

## The Unresolved Spaces of Diasporic Desire: An Interdisciplinary Critique of Haruko Okano's Work

EVA DARIAS-BEAUTELL  
Universidad de La Laguna  
edariasb@ull.es

This article explores, through the analysis of recent Asian Canadian critical and creative work, the unresolved nature of diasporic modes of cultural production in contemporary Canada. It starts by offering a metacritical discussion of Asian Canadian literary scholarship, with a focus on those works that define the field in terms of the quandary between resistance to various modes of cooption and the residual desire to belong. The second part of the article proposes an interdisciplinary critique of the poet and multimedia artist Haruko Okano's work as providing an instance of these contradictions, as well as exemplifying the potential of creative practices to provide answers to critical and theoretical impasses. Okano's disconcerting writing and artwork have invariably revolved around the unresolved condition of cultural hybridity, often betraying the traps as well as the possibilities of the search for modes of expression that fall outside normativity. Her production may thus be read metacritically, in that it thematizes and speaks to the theoretical debates that surround the condition of the diasporic subject in Canada.

Keywords: Haruko Okano; Asian Canadian Studies; Canadian literature; interdisciplinarity; diaspora

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## El espacio inconcluso del deseo diaspórico: Una crítica interdisciplinar de la obra de Haruko Okano

Este ensayo explora, a través de un análisis de la obra crítica y creativa asiático-canadiense, la naturaleza inconclusa de los modos diaspóricos de producción cultural en Canadá. Se ofrece, en primer lugar, un debate metacrítico de los artículos existentes en el campo, con especial atención a aquellos que lo definen en términos de un dilema entre la resistencia hacia varios modos de apropiación y el deseo residual de pertenencia nacional. La segunda parte del ensayo propone una crítica interdisciplinar de la obra de la poeta y artista multimedia Haruko Okano como un ejemplo tanto de las contradicciones como de las posibilidades que la creación diaspórica puede aportar al impasse teórico-crítico. La desconcertante obra de Okano siempre ha versado sobre la condición indecisa del hibridismo cultural, desvelando a menudo las cortapisas, pero también el potencial de buscar modos expresivos que trasciendan la normatividad. Su producción, por tanto, se puede interpretar desde una perspectiva metacrítica, ya que tematiza y contribuye a los debates teóricos que existen alrededor del sujeto diaspórico en Canadá.

Palabras clave: Haruko Okano; estudios asiático-canadienses; literatura canadiense; interdisciplinarietà; diáspora

In her essay “Diasporic Citizenship: Contradictions and Possibilities for Canadian Literature,” Lily Cho discusses the profound dissonance between the notions of diaspora and citizenship and outlines the implications of that dissonance for articulating the field of Canadian literature. Cho argues that this disparity “opens up a recognition of the contingencies surrounding our choice for citizenship. Diaspora allows us to be up against citizenship, to embrace it even as we hold it at some distance, to recognize it as both disabling and enabling” (2007, 108). Weaving this tension into the uneasy relationship between so-called majority and minority literatures in Canada, Cho proposes the need to explore “the messy places” of national narratives (where diaspora and citizenship clash against each other) “in order to enable memory to tear away at the coherence of national forgettings” (109). Such aporic and dissonant scrutiny of the notion of diasporic citizenship would reveal how histories of dislocation and racialization contradict and undermine narratives of belonging, a perspective which Cho claims would create a productive critical space from which to understand the contradictions in as well as the possibilities for Canadian literature.<sup>1</sup>

Implicit in Cho’s argument is an approach to Canadian culture which is largely affected by the shifting contexts of present identitary formations through the overlapping of local and global networks, often leading to what Roy Miki, writing about the future of CanLit, has called “a multiplicity of unresolved desires” (2011, 274). The current article takes a specific angle on that shift and intends to explore, through the analysis of recent Asian Canadian critical and creative work, the unresolved nature of diasporic modes of cultural production in contemporary Canada. I will start by offering a metacritical discussion of Asian Canadian literary scholarship, focusing on those works that define the field in terms of the quandary between resistance to cooption and the desire to belong. In the second part of my article, I propose an interdisciplinary reading of the poet and multimedia artist Haruko Okano’s work as representing such a predicament and, at the same time, as showing the potential that creative practices may have in providing a way out of critical and theoretical impasses. Okano’s disconcerting writing and artwork have invariably revolved around the unresolved condition of cultural hybridity, and this trajectory has regularly exposed both the lures and the prospects of the search for modes of expression that fall outside normativity. Her production may be read metacritically in that it thematizes and speaks to the theoretical debates that have surrounded the condition of the diasporic subject in Canada. Paradoxically, her work has received almost no critical attention to date.

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My choice of Asian Canadian as the field in which to examine these contradictions is meant as a case in point, for, as Smaro Kamboureli has argued, the field “has emerged as a powerful cultural and socio-political sign” in Canada. Moreover, she asserts, “its gradual emergence has also helped re-shape the overall understanding of Canadian literature as an institution, and thus raise important questions about knowledge production and power, literature and the nation-state, as well as diaspora and postcoloniality” (2012, 43). For Roy Miki, *Asian Canadian* has come to signify a space of transformative possibilities within the larger field of literary studies, since its “mirage-like form” may provoke “a radical rethinking of critical methodologies that can result in progressive social transformation” (2011, 266-67). Drawing on Miki’s argument, the status of Asian Canadian texts in relation to CanLit could be defined by the subsidiary relation that the first term, *Asian*, installs in the normative canon alluded to by *Canadian*. It is that implicitly *hyphenated* existence, Tara Lee asserts, “that disconnects [Asian Canadian literature] from and yet connects it to the nation and its literature. This position leaves Asian Canadian literature in a state of unfulfilled desire as it strives to belong to something in which it seems for ever marked” (2006, 5). Christopher Lee considers that structure of unfulfilled desire in terms of lateness, a condition that, being intrinsic to the field, prevents the latter’s full emergence: “In a reversal of the logic of ‘being on time’ whereby an academic discipline ‘catches up’ to its object of study, what becomes clear here is the illusoriness of the very desire, on the part of Asian Canadian Studies, to finally coincide with its own object” (2007, 4).<sup>2</sup> In this article, I wish to explore the space produced by the lack of coincidence implicit in the structure of desire as this lack applies to the distance between the creative work and critical expectation.

### 1. CRITICISM’S RESIDUAL DESIRE: ASIAN CANADIAN PRODUCTION

Much has been written about the failure of official multicultural policies to undo normative definitions of Canadianness. Some critics have stressed the need to devise modes of cultural difference that do not comply with multiculturalism’s sanctioned spaces for diasporic representation. In the field of Asian Canadian literature, Roy Miki’s critical work has been instrumental in drawing attention to the dangers of the normalization and appropriation of difference by both literary and cultural institutions and market forces.<sup>3</sup> But, although writers and critics alike have repeatedly proposed (or demanded from within their textual practice) an analysis that transcends systemic reading expectations based on

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Lee suggests looking at the field of Asian Canadian Studies through “its problem of lateness” (2007, 1), which he defines, following Donald Goellnitch, “not as a matter of failure but rather as an affective structure produced by the field’s ‘protracted birth’” (2007, 1-2; see also Goellnitch 2000). Other critics have defined the whole field of Canadian literature in terms of its belatedness (see Szeman 2000).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Miki (2008; 2011); the latter is a recent compilation of his most important essays on this topic. See also Lai (2004; 2008); Wong (2005); Cho (2007); Beaugregard (2008); Ty and Verduyn (2008); Cuder, Martín and Villegas (2011); all of whom draw more or less explicitly on Miki’s seminal work.

the authors' racial/cultural backgrounds, these efforts have not completely succeeded in their goal of liberating minoritized Canadian writing from the burden of representation (signalled by what Ty and Verduyn [2008] have called the "autoethnographic" expectation and the ensuing thematic critical practices).

The most traditional critical approach to Asian Canadian literature seems paradigmatic of this predicament. Novels by Joy Kogawa, Wayson Choy and Anita Rau Badami have often flowed into the mainstream of CanLit as representatives of the diversity of Canadian literary production and thus, implicitly, of the success of the multicultural project of the nation. Together with their works, largely autoethnographic, these authors have also become tokens of a model minority within a much wider institutional framework that remains largely unchanged in its intrinsic whiteness. They are, in other words, marketed and read within a more or less obvious racialized framework, and their arguably mainstream position is invariably encumbered with the burden of representation of the Japanese, Chinese and Indian Canadian communities they respectively come from and write about. In turn, this has evolved into what Guy Beauregard metonymically calls "Kogawa criticism," by which he refers to "the particular contradictions facing Canadian literary studies over the past two decades as critics have attempted to confront the difficult implications of reading a 'racist past' in a 'multicultural present'—that is, as they have attempted the genuinely difficult task of transforming the discipline of Canadian literary criticism to address representations of racialization and racist exclusion in Canada" (see Beauregard, "After *Obasan*," qtd. in Beauregard 2008, 8-9).

Genuine and difficult as these critical efforts must have been when they were made, they often failed to produce the desired transformation of the field of Canadian literature. In the 1990s, Beauregard comments, there was "a dramatic proliferation of articles on texts such as *Obasan*," yet this was not matched by a "similarly dramatic reflexive turn that could question the unselfconscious uses of Kogawa's novel and other Asian Canadian cultural texts as signifiers of multicultural inclusiveness in English studies in Canada" (2008, 9). As Beauregard's argument intimates, the tendency to read *multiculturally* is not necessarily inscribed in the texts themselves (although this may arguably be the case), but rather ensues from critical practices, market forces and the institutional powers associated with both.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I offer a metacritical review of some of the most interesting practices that have tackled this predicament and attempted to circumvent what may at first glance look like a critical impasse.

Reading and writing practices in Canada have often been torn between their resistance to cooption through diverse modes of nation narration and "their residual desire for

<sup>4</sup> For an engaging and exhaustive critique of Beauregard's argument, see Kamboureli's "(Reading Closely) Calling for the Formation of Asian Canadian Studies," where she complains that Beauregard "does not engage directly with how Canadian literature and Asian Canadian studies might interpolate each other methodologically, as well as in terms of inter/disciplinary and institutional formations" (2012, 56). In this sense, Beauregard might be practicing the type of criticism that he himself finds fault with. The debate, although highly relevant, is well beyond the purpose of this article.

national affirmation” (Lee 2006, 5). Crucial to this dilemma has been the role of official multiculturalism in the reproduction of a domesticated version of identity differences within the nation-state (see Kamboureli 2000). It seems now clear that, as Tara Lee has argued, “the willingness of designated ethnic minorities to perform their difference for the multicultural state attests to the ability of the state to co-opt the racialized body into stabilizing its identity reproductions” (2006, 11).<sup>5</sup> But if those *overethnicized* modes of writing and reading Asian Canadian production have proven co-optive and ultimately unsatisfactory, the opposite, that is, the erasure of the racial and cultural difference of diasporic texts, may well have perverse results. In this regard, the case of Vancouver writer Evelyn Lau comes to mind as a well-known instance of potential perversion, as the conscious avoidance of a Chinese Canadian identity in her writing has also often produced reading practices that may reinforce racist stereotypes and replicate normative narratives of the nation.<sup>6</sup> As Rita Wong asserts in her discussion of Lau’s controversial case,

the disavowal of race and culture appeared to work to her publishers’ benefit in that it appealed to a perceived “mainstream” audience. The general tendency to disavow or avoid race in Lau’s writing yields a number of possible readings: one is a refusal to be pigeonholed as an “ethnic” writer, and another is that this work represents a yearning for acceptance that translates into assimilation, which is accordingly validated and rewarded. In the absence of racialized characters, the normalized power relations at work tend to default her characters into whiteness. The machine is larger than whatever Lau’s intentions might be. (2005, 54)

Notable in their attempt to circumvent the logics of this seemingly critical dichotomy, and marking a firm departure from either form of criticism, two special issues of the academic journal *Canadian Literature* were published in 1999 (edited by Glenn Deer) and 2008 (edited by Guy Beauregard) that provided a fresh critical look at Asian Canadian Studies. Significantly, a comparative glance between them would unfold the shift in the critical practices that have shaped the discipline of Canadian literature in the past fifteen years, from the exhaustion of identity politics to an interest in the structural discourses that frame and assign the location of (diasporic) cultural production in Canada. Thus, whereas in the 1999 issue, Deer claims to be concerned with moving “beyond the constraints of racial categories” and “reasserting” the identity of “Asian North-American writers” “against the stereotypes of the public imagination” (14), in the 2008 issue, Beauregard and other prominent critics set out to counteract, undo and rethink the field of Canadian literature with a focus on the racialization processes at work at its base, which prevent

<sup>5</sup> Lee is echoing Donna Haraway’s ideas on the reproduction of the national Self (1991, 61).

<sup>6</sup> Lau’s choice for racial self-effacement has been the source of much controversy in Canada. She came to prominence in 1994 when she accused the organizers of the Writing Thru Race Conference of practicing reverse racism (see Lai 2008, 94-101). For a detailed analysis of the controversy surrounding the WTR Conference, see Sehdev (2002).

minoritized writing from fully entering the field. Combined, these two issues marked, I would suggest, an important methodological shift and shaped the direction of subsequent critical production in the field.

This crucial shift is towards a type of analysis that does not replicate state ideology. Some critics are redirecting their focus back to the practice of close reading, intent on avoiding the constraints of the institutional loop and in the belief that any paradigm shift must come from, and be inscribed in, the texts themselves. One of the most interesting literary modes to be born from the exhaustion of identity politics is the explicit contestation of the normative processes of the reproduction of national identity through the racialized body in Asian Canadian texts by women writers. Some texts enact this resistance by claiming a Harawayan cyborg identity which, by definition, empowers the racialized female body in that it enables unexpected critiques of national, racial, and gender forms of normativity, as in Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* or Hiromi Goto's *The Kappa Child* and *Hopeful Monsters* (see Miki 2009; Lee 2006; also Martín-Lucas 2012). In fact, implicit in Donna Haraway's articulation of cyborg subjectivities is an emphasis on the materiality of the in-between that, Tara Lee claims, well fits both Lai's and Goto's production of textuality "at points of border contestation" (2006, 27; and see Haraway 1991). Moreover, as a result of their emphasis on social critique, the texts' identitary logics are refused conclusion, their referential promise permanently postponed (see Miki 2001; also Lee 2007, 3). These textual practices demand a transnational perspective toward diasporic Canadian texts since their self-conscious analyses of racialization processes are almost always placed at the intersection of local and global spaces (as well as vis-à-vis not only a normative whiteness but also gender and other identitary constituents). In being produced "outside the womb," as Tara Lee argues in reference to the texts' tendency to undo the normative slots of racialized identities within the nation-state, these contesting modes of writing advance an alternative framework for rereading Asian Canadian literature (Lee 2006, 27; also Miki 2000, 2001 and 2008).

At the same time there is reassessment of previous Asian Canadian works that remain intriguing in their refusal of self-explanation. Illustrating this methodological shift, in his essay "Asian Canadian, eh?" (2008), Donald Goellnicht shows how the multidisciplinary works of Roy Kiyooka and Fred Wah can be viewed as paradigmatic of the contradictions attending the rubric Asian Canadian and the tricky processes of (minoritized) literary canon formation. Goellnicht convincingly explains how, by focusing on the local and the transnational dimensions of art, both Kiyooka and Wah were ahead of their times in that they implicitly articulated a politics of race that transcended the binary structures of identity politics. In both cases, their interests fell beyond the borders of cultural nationalism, within which the formation of the necessarily minoritized Asian Canadian literature had been designed to take shape (see also Miki 2000, 56). Goellnicht further argues that "their often difficult multi-generic experiments and their particular concern with innovative usages of language explain in part their belated recognition as Asian Canadian artists, but these very

experiments constitute, to a considerable degree, Kiyooka's and Wah's racial politics" (2008, 72).<sup>7</sup>

The archival work presently being conducted as a result of this renewed interest in writers that had fallen, as it were, outside the box, has repositioned and modified the terms of Asian Canadian production itself, as well as its place within the larger context of Canadian culture. A rich instance of this is provided by the ongoing reassessment of Fred Wah's critical work, and, more specifically, his approach to the diasporic condition. Central to Wah's concern was the innovation of the form of the so-called ethnic writing in Canada by means of an "alienethnic" poetics (2000, 52), or a form of poetics that complicated the representation of cultural and racial difference in a practical sense by introducing linguistic (and identitary) fluidity. In this way, Wah, writing in the late 1980s, suggests, "the culturally marginalized writer will engineer approaches to language and form that enable a particular residue (genetic, cultural, biographical) to become kinetic and valorized" (2000, 51). An alienethnic poetics would open up the question of representation to include the reader, since, as Beaugard contends, it invites, "readers and critics to reflect upon what is potentially at stake in reading representations of diasporic histories and identities" (2005, 135). As such, it presents itself as a valid strategy through which to read and write the texts of diasporic Canada today.

Additionally, to revalorize Fred Wah's critical and creative work also implies a reframing of the threadbare debates of form versus content, or aesthetics versus politics, which have marred the field for years, leading to the implicit privilege of thematic criticism. For Wah, linguistic experimentation is always enmeshed in political action, which explains why form may be an essential constituent of racial identity. As Jeff Derksen has argued, the fractured form of much of Wah's writing signals a radical poetics in that it is identity politics "within rather than through language." This resists "the containable performances of race, class, and gender and rewrites the limits of identity," given that the refusal to abide by linguistic or literary form is also a refusal to abide by forms of racial oppression (1995-96, 72). The fact that his interest in formal experimentation has, until relatively recently, prevented Wah's production from being studied under the auspices of Asian Canadian writing betrays the thematic and restrictive focus behind the rubric. Moreover, Wah's connection with the Tish poets may have been seen as an obstacle to ethnicized thematic readings of his work, for, as Smaro Kamboureli has noted, "a lot of the *Tish* work about language, form, genre, and localism developed ways of reading the nation-state against the grain, hence the resistance they encountered at the time within conventional nationalist discourses" (2012, 66). The renewed critical attention on these works shows the extent to which they hinted at the exhaustion of certain forms of producing minoritized writing in Canada, as well as the need to inscribe forms of difference that destabilize the very notion of cultural difference by refusing institutional cooption.

<sup>7</sup> However, Goellnitch's Asian North American approach has been the source of some disagreement amongst critics. See Kamboureli (2012), for a powerful critique of Goellnitch's terms and methodology.

In his essay “Can Asian Adian? Reading the Scenes of Asian Canadian,” Roy Miki calls for an ethics of reading that is able to promote a paradigm shift. The call, he writes, is “for critical practices that can negotiate the tensions between the material conditions of textual production that give a text its singularity and its power to see and the normative conditions of reception that shape the subject positions of readers and thereby influence what gets to be seen” (2001, 74). Later, in “A Poetics of the Hyphen: Fred Wah, or the Ethics of Reading ‘Asian Canadian’ Writing,” Miki responds to his own call by proposing Wah’s notion of the hyphen as “the most appropriate sign for a text that performs the critical limits of socially sanctioned identity formations, even while it opens the door to cultural, familial, and personal narratives that have been silenced by racialization, displacements and colonial history” (2009, 115). For Miki, the highest political and aesthetic potential of the hyphen as trope resides in its capacity to resist identitary closure (2009, 118): “Readers are then challenged to create critical frameworks and interpretative methods that will not appropriate [the hyphen’s] quixotic powers and effects to service institutional ends” (2009, 121). In what follows, I wish to read Haruko Okano’s poetry and multimedia work as paradigmatic of the contradictions as well as the potential involved in the production of diasporic identity as hyphen, that is, identity as a constant process of undermining its own referential impulse. Starting her career in the 1990s, a key decade in the transformation of identitary discourses in Canada, Okano’s enigmatic and often disconcerting work exposes the messy areas of cultural representation, oscillating between the desire and the resistance to bridge the distance between diaspora and citizenship. In her interdisciplinary search for modes of representation that do not replicate the assigned modes of diasporic belonging, Okano’s case is unique. Indeed, her work may be read metacritically in that it traces, from the creative position, the theoretical debates discussed above.

## 2. HARUKO OKANO’S TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

Haruko Okano is a Vancouver-based poet, performer, multimedia artist and activist. Born in Toronto to *Nisei* parents, she was mostly raised by white Canadians at various foster homes where she was removed from all contact with her cultural heritage.<sup>8</sup> These circumstances have always marked her textual and artistic production with a tendency towards the unfathomable facets of cultural identity, the explicit focus of her first works: “My Asian-ness is a secret even to me,” reads the last line of her poem “Sansei” (1992, 42). In the early 1990s, at the peak of the cultural discourses of identity politics in Canada, Okano (2010) expressed her scepticism of those discourses as well as the ambivalence surrounding her own Canadianness: “As a visible minority in the arts, current identity politics and the movement towards self-representation have led to increased opportunities; however, I have found its influence getting in the way of my own creative development.

<sup>8</sup> *Nisei* means “second generation.” Okano would be a *Sansei*, or a third-generation Japanese Canadian.

Instead of feeling culturally liberated, I felt I had stepped out of one restrictive description into another.” Her work from this period is accordingly obsessed with the notion of identitary frames and cultural stereotypes, openly drawing the reader/viewer’s attention to the rigidity of legitimized boundaries of representation:

In a house I do not own  
 In a country of isolation  
 In a land that belongs to others  
 I sit on folded legs, bent by cultural impulse.

Even in my body so assimilated  
 so pressured by Canadian history  
 my stomach sighs with rice and bancha.

Toes turned in to kick aside kimono hem  
 a certain walk locked into limbs  
 so strong as to defy western influence, and yet  
 I have never been to the land of the sun. (“Sansei,” 1992, 41)

Yet the poet’s own stand towards dichotomous identitary positions seems ambivalent, for stemming from the poem’s words is a query: How can a third generation Japanese Canadian who has been brought up in non-Japanese foster homes have inherited the body postures of her ancestral culture? Okano may be working with a notion of tradition not as essential inheritance but as the result of specific cultural practices, some of which are imposed by dominant discourses. In that case, there is the possibility of an ironic reading of the cultural essentialism initially expressed in the “toes turned in to kick aside kimono hem,” the “certain walk locked into limbs.” However, as Marilyn Iwama wonders in her thoughtful study of the notion of tradition in Japanese Canadian culture, “what happens when we consider the expression of perceived tradition as one step in a process of constructing and defining certain events or ideals as ‘traditional?’ In this case, such events and ideals may be made imperative by historical incidents, and so achieve status as essential components of cultural identity” (1994, 13). The line between essentialist and constructionist approaches to cultural identity seems fine, but each option leads us in a completely different direction. I would like to turn to Okano’s 1992 multimedia work *Come Spring: Journey of a Sansei Series*, where the poem above appears, since it provides a telling instance of such aporias involved in the process of diasporic representation in the midst of hegemonic multiculturalism.

Mixing a wide range of materials, and combining poetry, autobiographical prose and artwork, the monograph offers, through the progress of the four seasons, an intimate and lyrical account of Okano’s own life story, from a relatively happy early childhood (“Summer”) to the first encounter with racial prejudice (“Fall”) to the verbal and physical violence

suffered in various white foster homes (“Winter”) to a sense of healing and regeneration through art and activism (“Spring”). The publication was funded by the Heritage, Cultures and Languages Program of Multiculturalism and Citizenship of Canada, and, in many ways, the work seems to replicate normative approaches to minoritized identity. Yet, in my opinion, the particular combination of texts and images seems to rather build up a tension between the work’s meaning and critical and institutional expectation, whose overall effect is to overthrow the resolatory intent of state multiculturalism. On the one hand, the autoethnographic tone fits well within the assigned frames of representation in the early 1990s, and the teleological emphasis, signaled by the lyrical use of the four seasons, would seem to confirm the illusion of an identitary resolution based on the recognition of cultural specificity within a multicultural nation-state. This celebratory vision would be supported by such poems as “Haru” (“Spring”):

Hope rises.

Come spring,  
when rivers swell  
forests grow lush in greenery,  
beasts stir from slumber and  
seek each other out.

My spirit is reborn (1992, 51)

On the other, however, the poem’s contiguous location with the piece *The Gift of Heritage and Culture*, where the decorated and heavily inscribed back of a human figure appears inside a wooden box-like structure, problematizes the above interpretation.<sup>9</sup> That the very artist (unwittingly?) provokes an aporic moment could signal the extent and spectrum of those traps. After explaining that the Japanese calligraphy in the work corresponds to the history of her own family and is taken from the registry of the village in Japan where they came from, she claims that the piece represents the regenerative power of spring (1992, 44-45). Indeed, the assertion has a troubling effect, as the graphic clash between the work’s title, echoing the language of the nation-state, and the actual choice of images, text and materials clearly alert the viewer about the traps of institutional cooption, thereby highlighting the rigidity of available identitary locations.

Additionally, despite the fact that the gradual transition from highly dichotomous to hybrid approaches to cultural identity is announced in the work’s cyclical structure, this remains unresolved. Poems like “Tongue-Tied” speak of a burning repression and of the impossibility of diasporic subjectivity:

<sup>9</sup> This piece as well as the rest of the works I will be discussing below can be seen on Okano’s personal website: [www.harukookano.com](http://www.harukookano.com).

Ghost words, like ice cubes  
 jammed against the back of my teeth.  
 Cold pain shoots up the roots of my teeth  
 into my brain. (1992, 30)

In this case, it is their silent nature that endows the ghost words with the ability to produce pain. Later, the renewed attempts at the articulation of a third space are not free from oppression and violence:

My syntax is Japanese-Canadian,  
 formed by generations of hushed voices.  
 Pressed white,  
 like manju. Pulling softly  
 from lips barely parted.  
 A sweetness of language lost. ("Sansei," 1992, 42)

The recurrent production of a highly racialized body in these poems marks an explicit engagement with normative processes of identity construction within the nation. But, in its highlighting of an unresolved tension, the residual syntax (the "language lost") mars the possibility of interpreting the overall work in triumphalist identitary terms and points to the unbridgeable distance between diaspora and citizenship. Besides, *White Rice* ("Winter"), a multimedia piece consisting of a wooden female sculpture of Asian complexion holding chopsticks and a bowl filled with tiny family photographs against the backdrop of a classic Japanese stamp, explores that distance like no other work. Visual and textual images impose highly dichotomous identitary options on the wooden body frame, signifying the extreme violence implied in the processes of cultural assimilation to a normative whiteness: while the superimposed images on the figure's head and face represent the glamorous female North American blondes that the artist grew up with, a text about cosmetic eye surgery (to westernize Asian eyelids) and breast augmentation is inscribed on the wooden skin. A "spirit curtain," meant in traditional Japan to brush the top of one's head and cleanse one's energy when passaging between rooms, is set in the doorway reinforcing the dichotomous representation of the two cultures. "I can't go into that world of Japan," admits Okano, "nor can I ever see Japan uncontaminated by my North American experience. At the same time, I am not free of the stereotyped imaged of the Japanese here, nor of the Eurocentric value judgments placed on me and my people" (1992, 35). Hence the work's exploration of the power of visibility vis-à-vis the marketing and consumption of racialized and gendered subjects for a still dominantly white male gaze (a recurrent issue in Asian Canadian works since this gaze till figures as a major form of institutionalization of racial and gender difference). Additionally, there is a self-conscious use of the connection between the racial and

the edible that has become a common means of probing the commodification of race within Asian Canadian production (to which I will return below). But what makes *White Rice* resonate today is its representation of the racialized subject's complicity with just those practices of institutionalization and commodification of racialized identity it portrays.

To a certain extent, then, *Come Spring* is typical of the complex and contradictory discourses generated by official multiculturalism, and the artists' own responses to, and possible concurrence with, them. At the same time, it is the presence of those unresolved moments of diasporic identity that endows the work with critical interest as it makes its implicit attempt to tackle the messy locations of Canadianness remain fresh.

A look at Okano's subsequent work evinces her own awareness of those traps and her continuous search for modes of representation that, being "minority-wise" (Miki 2001, 62), manage to escape the commodification of cultural difference. This has led her to experiment with much more radical forms of art such as in *Transvisceral Borders* (1997), a time-lapse process-based installation composed of mixed materials including fungi, natural latex and an odd collection of objects made of animal viscera, hair, and teeth. In this work, the artist's avoidance of textual modes of representation in favour of (arguably) more material media may disclose a desire to circumvent down-trodden text-based paths for the articulation of diasporic identity. Moreover, the explicit emphasis that some of Okano's key pieces place on time-lapsed natural processes, which constantly transform the installation's overall appearance and, in so doing, the work's potential meaning, sabotages the viewer's expectation of identitary themes. Yet, as Robin Laurence suggests (2007, 3), Okano's attention to the intricate modes of articulation of the diasporic continues to function as a subtle subtext.

Exploring the role of the skin as both container and threshold of identity, *Transvisceral Borders*' interpretative possibilities varied as the objects were being transformed by the decomposing fungus. According to the artist, the focus was the human skin and its "ambiguous role as both a 'barrier' and a 'link'. Perceptual shifts occurring through *Transvisceral Borders* acted as a catalyst through which [she] began to think differently about cultural heritage and ethnicity" (Okano 2010). The installation was designed to be touched, smelled and watched, since it incorporated texture, odor and time-lapse elements such as the decay of the fungus. Visitors were thus implicitly invited to attend the gallery more than once in order to achieve a more complete perspective on the piece's signification. Yet each visit was designed to contribute a certain degree of confusion and bring about a different, possibly contradictory, interpretation each time:

Only if you took the time to watch and explore over several visits would you have been able to witness the subtler transformation of nature in movement as the fungus and natural latex casings deepened in colour to match that of the dehydrated pig's ears, or condoms that shriveled up as the contents were spent through evaporation. The weight and fullness drained slowly away,

briefly drawing aside the curtain of illusion that separates life from death, plant from animal. (2010)

This disconcerting effect, I would argue, succeeded in drawing the visitor's attention to the extreme malleability of skin and, in so doing, to the instability of the identitary and cultural parameters often associated with it, "from the flaying of human skin to be used in lampshades and book covers by the Nazis of WWII to the Irezumi subculture of Japan where prized artwork of tattoo artists' on humans were collected by a special museum in Japan" (2010).

Okano has declared that *Transvisceral Borders* meant a turning point in her creative career, after which "instead of shaping materials around preconceived ideas, priority was given to exploring the nature of materials just on their own, allowing ideas to be generated by their process" (2010). I would further argue that this work also set the tone, elements and techniques of her later investigations of material and symbolic hybridity, for as Paula Gustafson asserts, "The ambiguities implied in *Transvisceral Borders* are embedded in the two-word title Okano devised for the exhibition. Like the symbiotic fungus chosen for her sculptures, she wordsmithed *transverse* (a situation arranged in a crosswise direction) and *visceral* (relating to inward feelings) into a hybrid descriptive, then supplemented her coined word with the us/them, inner/outer implications of borders" (1997, 38).

Implicitly understood is the possibility of applying these ideas to the representation of diasporic identity in Canada. Yet, in its undecidability, this process-based approach to the Asian Canadian paradigm would also complicate the representation of difference, shaking the present frameworks of cultural identifications and provoking what Roy Miki has called "a crisis of representation," a radical move that would necessarily "alter and transform the field of our reading practices" (Miki 2001, 75).

Okano's later projects have juggled, from various perspectives, the implications of this transformative approach to diasporic identity, putting forward a practice based on the incorporation of contradiction, the refusal of conclusion and the permanent postponement of the referential promise. Her collaborative installation and performance *High (bridi) Tea* (1998-2001), a joint text-based project with Fred Wah, explores the space of the cultural and racial hyphen (*bridi*) in those terms as fundamentally oxymoronic. Accordingly, the odd piece had a mixed reception, critics often torn between curiosity and confusion:

Okano once cultivated a type of fungus called kombucha, which was served on paper plates for her collaborative installation and performance piece with poet and writer, Fred Wah, called *High (bridi) Tea*. The piece was about racism and contamination anxiety, an oddly hilarious work utilizing lots of white bread and mold. The kombucha, which is considered an edible fungus, had grown mold during the cultivation process, which rendered it inedible. When it dried for the installation, it acquired a thin, stiff consistency with the colour and texture of leather. (Keiran 2009)

The performance, first created during an Artist's Residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in 1998, was hosted at various restaurants and venues in Vancouver. Randomly scheduled (it began when the twenty-six available seats were taken), the piece combined elements of previous works by both Okano and Wah to discuss racism and ethnocentrism through a partly serious and partly humorous autoethnographic discourse. "Our stories are told while serving up racialized words printed on white bread and pouring black tea for 26 members of the public . . . The stories focus on the struggles of assimilation and language. Participants are invited to save their slice of bread, the menu, and the waiter's bill pad" (Okano 2010). Some of the lines of the performance interpellated the participant in unexpected and uncomfortable ways:

on the edge  
 crowling up yr leg

hiding underneath  
 stuck

between the fingernails?  
 Is that a black hair in yr soup? (Okano and Wah 2000, 26)<sup>10</sup>

While some menu items highlighted the consumptive drive of identity politics ("Puffed Identity with Cream," 2000, 3), yet others denounced racial or cultural subjection ("Tied Tongue," or "Skin-Under-Gaze," 2000, 12).

Simultaneously, the performative framework emphasized the material aspects of cultural and racial hybridity as it bridged the distance between the creative subject and its public, who are turned into audience, reader, viewer and restaurant customer by the performance's requirements. In this sense, while emphasis is carefully placed on those elements that do not fit in normative definitions of Canadian culture, there is also a parallel interest in the possibilities of producing a palimpsestic aesthetics of resistance and change. This is literally signaled in the printed menu's palimpsestic structure, in which reproduced historical documents (including the 1942 RCMP Notice to Male Enemy Aliens) underlie what seems an infinite play on words, composed of poems, menu items and drawings, dictionary definitions of special words running vertical on the sides. It is also evident in the use of pidgin words; for instance, behind the superimposed "Haikala/ hai collar/low colour/hai colour/noh collar," the participant can read "but . . . / it is not founded/ on fact" (24).

A similar forked-tongue strategy could be applied to the work's use of food as a means of discussion of identitary issues and, specifically, its frequent probing of the connection between the racial and the edible. But, if *White Rice* played on such a connection to eventually expose its intrinsic violence, *High (bridi) Tea* seems to work

<sup>10</sup> I am using the special limited edition of the printed menu produced for the performance that took place at Nice Café in Vancouver on 17 November, 2000.

with a notion of food not only as a form of consumption of the ethnicized other, but also as a possible link between minoritized and majoritized cultures. In fact, as Lily Cho has shown in her study of the case of Chinese restaurants in Canadian small towns, historically, Chinese food (as well as the spaces where it was served) became “one of the few consistently available spaces of cultural interaction between Chinese immigrants and their ‘host’ communities” (2010, 12-13) and thus signified the location for negotiations between “Chineseness and Westernness” (13). Rather than being perceived as a measure and reflection of Chinese culture, the Chinese restaurant must then be analysed as “cultural site that is a productive of Chineseness, Canadianness, small town Canadian culture, and diasporic culture more broadly,” Cho affirms (13). From this viewpoint, I would argue that, in *High (bridi) Tea*, the genre of performance supplies the material and discursive sites for such cultural negotiations, although this is done to unexpected results.

In unmasking the collective assumptions underlying our daily eating experiences, the performance exposes deep discursive and contextual layers of orientalization. Yet the fact that it is the racialized subject that serves the racialized dishes problematizes the act, preventing a dichotomous reading of the piece, that is possible with *White Rice*. On the one hand, the serving moment marks the subject’s complicity in the processes that have constructed her/him as a racialized other, while on the other, the fact that the mould words make the white bread inedible, or even poisonous, turns the apparent servility of the waiting “staff” into guerrilla warfare; and as a result of the conflict between complicity and resistance, the meaning of food as cultural sign becomes inconclusive. Similarly, the performative structure involves a potentially multiracial audience in the acts of attending, sitting, reading, ordering certain items from the menu, and eventually eating the xenophobic words moulded in the slices of white bread. Yet this collaboration is bound to be incomplete in as much as the items are rendered inedible, thereby increasing the audience’s disconcert and adding a further level of undecidability to the interpretation of the work. The one thing that remains inalterable in this odd exchange is the process of the decaying kombucha, slowly eating its way through the white bread and, in transforming the piece’s appearance, constantly interrogating its meaning: that is, in its relentless movement, the kombucha literally prevents closure, the performance’s meaning never finally coinciding with its object. And, in this connection, the work itself stages the logics of lateness as an affective structure (see Lee 2007): the desire to arrive at a conclusion produces its constant deferral.

This type of work dramatizes the distance between meaning and critical expectation, between the writing/performing subject and what Miki, in the context of literary studies, calls “the formal boundaries of the text that produce the writer as subject.” In Asian Canadian texts, Miki argues, this distance “brings out the complicated internal dynamics of the shifting constraints—historical, aesthetic, intellectual, and cultural—out of which this writing appears. This textual condition helps account for

the often unnoticed but troubling tension between critical expectation and textual specificity” (2009, 117). In its process-based approach to the representation of the diasporic, Okano’s work could act as a response to Miki’s words. Her emphasis on the unstable and highly contradictory elements of cultural identity underlie her racial politics, and her attempts to transcend the boundaries of cultural assumptions and practices often push the limits of dominant critical frameworks of analysis. It is in that very tension and in the infinite contingencies that a process-based approach to cultural belonging would entail that “the messy places” of a normative Canadianness come to light.

That Okano’s latest practice has veered away from explicit discussions of the diasporic condition and towards activist and environmental forms of artistic expression may be read as a sign of the exhaustion of certain modes of cultural identification. As Okano and Wah express in a highly ambivalent moment of their performance work:

Erase...  
no more  
race,  
  
no colour.

Silence  
no more.

Colour  
E-race. (“Gomu,” Okano and Wah 2000, 17)

Yet, at the same time, Okano’s latest work confirms a continuing interest in the contradictory and inconclusive processes of identity formation, signaled by the stress on the ephemeral aspects of natural processes and the increasing need for interaction with the audience/viewer. Often betraying a tension between the need for radical self-expression and the pressure to comply, her production, I have argued here, may be interpreted on a metacritical plane, both thematizing and engaging the theoretical debates that have surrounded the diasporic subject in Canada. Intrinsic to her racial politics is, then, a definition of diasporic citizenship as “the necessary relationship between two discontinuous begged questions” (Spivak 2004, 531).<sup>11</sup> Hence the demand for critical and creative practices that remain lodged in the probing of these questions and in the unresolved spaces produced by this predicament.

<sup>11</sup> Gayatri Spivak is discussing these issues in the context of Human Rights. She marks the relationship between self and the other as intrinsically fraught with contradiction and as “a discontinuous supplementary relationship, not a solution” (531). I have slightly adapted her ideas to the context of diasporic citizenship.

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Eva Darias-Beutell is Associate Professor of American and Canadian literatures at the University of La Laguna. Her books include *Shifting Sands: Literary Theory and Contemporary Canadian Fiction*; *Graphies and Grafts: (Con)Texts and (Inter)Texts in the Fictions of Four Canadian Women Writers*; *Canon Disorders: Gendered Perspectives on Literature and Film in Canada and the United States* (co-ed.); and *Unruly Penelopes and the Ghosts: Narratives of English Canada Today* (ed).

Address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana. Universidad de La Laguna. Campus de Guajara. 38071. La Laguna, Tenerife. Tel.: +34 922317613. Fax: +34 922317611.