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**Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*:
Cultural Difference, Visibility and the Canadian
Tradition**

Eva Darias Beautell

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Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms*: Cultural Difference, Visibility and the Canadian Tradition (note 1)

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the role of visual codes to construct cultural identities within a national framework in contemporary Canadian literature and culture, and analyses the novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* by Hiromi Goto (1994) as an interesting study of such strategies of identity formation in Canada. Clearly springing from the Asian Canadian rapidly growing field of writing, the novel sets itself to break institutional expectations in a number of ways. First, it exposes the asymmetries in the conditions of production of cultural identities in Canada and denounces the power of the codes of visibility in the production of cultural difference. Second, it recognizes, appropriates and reverses the functioning of cultural stereotypes, unveiling in the process their ar-

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bitrary nature. Third, it inscribes itself right into the Canadian tradition, putting into question the awkward division between mainstream and minority literature in Canada. This is done by means of a double move consisting of writing explicitly within the field of Asian Canadian tradition, specially because of its intertextual engagement with the multi-award-winning novel *Obasan*, by Joy Kogawa (1983), while entering and appropriating, at the same time, the texts of Canadian regionalism, specifically prairie fiction, as well as the larger national contexts of literature.

Recent studies in the historical, social and literary fields have focused on the role of visual codes to construct cultural identities within a national framework in contemporary Western countries. Canada, because of the specific circumstances of its formation and the ethnic variety of its population, offers an excellent instance of such strategies of identity construction, and the issue has therefore attracted the attention of theoreticians, critics and writers working in all areas of Canadian culture. Recent fictional production is no exception, and the number of novels published in the last ten years that deal directly or indirectly with visual technologies in connection to cultural identities is outstanding. Successful novels such as Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* (1998), Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Mem* (1996), Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), or André Alexis' *Childhood* (1998) are all involved (in different degrees, from

a variety of angles, and with unequal results) in the analysis of the interaction between the eye and the I, between what is seen and what is defined as subject, between the visible and the cultural. By exploring new forms of subject construction in Canada, these texts have also unveiled the presence of racism behind the apparently neutral ground of cultural difference. As Sneja Gunew has argued, “the visibility of ‘difference’ itself is registered via markers of normative racialization. The visible body—what the viewer sees in terms of corporeality—supposedly ‘explains’ these differences” (1998: 254). This, in turn, draws our attention to the limits and possible traps of postcolonial and postmodern theories, initially celebrated as liberating discourses, and often used in the critical production on the so-called “New Literatures in English”.

Chorus of Mushrooms by Hiromi Goto (1994) provides one of those interesting fictional analyses of the role of visual structures in the official construction of cultural difference in Canada, with a special emphasis on the production of the Asian Canadian subject. Moreover, as the two scenes I have chosen to introduce the topic show, one of the most salient issues the novel explores is precisely the problematic lack of coincidence between the intended and the actual realities of the cultural mosaic. In the first of them, one of the book’s

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narrators, the Japanese Canadian grand-daughter, Murasaki, remembers for the reader the sessions at the Baptist Sunday school, where her converted immigrant mother makes her go as a child, presumably in the early 1970s. The scene is introduced by a song the children are told to sing out loud:

Red and Yellow, Black and White
They are precious in His sight
Jesus loves the little children of the world!

There were pictures drawn on the song boards too. Indians with feathers and black boys with curly hair wearing only shorts and yellow people with skinny eyes. An a blonde girl with long eyelashes with a normal dress on.

“Everybody is the same”, the teacher said, “Jesus doesn’t see any difference at all. He loves you all the same”.

I thought that Jesus must be pretty blind if he thought everybody was the same. Because they weren’t. They weren’t at all (Goto, 1994: 59).

The clash between the song words and the described image accompanying it produces an ironic effect, compelling the reader to doubt the veracity of the teacher’s words, further reinforcing the message of equality, and to suspect the presence of a racist discourse behind the guise of the Anglo-Christian benevolence. The image is also telling because of its tacit description of the exercise of normalizing the white

subject (blonde girls with normal dresses on), while tagging minority subjects to their respective prescribed stereotypical images (Indians with feathers, half-naked black boys, and so on). As we will see, this double strategy has been often identified behind the claim for cultural equality of today's official multiculturalist construction of the nation.

Further proof of the deceitful nature of the Christian discourse of racial equality is provided by a second scene in which Murasaki is chosen in a school operetta to play the part of Alice in Wonderland. The flattered mother is summoned for an informative meeting after school, to which she attends "with her going-out purse and pumps" (Goto, 1994: 176). Mrs Spears, the teacher, draws the mother to the side by the elbow and adopts a confidential tone to explain why Murasaki's hair colour poses a serious impediment for her to play the part convincingly. The episode is portrayed as specially traumatic for the narrator because of the mother's uncritical collaboration:

"Well, Alice is a story about an English girl, you know. An English girl with lovely blonde hair. And strictly for the play, you understand, Muriel will have to have blonde hair or no one will know what part she is playing. You simply cannot have an Alice with black hair".

"Of course", Mom nodded, to my growing horror. "It's in the nature of theatre and costume, is it not?"

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“Of course!” Mrs. Spears beamed. “I knew you would understand. I was thinking of a nice blonde wig [....]”
[....]

I was horrified, Mom and Mrs. Spear chatting away and dye my beautiful black hair blonde? Me with blonde hair and living the role of Alice? In Nanton? What could my Mom be thinking? I would look ridiculous and stand out like a freak.

“Mom!” I hissed. “Mom, I changed my mind. I don’t want to be Alice anymore. I’ll be the Mad Hatter, that way, I can just wear a hat. Or the Cheshire Cat! Cats have slanted eyes. That would work out. Mom?” (Goto, 1994: 177).

The scene reveals the workings of the strategies of homogenization of the other within the white dominant so that difference is categorized and controlled from within, a process in which the racialized subject may even participate, as is the case of the mother’s compliant attitude. That the gap between Murasaki’s and the Alice’s outer appearance proves an unsurmountable obstacle for the former’s successful performance signals the power of the visual as measure in the multiculturalist construction of the nation, and marks, therefore, an important clash between the visual and the discursive. Although the two episodes I have quoted take place around the early 1970s, the approach to multicultural interaction in Canada they advance could be very well applied to today’s situation. Such is at least the impression the reader achieves

from other moments in the novel, closer to the 1990s, that reproduce a similar ideology. The fact, as Roy Miki maintains (2001: 56), is that identity in contemporary Canada is strongly based on codes of visibility (“birth certificates, residential location, familial names, social codes for ‘skin colour’ and gender”) which are then normalized to be made obvious or transparent. Moreover,

[t]he undercurrents of this social unconscious are instrumental for maintaining the processes of racialization that produce raced subjects, especially prevalent in nation-states, such as Canada, that trace their trajectories to colonial legacies. These processes – into which the term ‘Asian Canadian’ as both identity and representation is bound up – are fraught with ethical problems and conundrums that bring in their wake the volatile issues of appropriation, dominant-subordinate relations, commodification, and containment – issues that have scripted the tensions of contemporary cultural conflicts (Miki, 2001: 56).

But let us briefly revise the short history of multiculturalism in Canada. The last thirty years of the 20th century saw the transformation of the country from an ethnocentric bilingual national entity to a multicultural, multiracial, multiethnic one. The first multicultural policy issued in 1971, and constructed within a bilingual framework, was gradually modified by visible changes in the composition of Canadian society, very special-

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ly after the non-discriminatory immigration policy introduced in the late 1960s. In the early 1980s, the issue of multiculturalism began to include the question of race as an important category in the construction of the new Canada (see Padolsky, 1998). Throughout that same decade, it became clear that the different cultural communities established in Canada should be recognized as part of mainstream Canada, not as outside or on the borders of it. It was this kind of thinking that gave way to the Multiculturalism Act of 1988: “This means”, according to Greg Gauld, “that the policy starts from a view that the multicultural reality of Canada is a permanent and central reality—not a transient one or something outside the mainstream” (Gauld, 1992: 11).

The policy, however, has been perceived otherwise by Canadian society at large. As many critics and cultural commentators have argued, multiculturalism seems to have been designed, probably despite itself, to contain cultural and ethnic difference within the official parameters defined and controlled by mainstream Canada, still seen as predominantly White, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. This view seems implicitly supported by a majority of white Canadians who, for better or worse, have never thought of themselves as part of the famous mosaic, but rather as outside it, representing a

very blurred notion of a center. In fact, many have said, one of the difficulties of the functioning of true multiculturalism in Canada has been the lack of a definition of the “Great White North”, so that multicultural categories or identities move and slip in and out with no real center to stand up against (Sasano, 1998: 41). In her essay “Translating the Self”, Hiromi Goto addresses such assumption of transparency on the part of white Anglo-Canadians in the following ironic terms:

You're so lucky, I've been told. You have a rich source of culture to draw from, to bring to your writing. And I was stunned. Amazed. That the person was so “white” Canadian, she didn't even have a culture any more. That she was in such a position of privilege, that her own racial/cultural identification became obsolete and my Canadian racialized position of historically reinforced weakness was a thing to be envied—it gave me lots to write about. There is something wrong with this equation (Goto, 1996: 113).

If we shift the discussion to the development of Canadian literature in the last quarter of the 20th century, a similar problem appears, for, despite some official and non-official efforts to the contrary, the incipient Canadian literary canon has not successfully managed to include cultural, ethnic and racial diversity. **(note 2)** Instead, it has implicitly produced two literary categories, as it were: on the one hand, there is ‘mainstream’ Canadian literature, ‘the real one’; on the other, there is ‘multi-

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cultural' literature, the colourful and folkloric, and therefore the less 'literary.' Each of these categories have in turn produced a completely different set of expectations, as well as different criteria and tools of analysis. The so-called multicultural text is often praised not so much for its literary value (whatever that may mean) as for its importance as a portrait of or contribution to the much-idolized Canadian mosaic—a fact, we should point out, that has been often exploited by the very writers for a variety of reasons and with different results. The assumption behind this type of categorization is that the average reader is English-speaking and white, representing the non-race and the non-language of a majority that, because of its self-attributed transparency, continues to occupy the center of national power: "This results, in the case of writing, in a literary othering which continues to perpetuate non-Caucasian cultural difference as a category that pomo post colonialists may colonize yet again" (Goto, 1996: 112).

Unfortunately, the presence of those neocolonialist strategies may be threatening the very basis of canon construction in multicultural literatures today. As Miki explains in the context of Asian Canadian writing, the referential power of texts

may be limited by the social construction of the Asian figures who have been the constituted others of the Canadian nation and who, for this reason, always remain in tension between incorporation

and externalization. The movement into the frameworks of disciplines such as CanLit changes both its valences and its values. The object of knowledge produced loses its singularity and takes on appearance through the already constituted categories of English literary studies (Miki , 2001: 73).

Asian Canadian works may become, in this way, objects of knowledge and consumption in the field of Canadian Literature on condition that they always retain their category as other within it, adding to it the much-sought element of cultural difference and modifying the field only in the prescribed directions. That is, the minoritized text is allowed to enter the center of national literature as long as it leaves intact the relations of power amongst the different national cultures:

In this process, the Asian Canadian subjects who produced the works can subsequently be (re)produced in the language of specialization which is pressured to hold allegiance, not to the site-specific conflicts and contradictions of textual production, but to the authority of institution – institutions that are themselves extensions of frameworks in which Asian continues to be a term of outsidersness (Miki, 2001: 74).

According to Miki, since our reading practices act as essential agents in such processes of othering, they can also therefore be used as weapons against them, highlighting the points of conflict and asymmetry and refusing the categories allotted to

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cultural difference in the dominant literary discourses. “Such practices”, Miki continues, “would be attentive to the interventionist modes of textual practices embedded in the works themselves – modes inseparable from the social, cultural, and historical specifics out of which, and often against which they have come into formation” (2001: 57).

In the remaining part of this essay, I wish to analyse Goto's novel, *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994), as an interventionist text in the above sense. Clearly springing from the Asian Canadian rapidly growing field of writing, the novel decidedly sets itself to break institutional expectations in a number of ways. First, it exposes the asymmetries in the conditions of production of cultural identities in Canada and denounces the power of the codes of visibility in the production of cultural difference. Second, it recognizes, appropriates and reverses the functioning of cultural stereotypes, unveiling in the process their arbitrary nature. Third, it inscribes itself right into the Canadian tradition, putting into question the awkward division between mainstream and minority literature in Canada. This is done by means of a double move consisting of writing explicitly within the field of Asian Canadian tradition, in which Goto's text is firmly set, specially because of its intertextual engagement with the multi-award-winning novel *Obasan*, by Joy Kogawa

(1983), while entering and appropriating, at the same time, the texts of Canadian regionalism, specifically prairie fiction, as well as the larger national contexts of literature.

Chorus of Mushrooms presents the life of a family of Japanese Canadians in a mushroom farm in Alberta. The novel has two main narrative frameworks: the outer framework, marked in italics, is set in Calgary where the grand-daughter, Murasaki, tells stories to her lover, a newly arrived Japanese teacher of flower arrangements. Those stories constitute in turn the inner framework, set in Nanton, Alberta, where Murasaki's family lives exploiting a mushroom farm. The Nanton narrative is alternately told by the grandmother, Naoe, and the grand-daughter, Murasaki. As the stories are disclosed, the two narrative frameworks come together, collapse into each other, and the characters of Murasaki and Naoe also become confused in the midst of memories and myths, Japanese and Canadian folktales and legends, often transposing Japanese oral traditions onto the Canadian prairies. Goto's text stresses the increasing lack of coincidence between identity and place, culture and nation, but looks at it not as a problem but as a source of cultural empowerment and enrichment. As Guy Beauregard suggests, in addressing race and gender issues, the different female narrators also give them an "address",

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a specific location in Canada and in the Canadian tradition (Beauregard, 1995-6: 47).

Chorus of Mushrooms is also about *grounding* in a very literary sense, for the text acknowledges and insists on the power of story-telling to frame and root realities, cultures, and identities. The various stories are invariably triggered by the characters' narrative desire, their demand to listen running parallel to their growing sense of belonging. The fact that the outer narrative framework is presented as a kind of pleasurable post-orgasmic conversation between two lovers seems no accident in this context. Goto's erotics of story-telling is given by a 'you' address rooting the book comfortably in the love story (Beauregard, 1995-96), and inaugurating a connection between love-making and story-telling right from the very first pages, when the Japanese lover asks the narrator to tell him a story as they lie in bed: **(note 3)**

"Will you tell me a true story?" you ask, with unconscious longing. "A lot of people ask that. Have you ever noticed?" I roll onto my side. Prop my elbow and rest my chin, my cheek, into the curve of my hand. "It's like people want to hear a story, and then, after they're done with it, they can stick it back to where it came from. You know?"

“Not really”, you say, and slide a little lower, so that your head is nestled beneath my chin. Your face in my neck. “But will you still tell me?”

“Sure, but bear with my language, won’t you? My Japanese isn’t as good as my English, and you might not get everything I say. But that doesn’t mean the story’s not there to understand. *Wakatte kureru kashira?* Can you listen before you hear?”

“Trust me”, you say.

I pause. Take a deep breath, then spiral into sound.

“Here’s a true story”.

Mukâshi, mukâshi, ômukâshi... (Goto, 1994: 1)

Far from existing for its undeniable exotic effect, the repetition, in Goto’s novel, of the Japanese words “**Mukâshi, mukâshi, ômukâshi...**”, marking the beginning of each story, sends the Canadian reader directly to the novel *Obasan*, by Joy Kogawa (1983), “a novel”, as Guy Beauregard writes, “that is not the ‘centre’ in post-colonial terms, but remains the canonical centre of the rapidly-emerging field of Asian Canadian writing” (1995-96: 47). Whereas in Goto’s text, the phrase invariably appears in Japanese, in Kogawa’s, it is given a translation: “In ancient times, in ancient times, in very very ancient times” (1983: 54). One text becomes thus inserted into the other, re-telling and rewriting each other, and producing an intertextual effect to which I will return. Additionally, as Mark Libin writes,

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the phrase locates the novel in the temporal frame of storytelling, of myth and fairy tales, where “time is not measurable by historical or geographical periodicity but can only be accessed by fairy tale, just as the story is identified through its invocation of ‘once upon a time’” (1999: 127). In so doing, *Chorus of Mushrooms* contests the pressures for realism associated to multicultural literature in Canada. (note 4) As becomes obvious from the narrator’s words in the above quotation—and this probably disappointing an important sector of the readership entertaining multiculturalist expectations—the text is to be read, at least partially, outside a realistic framework of interpretation. It also insists on marking the elements of cultural difference without selling into the multicultural lore of ethnic colour. The intertextual effect of the Japanese phrase commented cutting the first exotic impression and adding a theoretical dimension to the reading provides one example of this. Goto’s deliberate use of Western translations of Japanese sources, on which she draws for the inclusion in the text of Japanese mythology and legends, proves another form of dismantling of the expectations of authenticity implicitly attached to “ethnic” writing. As Beauregard writes, Goto’s interest is not in “reviv[ing] or exhum[ing] ‘pure’ orality or ‘real’ Japanese culture, and should not be judged on this basis” (1995-96: 49). With this strategy, she resists the pre-pack-

aged images of the oriental and reinvents, at the same time, cultural identities outside pure markers (58). (note 5)

We could then argue that the novel embodies what Fred Wah has called an “alienethnic” poetics, a kind of writing which refuses “to operate within a colonized and inherited formal awareness while investigating their individual enactments of internment and migration”, and tries instead “formal innovative possibilities” not limited to an “ethnic” project” (Wah, 1992: 100). I believe that Goto enters this alternative poetics by denouncing the strategies of appropriation and otherization of the racialized subjects, resisting cultural stereotypes dictated by so-called mainstream Canadian readers, and inscribing her text at the same time right into the Canadian literary tradition. In what follows I wish to elaborate the strategies of this three-fold move.

One of the most telling moments in the novel in terms of the representation of cultural conflict is provided by the scene of the supermarket, in which, finding herself shopping in the “ethnic ChinesericenoodleTofupattieexotic vegetable section of Safeway”, Murasaki is interrupted by a white Canadian who kindly demands information about the products in the section:

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“What is that, exactly? I’ve always wondered”.

I looked up from my reverie and a face peered down on me. A kindly face. An interested face.

“It’s an eggplant”.

“Oh really!” Surprisewonderjoy. “How wonderful! This is what *our* eggplants look like. They are so different!” She held up a round almost-black solid eggplant. Bitter skin and all. She looked up at the handmade signs above the vegetable with the prices marked in dollars per pound.

[... Here Goto reproduces the drawings of the vegetable signs in Chinese]

“What are they called in *your* language?”

I looked up at the signs.

“I don’t speak Chinese”, I said.

“Oh. I’m sorry” (Goto, 1994: 90).

The episode is paradigmatic of the ethnocentric attitude often underlying white Canadians’ openness to other cultures. The fact that it happens in a supermarket seems no coincidence in this sense, for the Safeway context frameworks the encounter within a discourse of consumption, drawing implicit parallels between food and culture, between the acts of buying and selling supermarket products and the marketing of the ethnic other, and pointing out thus the strategies of consumption of cultural difference in contemporary Canada. As Roy Miki suggests in his reading of this same scene, the very name of the

food section, boxing ethnic difference under one single sign with no spaces in-between, acts already as a metaphor for the construction of the Asian subject as produce in the Anglo-European Canadian imaginary. It makes obvious the processes of appropriation and simplification of difference for the easy consumption of the white norm: “The playful elision of spaces between words performs the textually visible equivalent of an indiscriminate fusing of culturally-specific particularities into a distilled abstraction” (Miki, 2001: 59). Additionally, Miki continues, the episode offers a telling instance of the working of the codes of visibility in the construction of the Asian other. It is the narrator’s Asian appearance and the circumstance of her physically being in the section that construct her as other in relation to the white shopper, who sees herself as representing the dominant majority and as endowed, therefore, with the power to name: “In breaking the reverie of the narrator, the voice performs an interpellation process that presumes the power of the majority – embodied in Safeway as a representational social field based on ‘western’ (read ‘white’) food as the norm – to claim rights of entry into whatever comes into its referential frame” (Miki, 2001: 60).

Chorus of Mushrooms clearly sets itself off, right from the beginning, from a multicultural category whose purpose might

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be to “delineat[e] the borders into which difference is accepted or ‘tolerable’” (Sasano, 1998: 40). Many critics have pointed out this possibility of seeing multicultural policies as a way of controlling the excess of otherness, of ensuring the dominant group’s position of power, while, at the same time, enriching that position culturally by superficial contact with the mosaic. In the case of the Asian Canadian subject, the codes of visibility act as defining codes of otherness, allotting the subject a place which is always already outside the discourses of power. **(note 6)**

An important way in which Goto’s novel combats the tyranny of visibility is by constantly appropriating and playing with the lack of coincidence between the discursive and the visual construction of the characters’ identities. Paradigm of such clash between the visual and discursive, the character of Naoe, the eighty-five-year-old Japanese Canadian grandmother, unsettles the reader’s expectations in all possible ways: first, by having a double life while she sits immobile on her chair in the prairie family house (see Sasano, 1998: 47); second, by deliberately disappearing into the prairie wind, hitchhiking in the middle of a snow storm and being picked-up by a truck driver with whom she ends up having sex in a motel room; and, third, by presumably infiltrating “The Calgary Stampede”

under the name of “The Purple Mask”, her true identity concealed. From this brief account of her deeds, it becomes obvious that the character should not be read within a realist, but rather within a symbolic framework of interpretation. Indeed, the grandmother defies all identity codes attached to her age, culture and immigrant status. And, as her refusal to speak English, although she secretly understands it, seems to show, she does so self-consciously: “*Ohairi kudasai! Dôzo ohairi kudasai*. Talk loudly and e-n-u-n-c-i-a-t-e. I might be stupid as well as deaf. How can they think a body can live in this country for twenty years and not learn the language? But let them think this. Let them think what they will, for they will. Solly, Obâchan no speeku Eeenglishu” (Goto, 1994: 4). Her daring attitude granted a considerable critical weight, Naoe is endowed with the agency to change things. Far from embodying the stereotypical image of the passive old immigrant woman, she is given the power to break the public’s expectations, and plays with it to the point of making fun of the official approach to Canadian identity. Take, for instance, her ironic appropriation of official bilingualism:

Easy for an old woman to sit in a chair and talk and talk. Easier, still not to say anything at all. I could nod and smile and watch “Sesame Street” so I can learn French as well as the English people don’t think I already know. *Bonjour!* I’ll say and everyone will

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be amazed. *Je m'appelle Naoe Kiyokawa*. Ha! If an old woman sits in a chair and never gets out and talks and talks and talks, don't ignore her. She might be saying something that will change the colour of your eyes (Goto, 1994: 37).

The irony consists in her trespassing the limit between the visual and the discursive. And, indeed, the image of a Japanese immigrant grandmother permanently sitting on a chair in the living room of a prairie house and being fluent in both English and French does not seem to fit in any of the assigned fictional and social categories. Naoe does not only dismantle characterological and identity expectations. She is also boldly moving the line between margin and center, addressing the official construction of "true Canadianess", and appropriating it comfortably for her own purposes. Her enigmatic appearance at the end of the novel in the Calgary Stampede—a moment of great symbolic significance to which we will return—could be read, in this context, as a definite and final step in such a process of movement and transculturation.

The ex-centric grandmother occupying the center of the narration, *Chorus of Mushrooms* could be said to be really about impersonation, about the possibility of putting on and off different cultures. In fact, the novel plays endlessly with the constructed nature of identity categories and insists on the possibility of learning and unlearning identities in the same way

that they do learn and unlearn languages. Murasaki, herself a translation of the English name, Muriel, that her mother gave her, does not understand Japanese but can communicate with her grandmother in an intuitive fashion, “through empathy rather than interpretative knowledge” (Libin, 1999: 124). Sam and Kay, themselves the English transformations of the Japanese names Shinji and Keiko, mysteriously “forget” how to speak Japanese, their mother tongue, as soon as they arrive in Canada, an event that seems to denote the damage inflicted upon immigrants by official pressures to assimilate to the dominant white culture. The novel manages to be formally innovative without lending itself to uncritical celebrations of the transcultural. On the one hand, the characters’ cultural amnesia implies a skeptical attitude towards the experience of migrations, making clear that these processes are not necessarily voluntary or liberating, but can, in fact, be disabling and traumatic. On the other hand, however, Goto’s text does not decline the performative possibilities of the transcultural situation, the characters’ identities, as we have seen, always a result of multiple and endless translation processes across Japanese and English: “The novel’s ongoing translation of subjectivity”, writes Mark Libin in this context, “reaches its apotheosis when Naoe re-names herself ‘Purple,’ thus reconstructing herself as a translation of Murasaki, a name

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that is itself her translation of the English name, Muriel, into Japanese” (1999: 128). This playful back and forth and spiral movement between the two languages is not only paradigmatic of the novel’s constant undermining of the notions of purity, origin and source. It is also indicative that, in order to be liberating, that is, in order to avoid new forms of cultural colonization and/or discrimination, these movements across cultures and languages must be multidirectional.

The character of Tengu, the truck-driver who picks Naoe up in the snow, offers an innovative proposal of the possibilities of appropriation of identity in the inverse direction. That the grandmother is the agent of the process of asianization experimented by this prairie cowboy, rebaptized after a character of Japanese folktale tradition, seems no coincidence in this figurative context. (note 7) Soon after picking Naoe up on the road, he tells her about his visit to Japan:

“T’ain’t the heat that gits ta ya, mind ya, but the humidity all pouring’ down my back ‘n face ‘n my face turnin’ all red. My face wuz all red all summer ‘n on accounta my red face ‘n my big nose, well those kids’re startin’ ta call me ‘*Tengu! Tengu!*’ Tooka good look in the mirror when I got home ‘n sher enuff, I’m the spittin image of the *tengu* saw the uther night on the *Mukashi-banashi* program fer kids ‘n I laughed out loud”.

“*Ara ma ha! ha! Pittari janai no!* That’s what I will call you too. Even though you are not so red in the face, but it suits you perfectly, Mr. Tengu”.

“Please, no need for formalities! Just call me Tengu” (Goto, 1994: 110-111).

The arbitrariness of the codes of visibility that often construct the racialized other becomes specially obvious in the representation of Tengu, with whom narrative codes change completely into the fantastic and the metaphoric. His white body and his exaggerated cowboy accent signify in excess of his newly allotted Japanese identity, materializing thus, as Roy Miki (2001: 69) would have it in a different context, the contradictions between the power of visibility and the power of discourse. (note 8) The distance between the given Japanese name and the cowboy’s appearance, in other words, has the effect of stressing “the gap between the discursive production of the asian body and the visual codes attached to the asianized body” (Miki, 2001: 71). Himself constituting a stereotype of the Western Canadian male, Tengu’s entering the Japanese Canadian narrative—literally in terms of plot, symbolically in terms of name, and physically in terms of his sexual encounter with Naoe—introduces the possibility of reversing the direction of formation of cultural stereotypes. According to Mark Libin, *Chorus of Mushrooms*’ exploration of hyphens

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reaches its climax with the appearance of the truck driver, with whom the novel reaches the ultimate overthrowing of the boundaries between languages and cultures:

The figure of Tengu—as a white rural Albertan *translated* into a figure from Japanese folklore—represents just such a surfeit of meaning and identity. Tengu's character creates an ambiguous space for himself in a text that presents itself as a struggle to define Japanese Canadian identity *against* the white mainstream. The very definition of the Japanese Canadian subject is extended in the figure of Tengu, who becomes a part of that community by joining the “we” of eating, of story-telling, and—as his relationship with Naoe culminates in a motel room—of sexuality (Libin, 1999: 135).

And if there is one cultural stereotype that the novel uses and abuses, acknowledges and undermines, that is food; or rather the representation of food as identity. In the multicultural context of Canadian production, this is specially telling, for, as many cultural commentators have argued, multiculturalism's intended promotion of social dynamics and interaction may be said to have failed in most areas except in the gastronomic: “After 20 years of the policy”, writes Carol Carpenter, “there is operative multiculturalism in notably few aspects of our culture. Culinary customs are the single biggest success, for a diversity of food characterizes the everyday lives of most Ca-

nadians” (1992: 157). In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, food is seen as cultural root, as a source of healing sore identities. The culinary constitutes the final cultural residue, so that characters may lose language or memory, but always retain the names and tastes of specific food. Significantly, the most obvious example of the parallel between food and identity is provided by the very family name, Tonkatsu, which, far from being their real name, turns out to be the name of a dish and the only word mysteriously remembered by the immigrant father on their arrival to Canada. Murasaki finds this out in the last conversation with her father at the end of the novel:

“What about our name? Isn’t our name Japanese?”

Dad actually laughed, and it was a dirt brown sound.

“It’s funny, really. That word. It was the only word I could utter when the change took place. Your Mom suggested we take a Canadian name, if we couldn’t remember our real one. But I was firm about that. I said if we couldn’t remember our own name, the least we could do was keep the one word I could remember. Tonkatsu! Of all things!” Dad started laughing so hard that tears were rolling down his cheeks.

“Does our name really mean ‘breaded deep fried pork cutlets?’”

“The translation isn’t literal as that, but that’s what it signifies. The thing is, *tonkatsu* isn’t really a purely Japanese word. *Ton*, meaning pork, is Japanese, but *katsu* is adopted from ‘cutlet,’ and I don’t know the origins of that word” (Goto, 1994: 208-209).

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Mother, father and daughter eat *tonkatsu* to reconnect themselves back to a lost, erased or repressed cultural identity. The reader, Libin argues, is included in this ritual of recovery, since the language of description certainly awakens our own appetites: “The diction of “smell-taste” announces the beginning—for Goto’s characters as well as for the reader—of “knowing” a community in an essential (but not essentializing) way” (1999: 132). The very hybrid name of the dish, already a translation, stands as the basis for the text’s undermining of any notion of cultural purity, underlining, as I have said, that intimate connection between identity and food. At the same time, through the strong presence of such connection, the novel is explicitly addressing cultural stereotypes, and, in particular, the Western equation between Oriental identity and food, most commonly expressed in the association between the Asian North American subject and the proliferation of Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese or Thai restaurants. Goto’s choice, however, is not a simple reproduction of the stereotype for the easy multicultural effect, and the notion of food in the novel is highly multivalent: it pays homage to Asian cuisine, acknowledges the role of eating as essence, as survival, both physical and psychological, and finally rewrites food images in new hybrid contexts.

That the characters, for instance, come to a rebirth by symbolically eating themselves may be seen as addressing the idea of reaching purification through death, an archetypal narrative contained both in Japanese and Western folk cultures, as well as, more specifically, in the Canadian literary tradition. In the latter sense, the scene in which the mother literally comes to life, after a serious breakdown, by eating *tonkatsu*, may possibly remind Canadian readers of similar scenes in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) or Aritha van Herk's *No Fixed Address* (1987), with also similar symbolic dimensions. It is a kind of reversal in the direction of the process of creation also portrayed in the Japanese folk story of the female mountain muse *Yamanba*, who eats death maggots in order to create a new world, told by Naoe to Tengu (Goto, 1994: 115-119). Goto's version in this case is completely different, though, for, according to Dorson (1981: 83-85), *Yamanba* or *Yama Uba* is a female mountain muse often described as a giant with long locks which transform themselves into serpents, or catch children. Beauregard suggests that the invention of this *Yamanba* who rehabilitates a dead, post-apocalyptic world serves Goto to rewrite the painful description of the atomic holocaust in *Obasan*: "The very title of *Chorus of Mushrooms* could be read as an attempt to politicize female sexuality by taking the mushroom cloud of the atomic destruc-

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tion that haunts Kogawa's narrative and reconfiguring it as an orgasm" (1995-96: 52). Goto's radical departure from her source would thus add a further intertextual dimension to her text. In any case, and whatever the wide possibilities of interpretation, Beauregard's reading brings to the fore the close connection between the two novels, to which I wish to turn.

Chorus of Mushrooms certainly contributes to the making of an Asian Canadian tradition, and Kogawa's quasi-canonical *Obasan* remains unquestionably its most powerful and obvious intertext. Both the setting (a rural community, Alberta), and the characterization (Japanese Canadian characters, three generations of women, absent or silent mother) are very similar, and the two novels address the themes of ethnocentrism and racial discrimination (see Padolsky, 1998). As we have seen, the repetition of the Japanese phrase "*Mukâshi, mukâshi, ômukâshi...*", translated only in *Obasan*, connects the two texts but locates *Chorus of Mushrooms* in the space of a more radical proposal for cultural interaction.

Moreover, the strategies of representation are completely different in each of the novels. Most obviously, as many critics have noted, because Kogawa's novel is admittedly concerned with history while Goto's is rather focused on legend, myth and story-telling. This, Mari Sasano claims (1998), is

evidence of their contributing different historical moments to the making of a Japanese Canadian literary tradition, Goto's text representing a step forward in the direction of integration, both socially and in terms of the literary tradition. But I would further argue that *Chorus of Mushrooms* writes back to *Obasan*, even parodying Kogawa's text at times. In the first place, the claustrophobic immobility of the old Obasan in Kogawa's text is undone in Goto's by the *fantastic* character of the grandmother, Naoe, who escapes in the middle of the night with a *furoshiki* containing beer, seaweed paste and salted dried squid and turns the rest of her narrative life into an improbable road movie. Similarly, Obasan's painful statements that words "do not touch us where we are planted here in Alberta", that "words are not made flesh" (Kogawa, 1983: 189), are also turned around in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, a text literally constructed on the belief in the healing power of words, in their material reality, in language as a living thing. And it is precisely this belief that makes possible the intuitive form of communication that takes place between Murasaki and Naoe:

I turned my head slowly in Obâchan's lap, the fabric scratch and stiff. Inhaled dust and poetry. She stroked my forehead with her palm and her words, they flowed fluid. I snuggled close, curled my legs and stopped pretending to understand. Only listened. And

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listened. Then my mouth opened of its own accord and words fell from my tongue like treasure. I couldn't stop. Didn't try to stop. They swirled, swelled, and eddied. The words swept outside to be tugged and tossed by the prairie-shaping wind. Like a chain of seeds they lifted, then scattered. Obâchan and I, our voices lingered, reverberated off hollow walls and stretched across the land with streamers of silken thread (Goto, 1994: 20-21).

Chorus of Mushrooms seems thus to take where *Obasan* leaves. Words in the former text are not only flesh, but they are also inscribed and resound in the Canadian prairie. Obasan's aphasia in Kogawa's text is completely reversed by a Japanese Canadian grandmother who cannot stop talking: "I sew my lips together with a curved needle, but the words seep from my nostrils, my ears, even leak from my paper dry eyes" (Goto, 1994: 21).

Thirdly, Goto's novel, as we have seen, posits a different approach to tradition as hybrid, but nonetheless closer to myth and to the Japanese oral tradition than to the Judeo-Christian Bible, *Obasan*'s central intertext (see Darias-Beautell, 2001: 169-192). Such a choice on the part of Kogawa provides the most explicit moments of parody in Goto's novel: "The Greeks", exclaims Naoe. "Forget the Greeks! And don't quote Bible verses to me child. There were stories long before Eve tasted fruit fit for women" (Goto, 1994: 18). Later on, in an

even more obvious parodic allusion to *Obasan*, the grandmother states her preferences very clearly: “Nothing like a good folk legend to warm up one’s belly and fill the emptiness inside you”, she says. “Why a good folk tale can keep you going for at least a month, none of this manna talk and birds falling out of the sky” (Goto, 1994: 203).

Finally, whereas *Obasan* is about the pain of uprooting, we could say that *Chorus of Mushrooms* is about grounding and grafting, the grafting of cultures onto one another. I have already mentioned the textual emphasis on locating the characters specifically in the Canadian prairie. The sexual encounter between Naoe and Tengu could be interpreted, figuratively, in that context of grafting of traditions: “I will hover on the wind and in the leaves and dwell inside the soil beneath your feet,” the Japanese Canadian grandmother tells the prairie cowboy as she says goodbye. “You will even hold me inside your body every time you breathe the air” (Goto, 1994: 202). An ultimate act of symbolic entrance into the Canadian tradition, the book actually closes with the most unlikely image of the Japanese Canadian grandmother, her identity hidden under a purple mask, riding a bull called Revelation (another ironic allusion to Kogawa’s plot) in the Calgary Stampede. However improbable in realistic terms, this final scene succeeds in inserting

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the Japanese Canadian character right into prairie fiction and the redneck Western local tradition. The Calgary Stampede! What could be more regional and more Canadian than that? What image of the Canadian West would be more powerful in the collective unconscious of the nation?

Cotton candy fills the air, and people duck flying corn on the cob or are splattered with wet smacks of grease and salt. We spin tighter, tighter, an infinite source of wind and dust. The roaring howl of dust devil turned tornado. The wind we churn flings cowboy hats to Winnipeg, Victoria, Montreal, as far as Charlottetown. 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.

And I find it. I find it. That smooth clear space where the animal and I are pure as light and sound. Where stars turn liquid and you can taste sweet nectar in your mouth. The glide of the animal in your heart and in your lungs and the very blood of your body. Heat of the bull between your legs, riding on a crest of power. Tension and pleasure as fine as a silken thread. The moment of such sweet purity, it brings tears to your throat, your eyes. Makes your lips tremble (Goto, 1994: 219).

The scene is extremely powerful because of its sexual connotations. The episode is experienced with the intensity of an orgasm, and the language used to describe the touch of the animal and the movement is unmistakably sensual and erotic.

With this, the grandmother's narrative framework meets the grand-daughter's, figured, as I have said, as a post-orgasmic conversation between the two lovers. (note 9) In the context of the metaphoric reading of the sexual encounter that I have proposed, Naoe's success as a bullrider may signify her final appropriation of the Western Canadian tradition, her intimate fusion with the bull symbolizing the ultimate identification of woman and land, of culture and territory. "Naoe has beaten the Albertan redneck at his own game", writes Mari Sasano in this context (1998: 51). "[S]he is not only a rodeo star, but also a successful inhabitant of her environment, no problem. She has infiltrated the ranks. While furiously not white Canadian, she fully embraces and occupies aspects of that culture that please her" (Sasano, 1998: 51). The frantic movement is also sharply opposed, as I have said, to the immobility portrayed in *Obasan*. And with this, the text also appropriates and rewrites an essential part of Japanese Canadian culture.

Still, I would argue that the character's success is not complete, for her symbolic entrance into the mainstream tradition seems possible only through her wearing a mask that covers her (slanted) eyes, the most prominent visual difference in the discursive construction of the Asian subject. In other words, her figurative access to the discourses of power is sanctioned

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on condition that she remains hidden, that her body is concealed. Naoe's attitude defies the structures of age, gender and culture, but the efficacy of her actions is questioned by a simultaneous erasure of the very visual traits that have constructed her as other in terms of the above identity categories. This problem becomes obvious by the way the Calgary Stampede organizers introduce the enigmatic rider through the loudspeakers:

“Ladies and gentlemen! I've just received a special bulletin. There's word that The Purple Mask has been seen near the chutes! Now for those of you who've never heard of The Purple Mask, you folks from out of town, The Purple Mask is a mysterieerious bullrider who shows up at the Calgary Stampede and gives bullriding a whole new meaning. No one knows who he is, where he comes from. He doesn't even have a pro card. But lordly, can he ride! He just showed up one year and he's been around ever since. Only takes one ride. Never had a wreck. Plumb mysterious. The Purple Mask is a legend in these parts come Stampede time, and you're going to get your money's worth when you see this cowboy ride!”
(Goto, 1994: 216-217).

That the organizers assume that the unidentified Purple Mask is a white cowboy is indicative of the extent to which ethnocentric practices still dominate the construction of the national subject in Canada, subtly applying to it normalizing codes of gender, race, and culture. It seems necessary then to take

out the mask. One way of doing so is by writing fictional texts that shake our expectations as majoritized readers, forcing us to rethink subject categories. Another form of fight against the veiled continuation of discriminatory practices may be through the production of critical activities that refuse the division between mainstream and minority. We have seen how *Chorus of Mushrooms* is definitely located within the Asian Canadian field of writing, particularly, although not exclusively, because of its self-conscious engagement with *Obasan*. Goto's text would also draw promising connections with Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990), Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony* (1995), Kerri Sakamoto's *The Electrical Field* (1998) or Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* (1996), texts with which it is firmly contributing to the formation of an outstanding Asian Canadian corpus.

But my point is that the novel could also be analysed in relation to a number other texts of the Canadian tradition, which it implicitly or explicitly echoes. The portrait of a girl growing up in a Canadian small town has certainly significant connections with Alice Munro's short stories, and there are moments in *Chorus of Mushrooms* that unmistakably join Murasaki to the character of Rose in Munro's *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) . Or, the exploration of the juxtaposition between

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feminism and region could find fruitful parallels in the works of Margaret Laurence or Aritha van Herk. Besides, as I have already suggested, Goto's figuration of narrative desire as sexual desire has been proposed by other prairie writers such as Kristjana Gunnars in *The Substance of Forgetting* (1992) or van Herk in *No Fixed Address* (1987), always in connection to the dis/identification of woman and land. Elsewhere, Goto's feminist rewriting of (Japanese and Canadian) folk sources would parallel similar strategies in the writing of Margaret Atwood or Audrey Thomas. A critical reading of the ways in which Goto's text relates to any of these other texts of the Canadian tradition would probably overthrow multicultural literary categories, or would rather give them a new, truer meaning, by compelling us to look at the Canadian literary tradition as a growing field of multiple traditions and cultures, of texts grafted onto texts. Incidentally, there is a scene in *Chorus of Mushrooms* that may be read as producing a beautiful image of that process of grafting. Shinji walks in the living room of the family house from the mushroom farm with something in his hands and offers it to Naoe, who touches the gift and is marvelled by its firm and soft texture:

It is a mushroom. Bigger, than my two fists held together and rich with the scent of soil. But this mushroom, somewhere, somehow, two spores must have melded together [sic], because there is a

huge bulge on the main body of the stem, a two-headed mushroom with two possible umbrellas filled with gills of tiny spores. I hold the mushroom in my crack-lined palms and breathe in deep, the smell of growing (Goto, 1994: 74).

With her sensual description, Naoe is unknowingly proposing the way for Canadian literature to get out of the impasse created by too much (multi)cultural self-consciousness and identity politics. The field may be considered in this figurative context as a multi-headed mushroom, its different cultures growing by contact with one another. Only through that rhizomatous perspective may it develop as a healthy area of creativity and research. Canadian literature is/as a chorus of mushrooms.

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2. Official efforts in such a direction should not be overlooked. Take, for instance, the list of the Governor General’s Literary Awards of the last fifteen years. Nino Ricci or Rohinton Mistry became largely known in the 1990s because of their fictional works being recipient of this important literary prize, also awarded in the same decade to novels by more established Canadian writers such as Michael Ondaatje, Carol Shields, Jane Urquhart or Rudy Wiebe.
3. Although most critics have identified the presence of this erotic rhetorics in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, none has seen the possibility of interpreting the reading act as a love act between text and reader in a Barthesian fashion (1975). This, however, has been put into practice by other Canadian novels with which Goto’s implicitly relates, such as *No Fixed Address* by Aritha van Herk (1987) or *The Substance of*

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Forgetting by Kristjana Gunnars (1992), and appears as a strong interpretative possibility in our case.

4. Many critics in Canada have tried to establish possible points of connection between literature and ethnicity. This has resulted in the articulation of various fictional structures that have been called “the ethnic plot”, “the immigrant story”, and the like. The common assumption is that so-called ethnic texts tend to be autobiographical and unmistakably employ a realist form of representation. See the development of this argument between the late 1970s and the early 1990s in Mandel (1977), Kroetsch (1985) and Palmer (1990).

5. Goto herself acknowledges her sources at the end of the book, namely, Richard Dorson's *Folk Legends of Japan* (1981) and Julie Pig-gott's *Japanese Mythology* (1991). See Beauregard's essay (1995-96) for an analysis of this indirect use of Japanese sources in *Chorus of Mushrooms*.

6. See Glenn Deer's excellent analysis of the media coverage, in September 1999, of two completely different events played by Asian immigrants: the capturing of a boat trying to sneak in Chinese immigrants in British Columbia, and the appointment of Canada's new Governor General, Adrienne Clarkson, a former Hong Kong immigrant. The subtle connection on the media of the two events proves, according to Deer, “how people of visible Asian descent cannot escape a label that makes them less Canadian than their caucasian counterparts. The Asian label is not one that Clarkson went seeking—it was applied to her in order to promote the image of Canadian social inclusiveness: however, the label both professes the mobility of the individual while

limiting it by implying she is somehow less Canadian because of her refugee past” (1999: 11).

7. According to Dorson (1981: 68-82), the *tengu* is a demon figure in Japanese folk tales, often represented with a large, round, red nose.

8. Although Miki is here discussing the work of Fred Wah, his statement about the discursive production of the Asian Canadian subject are relevant to our analysis. One way in which *Chorus of Mushrooms* subverts the power of visual codes is by naturalizing Naoe’s English, improbably unaccented, while marking Tengu’s words with a parodic cowboy accent, thus reversing subject positions and shaking, with it, our characterological expectations.

9. The two frameworks are often confused along with the deliberate confusion of the two narrators’ identities. This confusion would reach its climax, as we have seen, when Naoe renames herself as Purple. In this sense, the final scene seems deliberately ambiguous, for the mysterious Purple Mask is described as both carrying a *furoshiki* (Goto, 1994: 216), which makes us think of Naoe, and wearing jeans (218), which the reader identifies with Murasaki.