion of the Western (European) “othering” of China, see also Zhang.
- ² See Craig’s discussion of the work of writers such as Woodsworth and Stead (*Racial Attitudes* 25-30, 48-49). In his “pseudosociological” study *Strangers Within Our Gates* (1909), Woodsworth “supplied a qualitatively ranked survey of possible immigrant groups. They were evaluated on the basis of their potential for assimilation, estimated on the grounds of their assumed intelligence and undesirable features. Asiatics were at the bottom of the list” (Craig 27). Compare this with Stead’s description of a Chinese house-boy in his novel *The Cow Puncher* (1918): “Dave pressed a button, and a Chinese boy (all male Chinese are boys) entered, bowing in that deference which is so potent to separate the white man from his silver. The white man glories in being salaamed, especially by an Oriental, who can grovel with a touch of art. And the Oriental has not been slow to capitalize his master’s vanity” (quoted in Craig 48).
- ³ On the motif of the “treacherous Oriental” in Western literature, see Zhang; also, in a more specific context, Winks.
- ⁴ For a capsule summary of attitudes to the Chinese in the early immigrant years, see Li, Chapters One and Two.
- ⁵ On the connection between romance and identitary quest fable, also on the redemptive

structure of romance, see Frye, especially Chapter Two, "The Context of Romance."

- ⁶ See the introduction and conclusion to Radway; also her excellent bibliography.
- ⁷ On the *Doppelgänger*, see Eigner, Chapter One; on the frontier hero, see Williams, Chapter Six. See also Brantlinger's discussion of Thackeray's ambivalent relationship to India, in *Rule of Darkness*.
- ⁸ The portrait of India Thackeray's father, in *To All Appearances A Lady*, is loosely based on the life of the father of her literary namesake. For purposes of comparison, see the early chapters of Monsarrat.
- ⁹ See Bongie's discussion of fin-de-siècle exoticism, especially the chapter on Conrad. Bongie sees a struggle in Conrad's work between the writer's exoticist beliefs and a modernity that had already displaced them. The constitutive (self/other) polarities of nineteenth-century exoticism thus come to be redefined as a split *within* the self. Exoticism emerges as a gesture of self-defeating egotism, motivated less by the search for pleasurable alternatives than by a narcissistic self-contempt.
- ¹⁰ On the inclusiveness of romance, see Beer 1-16, 29; also Frye, whose mythological approach toward the romance moves toward a *reconciliation* between the genre's oppositional tendencies.
- ¹¹ I am indebted for this insight to Bennett Lee's excellent introduction to a recent anthology of Chinese-Canadian writing, *Many-Mouthed Birds*. According to Lee, *Disappearing Moon Café* "reinvent[s] the past as domestic melodrama, borrowing elements from the Chinese popular oral tradition and weaving in incidents from local history to tell a story of the Wong family which is part soap opera, part Cantonese opera and wholly Chinese Canadian" (4). For an introduction to Cantonese opera, see also Yung. Yung stresses the *miscellaneous* nature of (contemporary) Cantonese opera, listing some of its constituent elements as: "singing and dancing, musical accompaniment by percussion and melodic instruments, recitation and dialogue, make-up and costume, acrobats and clowning" (1). The emphasis, as in *Disappearing Moon Café*, is clearly on *performance*, and on an aesthetically-pleasing balance between satirical critique and lively popular entertainment.
- ¹² For an introduction to the mischievous spirit of Camp, see Sontag. According to Sontag, Camp proposes "a comic view of the world . . . but not a bitter or polemical comedy" (116). Camp is playful, anti-serious; it "neutralizes moral indignation" (118). This playfulness is much in evidence in Lee's and Bowering's fictions: it serves to mitigate the tragedies of Chinese-Canadian history, turning—often violent—prejudice into a subject for offbeat satire, and transforming the anger of its victims into a wry, resilient humour. The replaying of romantic clichés in both fictions is another instance of Camp; as is the writers' dramatisation of overdetermined romantic rôles (the Orphan, the Outcast, the Traitor, the Rogue, etc.).
- ¹³ See *Reading the Romance*, especially the conclusion. For Radway, romance "recognizes and thereby protests the weaknesses of patriarchy and the failure of traditional marriage even as it apparently acts to assert the perfection of each and to teach women how to review their own imperfect relationships in such a way that they seem unassailable" (221). This realization of the covert *challenge* to patriarchy depends, however, on "a collective sharing of experiences" between (female) romance writers and readers, whereby both parties collaborate in the discovery that "together they have strength, a voice, and important objections to make about current gender arrangements" (220). For Radway, romances are only conservative if they are allowed to become, or remain, so; by arguing

for a reading of romance that “originates in dissatisfaction,” Radway enjoins her sisters to come to an understanding that “their need for romance is a function of their dependent status as women and of their acceptance of marriage as the only route to female fulfillment (220), and encourages them to turn the imaginary outlet of romance into a springboard for social action.

¹⁴ See Brantlinger; also Inden, who argues that the feminization of India, and of its “irrational Hindu spirit,” helped fashion an ontological space for the British Empire, whose—one presumes *male*—leaders would “inject the rational intellect and world-ordering will that the Indians themselves could not provide” (128).

¹⁵ See the oppositional model described by Freud:

The liberation of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development. It is quite essential that that liberation should occur and it may be presumed that it has been to some extent achieved by everyone who has reached a normal state. Indeed, the whole progress of society rests upon the opposition between successive generations. On the other hand, there is a class of neurotics whose condition is recognizably determined by their having failed in this task. (237)

The neurotic’s estrangement from his parents, according to Freud, manifests itself in the fantasies and day-dreams of the “family romance.” This neurosis can be overcome; hence the view of *Disappearing Moon Café* as *therapeutic fiction*: as a means of coming to terms with a, personal and communal, past rooted in conflict and estrangement. Like Freud, Lee seems to wish to turn romance from a vehicle of deception into an instrument of liberation; she does so, in *Disappearing Moon Café*, by stressing the *Oedipal* dimensions of the family romance, and by using these to contest the “natural order” of patrilineal descent. See, also, the implicit *literary* challenge presented in *To All Appearances A Lady*, where the fiction operates counterdiscursively toward its paternal ancestors.

¹⁶ On the shibboleth of authenticity, see the relevant sections in Minh-ha. Minh-ha’s attempt, through the agency of story, to forge a community of ethnic women who are moved to identify their own common concerns while resisting the identity labels tagged on them by the dominant culture, is very much in keeping with the spirit of Sky Lee’s fiction. (See, for example, the last section of *Woman, Native, Other*: “My Grandmother’s Story.”) Minh-ha’s strategy, like Lee’s, is to use the intersecting categories of gender and ethnicity to cut across fixed definitions of personal/cultural identity.

¹⁷ See, in particular, the rhapsodic ending of *Disappearing Moon Café*, which recapitulates the early—semi-mythical—encounter between Gwei Chang and Kelora Chen. It seems, through this passionate alliance, that Lee is attempting to forge a link between two of Canada’s oppressed minorities—a link that is further strengthened by the Native writer Lee Maracle’s poem and short story, “Yin Chin,” which are dedicated to Sky Lee. In *Disappearing Moon Café*, the regenerative potential of romance is enlisted to the common cause of two embattled “ethnic” cultures seeking a better, freer future.

¹⁸ For an understanding of the ambivalence of ethnic writing within an Asian American context, see the essays in Lim and Ling (especially those written by the editors); also the introduction to Ling, *Between Worlds*. Lim sees the history of Asian-American writing as moving from “ambivalence” to “productive multivalence”: a paradigm shift that is also, arguably, traced in Lee’s history of the Wong family in *Disappearing Moon Café*. Note, however, the specificity of the *Canadian* context in Lee’s fiction. Chinese communities in Canada, which emerge out of a different history to that of their sister-communities in

the United States, and which currently exist within a different geo-political make-up, are unlikely to subscribe to the benevolent pluralism espoused by Lim and Ling. Lee's model is still primarily *oppositional* (although by no means militantly separatist); her interest is not so much in integrating Chinese-Canadian culture into the wider geo-cultural realm as in locating it within the *interstices* of the dominant cultural system.

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