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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Vihanga Perera

Situating the Jungle-village in Leonard Woolf's *The Village in the Jungle* (1913) 5

Marek Pawlicki

"It Was a Brutal Land": Exploring the Personal and the Political in Damon Galgut's *Small Circle of Beings* (1988) 17

Malgorzata Rutkowska

"We Don't Know What We Want": The Ups and Downs of Global Travel in Dave Eggers's *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002). 35

Diana Ortega Martín

"Life Would Never Feel This Good Again": The Use of Pastiche in Edgar Wright's *The World's End* (2013) 53

Margarida Pereira Martins

Plural Identity and Migrant Communities in Guy Gunaratne's *In Our Mad and Furious City* (2018) 69

Joanna Antoniak

"Fearing your own queer self": Depictions of Diasporic Queer Experience in Grace Lau's Poetry 87

REVIEWS

Agnieszka Pantuchowicz

Patrick Gill, ed. (2023). *An Introduction to Poetic Forms*. New York and London: Routledge 109

Tadeusz Rachwał

Jeremy Tambling, ed. (2023). *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Literature and Psychoanalysis*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic 115

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“Fearing your own queer self”: Depictions of Diasporic Queer Experience in Grace Lau’s Poetry

Abstract: The intersection of migrant and queer experiences constitutes one of the core motifs of *The Language We Were Never Taught to Speak* (2021), the debut poetry collection by Grace Lau, a Chinese Canadian poet. Through a series of interconnected vignettes, Lau provides an insight into her experiences as both a Canadian and a Chinese immigrant, a lesbian and a failed model child, an aficionado of traditional Chinese culture and an enthusiast of contemporary Western popular culture. The mosaic of experiences illustrates the complexity and intricacy of the author’s identity/ies. Through the analysis of three poems (“The Levity,” “The Lies That Bind,” and “My Grief Is a Winter”), supported with references to the theoretical works on Asian North American writing and queer Asian migrant experience, the article discusses Lau’s depictions of queerness and her experiences as a Chinese immigrant in relation to the Canadian LGBTQ+ community, white queer liberalism, and internal politics of the Chinese diaspora. It proposes to see Lau’s poetry as an example of biomythography, a form of autobiographical writing showcasing how encounters with different communities shape the subject. In the process of disentangling her complex ties with the Chinese diaspora, the white Canadian LGBTQ+ community and her own family, Lau reveals the impact of her interactions with those different groups as she can finally express her identity as a queer Chinese Canadian.

Keywords: Chinese Canadian poetry, queerness, Grace Lau, diasporic queer experience, diasporic literature, Asian Canadian literature

1. Introduction

In her debut collection entitled *The Language We Were Never Taught to Speak* (2021), Grace Lau, a Hong-Kong-born Chinese Canadian poet, explores the complexity and intricacy of diasporic identity/ies. Using her own experiences as

a blueprint, Lau constructs a narrative that showcases tensions marring the Asian diasporic existence: being stuck between the perpetual foreigner stereotype and the model minority myth; circulating between being accepted and marked as the Other by the host culture; switching between embracing and distancing oneself from one's diasporic community; and migrating between appreciation for traditional culture of the homeland and affection for contemporary Western popular culture. In her poetry, Lau does not shy away from criticizing Canadian multiculturalism, revealing how easily it can be used to control, exploit and commodify immigrants and their cultures. Simultaneously, she delves into the Chinese diaspora and describes its ails: the slow spread of internalised prejudices, the rigidity of convictions, and the paradoxical rejection of those who are different. It is the last of those problems that seems to affect Lau the most – as a queer woman she has experienced it first-hand.

Lau's poetry can be described as an example of auto/biographical writing (Davis 2). As Larissa Lai notes, in the context of diasporic literature, "[w]riting the self, in autobiographies and memoirs, is often seen as a way to 'break the silence,' especially for marginalized subjects and those people who have been rendered invisible through racist exclusion from Canadian cultural life" (37). This strategy of breaking the silence functions as a mode of empowerment, "a first step in liberating subjects excluded from official histories" (Lai 38), allowing the marginalized to articulate their own history on their own terms and shape their own selves. As a result, Asian Canadian autobiographical writing is often described as autoethnographic. According to Deborah Reed-Danahay, autoethnography allows the author to combine "both a postmodern ethnography, in which the realist conventions and objective observer position of standard ethnography have been called into question, and a postmodern autobiography, in which the notion of the coherent, individual self has been similarly called into question"; hence, the term refers "to the ethnography of one's own group or to autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest" (2). As Mary Louise Pratt notes, autoethnographic writing is a form of resistance used by the colonized when interacting with the colonizer (7). However, Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn highlight that as autoethnography relies on the concept of an authentic self/other, it may be problematic "when applied to a heterogenous group of pan-Asian Canadians who are, in many ways, still in the formative stages of developing hybridized group identities" (4). Similarly, Lai notes that self-writing autobiography can, in fact, deepen oppression – the combination of generic conventions, racist stereotypes and "the problem of articulation itself" often plaguing this type of writing "may have the unfortunate effect of retrospectively folding the marginalized subject back into a discourse of national belonging, while actually covering over the violent history of exclusion it was supposed to have expiated" (37).

It is difficult to deny the autobiographical and ethnographic character of Lau's poetry as, in her works, she intertwines her personal experiences of queerness with historical instances of discrimination in Canada in an attempt to understand the

reasons for her complicated relationship with both the Chinese diaspora and the white queer community. However, the references Lau makes seem to be suspended between factual and fictional – her recollections and remarks, whether referring to her own childhood experiences or the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, are shaped by her own feelings and emotions. This feature of poetry – resting in the space “between facts and emotional truth” (Miller) and “telling a different kind of truth that supersedes the factual truth” (Thomson) – allows Lau to create her own myths, enabling her to discuss the official history and focus on the marginalised, hidden-from-view histories.¹ This fragmentation manifests itself throughout the whole collection. Each poem presents a different fragment of Lau’s identity/ies, whether concerning her connection to the Chinese diaspora in Canada, her complicated relationship with Canadian society in the context of its colonial history, her own status as a post-colonial migrant subject, her queerness or her understanding of her own family history.

The mixture of autobiographical and mythologized representations of events, combined with the exploration of one’s identities, points to Lau’s poetry being biomythographic in nature. The term “biomythography,” coined by Audre Lorde in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982),² can be defined as “a deliberate amalgamation of autobiographical fact and mythically resonant fiction” (Henke 103) that allows the author to discuss how social and cultural oppression can be internalised as a part of their identity. As a result, it becomes “a method of self-exploration [...] not limited to a genre whose validity depends on the authenticity of the content of the narration” (Calle 163). However, biomythography allows Lau not only to move beyond the constraints of autobiography but also to explore the richness and complexity of her subjectivity (Calle 163). Furthermore, the form of biomythography makes it possible to showcase the ways in which different communities, experiences and individuals have shaped the subject (Floyd-Thomas and Gillman 185). This aspect corresponds to Paul Ricoeur’s perception of identity as partially “bound up in identification with significant others” (qtd. in Davis 9); as a result, the subject engaging in life-writing finds themselves located within the context of a specific community, such as family or ethnic or racial group (Davis 11).

The aim of this article is to discuss Lau’s depictions of queerness and her attempts at connecting them with her experiences as a Chinese immigrant and her relationship with the Canadian LGBTQ+ community, white queer liberalism, and the Chinese diaspora. The analysis of three poems – “The Levity,” “The Lies That Bind,” and “My Grief Is a Winter” – provides an insight into Lau’s reflections on practices of queerness propagated by the white LGBTQ+ community and explores guilt and fear of rejection that accompany her during her interactions with the members of the Chinese diaspora. Furthermore, by approaching Lau’s poetry as an example of biomythography, the article addresses the interconnection between personal experiences of the author and experiences of the others.

2. Being Queer and Coloured: The Reality of Queer Migrant Experience

The beginnings of Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement (GLLM) in Canada can be traced back to the establishment of the first gay organizations in 1964 in Vancouver (Warner 57). Although strongly influenced by its American counterpart, Canadian GLLM is rooted in three events: the introduction of Bill C-150, the decentralization of political system, and the rise of Quebec nationalism (Adam 12). While Bill C-150 decriminalized homosexual acts between consenting adults (Adam 12),³ the decentralisation of Canadian political system and the rise of Quebec nationalism contributed to the creation of culture of compromise where organizations fighting for gay and lesbian liberation could thrive (Adam 18).

GLLM gained momentum in August 1971 when the first protests for gay rights took place in Ottawa and Vancouver. Just a year later, the first Pride was organized in Toronto, a result of cooperation between the University of Toronto and local gay and lesbian associations (Rau). The 1970s also witnessed the emergence of *The Body Politics* – the first Canadian gay publication – and two legislative changes: in 1977 Quebec prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and the newly amended Canadian Immigration Act lifted the ban on the immigration of gay men (Rau). The adoption of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 further facilitated the fight for sexual minority rights. When Section 15 of the Charter came into effect in 1985, it guaranteed “right to the equal protection and equal benefit to the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability” (Rau). Although Section 15 did not include sexual orientation, it made challenging discriminatory legislation easier and more successful (Lahey 28). Further legislative changes occurred in the 1990s, the most important of which was the 1995 ruling of the Supreme Court which stated that “Section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms [...] included sexual orientation as prohibited basis of discrimination” (Rau).

At the beginning of the 21st century LGBTQ+ activists focused on the issue of same-sex marriage and trans rights. Their efforts on the first front culminated in the introduction of Bill C-38 on 20 July 2005 which allowed same-sex marriage (Rau). In 2017, the Canadian Human Rights Act was amended “to include gender identity and gender expression as prohibited grounds of discrimination,” providing legal protection to trans and gender-fluid people (Rau). In 2018, all Canadian provinces made changing gender on official documents easier and in December 2021 the Canadian government banned conversion therapy (Rau). Although it cannot be denied that GLLM significantly contributed to the fight for equal rights, it also, paradoxically, contributed to the exclusion of queer people of colour. David Eng (4) notes that Western queer activists create a monolithic queer identity which, apart from promoting visibility and outness, leads to the erasure of racialized people. Eng calls this reinforcement of colonial and imperial discourses “queer liberalism”

and claims that it “works to oppose a politics of intersectionality, resisting any acknowledgement of the ways in which sexuality and race are constituted in relation to one another, each often serving to articulate, subsume, and frame the other’s legibility in the social domain” (4).

Therefore, through the erasure of people of colour, queer liberalism places whiteness at the centre of queer experience (Eng 4). Shweta Adur illustrates this erasure on the example of queer South Asians in the United States:

Queer South Asian lives mirrored all the barriers their heterosexual counterparts encountered, except unlike the latter they could not turn to the unconditional support of their family and seek refuge in their co-ethnic communities. On the other hand, unlike white Americans, their integration into the broader LGBT movement was limited. At the interpersonal level, they experienced racism and at the structural level, laws that impacted them were not central to white LGBT movement. (307)

While Adur focuses on the experiences of queer South Asians in the United States, the observations can also be applied in the Canadian context. Similarly, Stephen Hong Sohn notes that, as a result of cultural, structural and legislative oppressive forces, queer Asian North Americans face social death, a type of alienation which disconnects them from both ascending and descending generations (5). In fact, Nate Fuks and colleagues note that queer immigrants in Canada experience “homophobia and racism (a) within interpersonal relationships, (b) in the LGBT community, (c) in their respective ethnic communities, (d) in social service settings, and (e) during the immigration process” (299). This sense of exclusion is extended to other aspects of queer culture, such as media representation or categories of aesthetics and attractiveness (Sohn 5).

Those issues are addressed by Lau in her poetry. The feeling of being excluded from the LGBTQ+ community experienced by queer Asian immigrants stems not only from the lack of positive representation in media, but also from cultural differences concerning practices of performing queerness, including the act of coming out. Western LGBTQ+ culture is characterised by strong emphasis on individualism which contrasts with collectivism and familialism of Asian cultures (Zhu et al. 346). The responsibility to maintain face – to take “performed or planned actions to preserve the reputation and dignity of individuals and the family” (Zhu et al. 346) – forces many queer Asian North Americans to be more clandestine in expressing their queerness, or even conceal their sexual orientation in order to avoid familial repercussions (Sohn 5). This notion clashes with Western practices of performing queerness, especially with that of coming out. The process of coming out is “a key tactic of LGBTQ+ visibility politics” and “an integral aspect of Western LGBTQ+ identity formation” (Patel 24); therefore, in order to be seen as “authentically” queer, an individual needs to “come out of the closet.” This notion creates a dichotomy in which coming out is associated with the sense of pride and increased visibility and

the decision to hide one's sexuality – with shame and self-imposed invisibility. As Michelle Tam claims, such a binary depiction of performing queerness

assumes that refusal or failure to disclose one's identity will result in isolation and shame, and that although coming out to the self, family or others may raise fears of loss or isolation, one should do it anyway in order to be able to live a supposed authentic life of visibility and recognition. This binary illustrates the racialization embedded within the logics of queer liberalism and modern sexuality when it does not take into account the needs of queer diasporic people for social and economic survival as members of culturally and ethnically marginalized communities. (11–12)

Therefore, the process of coming out is often seen by queer Asian migrants as a threat to their sense of belonging: while being open about their sexual orientation may alienate them from their families and diasporic communities providing “necessary comforts within a racist society” (Lai 114), the decision to conceal it often leads to their exclusion from queer communities and spaces.

In fact, many queer Asian North Americans live “double lives – the racial versus the sexual. Many live in silence and secrecy, and often find themselves in situations where they are forced to compromise the multiplicity of their identities” (Sohn 6). This sentiment is reflected in “The Levity,” a poem in which Lau describes her experiences of coming out to her mother:

There really is no good time
to tell your mother
you've never liked boys.

Closets do not relinquish
their grips easily
but I have always instinctively
hated dresses.
So when my mother asked me
about boyfriends again
as we wrenched the tails
from luscious prawns
and cracked their shells with our teeth,
I offered the truth.

She said loneliness is better
than sin. (44)

In the first three stanzas of the poem Lau describes how, despite her fears, she decides to finally tell her mother the truth about her sexual orientation. The idea of “coming

out” seems to be understood by Lau as a way of freeing herself from both societal and familial gender expectations. Her perception of coming out is, therefore, rooted in Western practices of performing queerness as exemplified by the direct reference to a closet, which has been described by Eve Kosofsky Sedwick as “the defining structure for gay oppression in this century” (68). This is further reflected by the personification of the closet in the second stanza – the iron grip that the closet has on Lau highlights both its oppressive character and the difficulty of freeing oneself from its confines. Lau also ties compulsory heterosexuality with the traditional understanding of gender norms – she uses the word “dresses” as a symbolic representation of patriarchal and heteronormative understanding of femininity and notes her instinctual hatred for such a perception. Furthermore, the reference to dresses reinforces the focus on the oppressive nature of closets, this time through comparing different social constraints that are imposed on women. As Lau depicts a wardrobe filled with dresses that leaves no room for other type of clothing, she underlines that in such an environment there is no place for alternative ways of expressing one’s true self.

While Lau claims that there is no good time to come out to one’s parents, her own decision to do so seems to be motivated by frustration she feels upon being asked the same question over and over again as reflected by the visual break in the line “about boyfriends again” (Lau 44). Furthermore, Lau decides to tell her mother the truth about her sexuality as they are cracking open prawns – the use of the verb “to crack” implies that the pressure and strain marring Lau’s relationship with her mother causes her to finally break and reveal the truth. Therefore, while Lau might not feel yet ready to come out, she believes that she needs to do that for both of their sakes. Finally, intertwining the act of coming out with the mundaneness of preparing food shows that “[t]he lesbian subject is produced in the middle of being, in the middle of the complexity of living” (Lai 120). Although queerness is a part of Lau’s identity/ies, it is through coming out that she hopes to be acknowledged and understood and, ultimately, to be born into her true self.

However, the reaction she receives is not the one she hoped for as her mother, while not outright rejecting her, brandishes her as a sinner. The decision to make her mother’s response a separate stanza not only draws readers’ attention to it, but also shows how big of an impact it has on Lau herself. The response sounds almost like a sentence passed by a judge as it lacks empathy and understanding. In fact, Lau’s mother refuses to directly and openly address her daughter’s sexuality, instead choosing to focus on religious repercussions. Furthermore, such a response may point to fear being the main reason for Lau’s reluctance to come out to her mother. Lai notes that fear can be seen as one of the factors stopping queer people of colour from coming out as “[t]o break through not only one’s own fear, but the fear of privileged others [...] does constitute a heroics” (114). While Lau’s mother does not enjoy the same level of privilege as the members of the host society, both her sexual orientation and her religious beliefs place her in a much better position than her daughter.

As a result, in order to come out Lau needs to not only overcome her own fear of placing herself in a vulnerable position, but also that of her mother's potential negative reaction. Hence, the response she receives not only fills her with shame, but also may hinder her future attempts of coming out to others. Although Lau understands the motivation behind her mother's comment, she is still traumatised:

In my dreams I am a child.
I am always fleeing the cold
of my parents' house, always
the same way:

Lock self in room.
Force open window
to reveal a thousand mesh screens.
Push them back push them back push them back.
Sometimes I make it out, sometimes
I am trapped forever.

*And ye shall know the truth,
and the truth shall make you free.* (44–45; original emphasis)

The sudden switch from the domestic kitchen scene to the description of dreams in which Lau desperately tries to escape her parents' house recreates the feeling of emotional distress caused by a traumatic flashback. Interestingly, Lau uses the word "house" rather than "home" to describe her parents' place of residence – such a word choice indicates that that it is not a space where she feels comfortable or where she belongs. The coldness of the house mentioned by Lau seems to not only further reinforce the alienating character of the place, but also reflect the emotional coldness of her parents, reminiscent of the coldness with which her mother reacted to her confession. Hence, for Lau, as a marginalized subject, "the return [to home] does not have the luxury of apparent stability" (Lai 122) as the home itself "is made unstable for the queer Asian North American who dares to come out of the closet" (Sohn 18). Instead, it becomes another site of oppression, a place where the act of coming out transforms itself from one performative statement into "a life-long journey" (Lai 122).

This unstable and oppressive character of home is reflected in the Lau's dream as she once again employs the motif of being locked in a confined space and attempting to escape it. The house itself becomes the symbolic extension of the closet with Lau's parents religious beliefs and emotional coldness acting as oppressive forces that simultaneously suppress her from being true to herself and honest with others and motivate her to try and free herself from their grip. The act of escaping is not, however, an effortless one. Mesh screens that Lau encounters in

her dream serve as a symbolic representation of everything that hinders her escape while the chant-like repetition of “push them back” reflects the desperation and panic she feels upon realising that freeing herself from the oppressive confines of her parents’ house is not going to be easy. Furthermore, as indicated by the last two lines of the stanza, not all attempts at escaping are successful, suspending Lau in the space which deprives her of the freedom to be herself. The need to flee the house is equated with the act of coming out and the struggles Lau experiences in her dreams reflect the difficulty – and sometimes impossibility – of revealing her true self to her parents. Her own experiences, therefore, contrast significantly with those of her white Canadian peers – she does not feel free, more independent or authentic after coming out to her parents. This sense of entrapment is reflected in the final couplet, taken directly from John 8:32: “And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” The inclusion of this particular Biblical quote can be seen as a bitter and ironic statement as it highlights the dissonance between what Lau was told would happen and her own experiences.

This focus on Christianity and Christian values is not incidental. For a person who grew up in the small community of the Chinese Canadian Christians, as Lau did, the act of coming out constitutes a threat to her sense of belonging, leaving her confused and vulnerable. This vulnerability is reflected in the last stanza of the poem:

I twisted the prawn’s head
from its body,
ran my finger along its belly,
split it clean. (45)

The vivid description of prepping the prawn serves as a representation of Lau’s emotional state and a re-enactment of the treatment Lau herself has just received: as she told her mother the truth about her sexuality, metaphorically removing her own shell and showing her soft interior, she is met with a reaction that leaves her in a state of turmoil. Although subdued and emotionless, her mother’s comment seems particularly cruel to Lau – already vulnerable as a result of her coming out, the young woman feels even more exposed and defenceless upon hearing it.

In “The Levity,” Lau highlights that the act of coming out, depicted in the Western queer culture as a foundation of one’s future happiness, is not always a moment of celebration. She focuses especially on the promise of freedom that coming out should bring, contrasting it with the sense of vulnerability and defenceless that accompany it instead. Lau notes that in certain communities openly performing queerness is difficult and the fear of becoming rejected for it can serve as a deterrent. Therefore, according to Lau, the desire to adhere to the expression of queerness labelled by queer liberalism as universal can become a source of trauma for coloured postcolonial subjects.

3. Queerness and Diaspora: The Reality of Queer Chinese Diasporic Experience

One of the main functions of a diaspora is to serve as a frame of reference for its members. Through preserving cultural values and norms of the abandoned homeland, it provides immigrants with a safe space, easing the process of adaptation into a new environment (Strier and Roer-Strier 439). Furthermore, it serves as the foundation for building a new identity while maintaining the connection with the homeland (Délano and Gamlen 176–177). Other functions of diaspora include: aiding and easing the process of dealing with institutions of the host country and providing its members with a sense of stability (Dahinden 54–55). Hence, maintaining the connection with a diasporic community becomes an important aspect of life in the new homeland.

Preserving the bond with a diasporic community is even more essential in the case of those diasporas that used to be a target of persistent legal, social and political discrimination. Chinese immigrants to Canada were subjected to anti-Asian prejudice and hostility as “[t]he least popular and [...] the most harshly treated” (Tan and Roy 3). The discriminatory actions undertaken by the Canadian government and directed at Chinese migrants resulted in the emergence of Chinatowns which “provided a refuge from the harsh conditions of life in larger society [as well as] social, emotional and material support and, at times, protection from racial hostility” (Li and Li 8). The tendency to separate themselves from the host society exhibited by many Chinese migrants was seen as a proof of their outright refusal to assimilate, which only fuelled anti-Chinese prejudice and, in consequence, “prevented many Chinese from considering Canada as their permanent home” (Chan).

Although the situation of Chinese Canadians improved significantly after the Second World War, the fear of becoming a target of prejudice once again remained deeply ingrained in the community. Consequently, the Chinese diaspora has tried to avoid any behaviours and actions that would draw the attention of the host society to themselves. This process of becoming socially invisible would entail not only modifying cultural practices in accordance with Western norms, but also putting greater emphasis on behaviours and characteristics deemed ‘normal’ by the host society and rejecting the abnormal ones. One of such ‘normal’ features is heteronormativity (Zhu et al. 345). While the idea of performing heteronormativity – “the execution of cultural, systemic, and individual practices that normalize opposite-sex attraction and behaviours” (Zhu et al. 345) – is not exclusive to diasporic communities, it is often described by queer Asian migrants as necessary for survival. In her study, Tam (41–44) highlights that her respondents draw a strong connection between performing heteronormativity and maintaining harmony in their homeplaces,⁴ being it the family or the diasporic community.

The tension between those two notions is addressed by Lau in “The Lies That Bind,” where she draws a parallel between two secrets that plague her family – the real age of her grandmother and Lau’s sexuality:

We don't know how old Grandma is.
She stole a few extra years
in Toishan to work in Hong Kong –
an early birthday
gift for a hungry house.

Now her age is another secret
with no answer, like
what's really
in her delicious jellyfish sauce
and why have I never brought a boy home. (16)

The beginning of the poem provides the context for the first of those secrets. Lau reveals that the confusion about her grandmother's real age is caused by the lie the older woman told the officials when immigrating from Taishan to Hong Kong to find employment and provide for her family. The lie is depicted as necessary as it ensures the survival of the whole family. However, as Lau notes, it is not the only secret that her family keeps – she lists the rest of them, including the truth about her sexuality. Through placing her “secret” alongside other family secrets, Lau not only highlights how common it is for her family to keep secrets, but also contrasts her potentially life-changing secret with the more mundane and harmless ones kept by her family.

In the last stanza of the poem Lau again connects her grandmother's lie with her own:

She asks again
when she will get to eat beng,
if I've met any
good men,
when she will have her cup of cha.
I wonder if the truth
would scald or soothe
I try to remember if she's 91
or 92;
I think of the woman I love
and say,
Soon, Grandma. Soon. (17)

While Lau understands that her grandmother's old age and poor memory are the reasons for her constant questions, she feels slightly frustrated and exasperated about it as reflected by the visual break in the first line of the stanza. Just like earlier in the poem, Lau once more uses enumeration as she reports questions asked by

her grandmother. This time, however, the questions focus on Lau's future (and heteronormative) marriage as the older woman alludes to *hay beng*, "traditional Chinese pastries that are gifted by the groom to the bride's family" (Lau 75), and a tea-serving ceremony, "one of the most significant parts of a traditional Chinese wedding [during which] the bride and groom express their gratitude to each other's families by offering tea" (Lau 75). While the questions asked by her grandmother are ordinary and common, ones that are often directed by elderly family members at their nephews or grandchildren entering a marriageable age, Lau knows that if she were to answer them truthfully, she would have to reveal her secret that would affect the normalcy and peacefulness of her grandmother's life and, in consequence, their relationship.

Just like her grandmother before her, Lau decides to lie when asked about her personal life. While the lies told by two women differ in terms of circumstances in which they have been made, they have the same purpose – to protect the loved ones from physical or emotional harm. According to Junfeng Zhu and colleagues (347), the need to protect emotions of family members is one of the factors motivating queer Asians to mask their sexual orientation and adhere to heteronormative models of behaviour. Yet, in "The Lies That Bind," Lau highlights that she lies to her grandmother also to protect herself. Tam (58) notes that some queer Asian migrants see keeping their sexuality secret as the only way of maintaining harmony in their families and ensuring the peaceful coexistence of all members.

However, Lau keeps wondering what would happen if she came out to her grandmother. In the lines "I wonder if the truth would scald or soothe," Lau likens revealing the truth to drinking tea, the beverage her grandmother mentioned in one of her questions. The reference to tea does not seem to be accidental as the act of spilling tea during a formal tea-serving is considered a breach of etiquette which may result in hurting others with hot liquid. Furthermore, the phrase "to spill the tea" is also used informally to refer to "secret information or rumours of a scandalous nature," such as information about one's sexual orientation.⁵ This metaphor is extended further as Lau wonders if revealing the truth – or spilling the tea – "would scold or soothe." "Scold" and "soothe" are used by Lau to label the possible outcomes of telling her grandmother the truth as it can result either in more pain, just like spilling hot tea may result in an injury, or comfort and support as tea is also used to lessen and remedy physical ailments and psychological distress. It is this state of uncertainty that prevents Lau from being honest with her grandmother, at least at that moment.

Similarly to "The Levity," "The Lies That Bind" can be described as a poem about coming out. This time, however, Lau focuses on the reasons that deter queer Asian migrants from being open about their sexual orientation. Lau's decision not to come out to her grandmother is connected to her status as a Chinese immigrant; her position as a marginalized Other, combined with the racial discrimination that her community faces, forces her to carefully "navigate everyday dilemmas within

[her] family, the Chinese community [and] the Chinese Christian community” (Tam 58). Through avoiding answering her grandmother’s questions about her love life, Lau protects both herself and the older woman while preserving family face. Therefore, the process of negotiating queer Chinese immigrant identity “takes into consideration not only the self and self-expression, but also family and community” (Tam 63).

The decision to protect family and diasporic community – one’s homeplace – at the cost of the freedom of self-expression does not imply that said space is not oppressive (Johnson 149). Lau addresses this issue in “My Grief Is a Winter,” a poem describing her troubled and tense relationship with her homeplace embodied by her Chinese Christian family and the Chinese diaspora as a whole. Each stanza of the poem lists a feature of the shared homeplace that prevents Lau from expressing herself freely:

My grief is a winter loss that lives
in new-snow silence. It breeds in the dead
air of questions
that Christian parents ask gay kids,
in the distance between being
loved and being accepted,
in the blood between skin and bone.
Our griefs go round and round. (26)

In the opening lines of the poem, Lau links her grief over not being able to openly and honestly communicate with her parents with winter, a season commonly associated with loss, death, harshness and struggle. Furthermore, she refers to her grief as if it was a living, breathing creature, dormant but ready to multiply and grow stronger. Grief, as Lau highlights, intensifies during “the dead air of questions,” an uncomfortable and awkward silence caused by parents asking their children about their private lives. This tense atmosphere allows the negative emotions to flourish as Lau knows and she and other “gay kids” are unable to answer those question without risking being rejected by their parents as the threat of social death looms over them (Sohn 5). As the stanza progresses, Lau lists other circumstances that fuel her grief and sadness, such as the paradox of “the distance between being loved and being accepted” or the blood ties between her and her family members.

Lau’s focus on religion, motivated by her own experiences with her Christian parents, highlights how it may transform a homeplace from a safe space into an oppressive one – as the questions concerning their love lives remain unanswered, queer individuals start to realise that, while they are loved by their families, they will never be fully accepted because of their sexual orientation. This epiphany becomes a source of distress and anxiety, fuelling the fear of rejection and possible expulsion from the safety of the shared homeplace.

The stanza ends with a rather ominous statement “Our griefs go round and round,” a phrase that Lau repeats three times in the poem. This repetition itself seems to replicate the meaning of the phrase – “go round and round” – while emphasising the existence of the vicious circle of grief that is impossible to break. Faced with a dilemma of preserving family harmony at the cost of their self-expression or being rejected, queer individuals often choose the former, unknowingly contributing to the said vicious circle. Furthermore, Lau’s use of the pronoun “our” suggests that grief and sadness constitute a common experience for queer people, one that bounds them together while providing a sense of kinship (Eng 16) and becomes the foundation of their community.

The second stanza focuses on Lau’s complicated relationship with the Chinese diaspora. It begins with Lau acknowledging that her current position – all the privileges of growing up and living in the Western country she enjoys – would not be possible to achieve without the sacrifices made by not only her family, but also other members of the Chinese diasporic community:

I am all the deaths of my blood
 laid to rest in this body’s
 grievyard, dressed by memory
 in a richer cloth.
 I’ll never be able to repay my parents and aunties
 in the currency they are owed.
 How do one’s ancestors receive
 a blood debt? A sweat debt? A life debt?
 Our griefs
 go round and round. (26)

However, this knowledge becomes the source of another internal struggle as it fuels Lau’s guilt caused by the inability to repay her ancestors for their sacrifices. This notion is reflected by the first line of this stanza where Lau declares herself as “all the deaths of [her] blood,” suggesting that she is the product of the actions of previous generations and that decisions made by her ancestors still affect her. The grim implications of the connection between Lau and her predecessors is further emphasised by the phrase “this body’s grievyard.” This portmanteau implies that the grief and sadness that Lau already feels are deepened by the belief that she has to pay back her ancestors – as she is constantly reminded of their deeds by her own existence, she becomes unable to escape the sense of guilt.

As the stanza progresses, Lau realises that the repayment of the said debt would require another sacrifice, this time made by her. However, three rhetorical questions posed at the end of the stanza – “a blood debt? A sweat debt? A life debt?” – underline the helplessness and frustration that Lau, haunted by the hungry ghosts of her ancestors, feels as she still tries to determine how to appease them. Finally,

she realizes that only through partially relinquishing her right for self-expression (including being open about their sexual orientation) can she ensure the survival of the diaspora and repay the debt she owes to the previous generations. Lau’s decision to placate the ghosts of her ancestors can also be attributed to “a complex sense of moral obligation” (Davis 12) characterising diasporic communities. According to Rocio Davis, the aforementioned sense of obligation not only leads to “the acknowledgement of a cultural debt to [one’s] family” (13), but also emphasises the connection between individual identity of the subject and their family history and the need to repay the said debt through preserving the communities as well as stories and narratives they create.

In turn, Sohn highlights that the pressure experienced by Lau is connected to the model minority myth and the need to reproduce it:

the heterosexuality of the Asian or Asian North American parent exists only as a function of raising the model minority child from birth to overachieving adulthood. In this sense, the model minority plot implicitly precludes the possibility of the queer subject, while promoting the centrality of the monogamous, heterosexual marriage and nuclear family formation. Not surprisingly, model minority progeny must adhere to a rather strict regime when it comes to sexuality. (29)

The successful reproduction of the model minority myth becomes the simplest way of achieving success and, through that, reinforcing the positive image of the diasporic community, even at the cost of personal sacrifices. However, the strict adherence to it has numerous side effects, such as substantial emotional and cultural stress or higher rates of depression, suicide and suicidal thoughts, and substance abuse (Chou and Feagin 21–22). Lau seems to be aware of those negative consequences. In the last two verses of the stanza, she notes that making sacrifices would only prolong the vicious circle of grief and guilt as the next generations would also feel pressured to ensure that the personal sacrifices of their ancestors were not pointless. Therefore, this time the repeated phrase – “Our griefs go round and round” – serves as a reminder of intergenerational character of grief and trauma, passed from one generation of racialized subjects onto another.

The pressure that Lau feels only fuels her grief and sadness, transforming them into trauma she is unable and unequipped to deal with. As noted by Sohn (19), such a response is not unusual as psychological distress caused by the fear of social death is particularly severe among young queer Asian North Americans. In order to numb her pain, she turns to alcohol, which only deepens her self-loathing as she identifies her queer self – her ‘abnormal’ love for women and her inability to be a model daughter for her parents – as the source of her suffering. Even Lau’s attempts at finding a more positive outlet for her negative emotions through tattooing only result in deepening the rift between her and her mother. Historically and currently, tattoos are seen in Chinese culture not only as a punishment for criminal

more inclusive legislation, often at the very high personal costs. Furthermore, Lau uses the binary oppositions of “celebration-grief” and “summer-winter” to illustrate two different approaches to remembering and commemorating sacrifices of the previous generations: while the Pride becomes the celebration of freedom attained as a result of those struggles, the diasporic community pushes its members into a vicious circle of grief and guilt, pressuring them into making their own sacrifices. Those different approaches to dealing with cultural debt lead to a paradox: although Lau’s parents themselves experienced struggles as a part of their migration experience, they seem to be unable to sympathise with queer people who also have had to face discrimination and prejudice.

Lau highlights that stigmatisation of homosexuality by her parents has an enormous impact on her – it not only prevents her from coming out and being open about her sexual orientation, but also becomes a source of distress, contributing to her fear of rejection. Zhu and colleagues (346) note that experiences of stigmatised homosexuality – “negatively connoted actions and beliefs toward queer behaviours and identity” – are one of main factors deterring queer Asian people from being open about their sexual orientation. Furthermore, such attitudes towards homosexuality often push queer individuals to perform heteronormativity in order to “protect their parents from experiencing stigma” (Zhu et al. 346). Lau does not voice her hurt to her parents but instead chooses to suffer in silence; this decision can be seen as another sacrifice, a painful solution to the tragic choice between expressing herself at the risk of rejection and remaining a part of the community at all costs.

4. Conclusion

In her poetry, Lau depicts the precarious position of queer Asian – particularly Chinese – immigrants in North America who often find themselves trapped in an impossible-to-solve dilemma. With the white LGBTQ+ community on the one hand and their diasporic communities on the other, they feel forced to choose one and exist in accordance with its values. Consequently, as Lau notes in her works, they end up stuck in the vicious circle of shame, guilt, grief and fear of rejection. Unable to make a choice, they sacrifice their freedom of self-expression to ensure their own safety.

The poems included in the collection provide an insight into Lau’s experiences with both the LGBTQ+ community in Canada and the Chinese diaspora. These encounters serve as a catalyst for the (re)evaluation of her relationships with those two communities. In her works, Lau addresses the faux inclusivity of the white queer community and its limited understanding of performing queerness. Drawing from her own experiences, she comments on the supposed universality of expressions of queerness, highlighting that the white LGBTQ+ community often does not acknowledge the existence of cultural differences that make performing

queerness – especially being open about one’s sexual orientation – very difficult or even impossible for people of colour. Poems like “The Lies That Bind” or “The Levity” depict anxiety, distress and vulnerability that Lau experiences when faced with the dilemma of coming out to her family and ethnic community at the risk of being rejected by them.

While Lau’s critique of the white queer community focuses mostly on its limited perception of queerness which often results in the exclusion of people of colour, her discussion of the Chinese diaspora is centred around the ideas of maintaining face and ensuring harmonious coexistence of its members. Although she acknowledges the role of the diaspora as a safe space providing respite from the prejudice and discrimination of the host society, she also notes its oppressive character. Through referring to her own experiences, especially her relationship with her parents, Lau describes how she has to negotiate her queer Chinese immigrant identity while navigating between expressing herself, maintaining harmony in her family and the Chinese diasporic community, preserving family face and protecting her loved ones from the stigma associated with homosexuality. All those actions are accompanied by the deep fear of rejection and the sense of guilt stemming from her ‘abnormality,’ her inability to adhere to gender and sexual norms of the host society and the diasporic community.

Torn between the two communities and feeling she does not truly belong to either of them, Lau finds a different solution for her predicament. In her poems “3 a.m. Communion” and “Red and Yellow,” she describes finding acceptance in a community comprised of queer people of colour. It is within this space that she can not only feel the “elation of [...] discovering the meaning of family” (28), but, more importantly, heal and escape the vicious circle of guilt and grief. The creation of this third community, founded in the shared experiences of discrimination and rejection, finally allows Lau to fully express herself and reshape her identity as a queer Chinese Canadian. However, the creation of this third space becomes possible only when Lau acknowledges that her story – and, by extension, her identity – is the amalgamation of different influences, all having roots in different communities and their experiences. In “The Lies that Bind,” Lau continues to draw parallels between her grandmother’s story and that of her own, indicating how her own self is shaped by the past experiences of the older woman and how she needs to “draw upon the stories [of her grandmother] to complete her own” (Davis 11). Simultaneously, the figures and events that Lau describes in her poems are given almost a mythical status. The mystery shrouding her grandmother’s real age is presented by Lau as a secret that, when uncovered, would transform her perception of the world as she knows it. Similarly, the dream sequence in “The Levity” is used by Lau to emphasise how crucial and fundamental the experience of coming out to her parents is to her.

The poem that best showcases the biomythographic character of Lau’s work is “My Grief is a Winter.” As she processes and works through her emotions, Lau

slowly reveals how different groups and experiences shaped her as a subject. She describes the fear of parental rejection and negative emotions caused by it as an experience shared by many queer people that simultaneously influences them and binds them together, creating the sense of kinship. Simultaneously, as a diasporic subject, Lau acknowledges how the lives of her ancestors shaped her and how she is indebted to them for their sacrifices. The cultural debt that she mentions and the search for the best way to pay it back are experiences that not only influence Lau’s identity/ies, but also connect her with other members of diasporic community who face similar problems. Finally, through providing brief insights into her parents’ – and especially her mother’s – lives, such as their religious beliefs, attitudes to the LGBTQ+ community, opinions on body modifications or desires to raise a model child, Lau shows how her interactions with her parents moulded her into the person she is today. Although the experiences Lau describes in the poem are negative and, to a certain extent, even oppressive, they are nevertheless essential for the development of her identity and the creation of the aforementioned third community.

Notes

- 1 Myth is understood here in Barthesian terms as “a type of speech chosen by history [that] cannot possibly evolve from the nature of things” (94). According to Roland Barthes, despite being rooted in history, myth makes it possible to question it through unveiling its exclusionary character (102).
- 2 Lau mentions Lorde in two of her poems: “Solidarity,” a poetic exploration of the sense of solidarity shared between representatives of different marginalised communities, and “Remedy,” where the quote from Lorde’s poem “Meet” is both used as an epigraph and incorporated within the poem itself. Those references to Lorde suggest that Lau knows about her works, including biomythography.
- 3 The introduction of the bill was the consequence of a public debate sparked by the case of Everett Klippert. In 1965, Klippert was sentenced to three years in prison for gross indecency after revealing that he had engaged in sexual activities with male partners. His sentence was indefinitely extended after he was described as “a dangerous sex offender” by a forensic psychiatrist. Despite his appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada, Klippert remained in prison until 1971 (Warner 46).
- 4 A homeplace should be understood here as a site of resistance within the confines of which marginalized groups can “freely construct the issue of humanization” (Hooks 42).
- 5 The motif of spilling secrets appears quite often in literary works created by North Americans of Chinese descent who spill the secrets of Chinatown to the white mainstream. However, as Lai notes, the existence of such a trope is

problematic as it not only reinforces racist expectations about Chineseness, but also “places the second-generation narrators who disclose the ‘secrets’ in the dubious position of traitor (to their first-generation parents), interpreter, and assimilated-but-marked Canadian subject” trading the secrets of Chinatown for the sense of national belonging (58). Interestingly, in her poem Lau reverses this trend as the secret she hopes to reveal in the future comes from beyond the borders of Chinatown and threatens her belonging within the Chinese community.

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