

Ghostly Foundations: Multicultural Space and Vancouver's Chinatown in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*

Daniel Martin

Volume 29, Number 1, Spring 2004

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl29_1art07

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Martin, D. (2004). Ghostly Foundations:: Multicultural Space and Vancouver's Chinatown in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 29(1), 85–105.

Article abstract

Destabilizing official multiculturalism's assertion that there exists, in "heritage" sites such as Chinatown, an always present unity between the spatial present and the historical past, Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* refuses to let its own architectural centre represent Chinese-Canadian history and identity. Instead, Lee's characters drift within a spatial grid of knowledge constructed by the European imagination while, at the same time, disrupting any representation of an essential "Chineseness." Ultimately, the novel's consistent references to spectrality ensure an experience of "being with" ghosts: an experience of recuperating the past without succumbing to multicultural policy's insistence that ethnic histories function to sell spatial or architectural images of diversity and tolerance.

Ghostly Foundations: Multicultural Space and Vancouver's Chinatown in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*

DANIEL MARTIN

“THE QUESTION OF THE GHOST,” to borrow Jacques Derrida’s phrase from *Specters of Marx*, haunts the following reading of *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Sky Lee’s novel about four generations of Chinese-Canadian women in Vancouver. Yet it will be necessary, at least at first, to temporarily put aside our reading of the novel to the space of the “not yet” as we lay a foundation for an interrogation of Lee’s frequent troping of spectrality through a preliminary examination of Canada’s official policy of multiculturalism. Lee’s novel engages with a particular spatialization of Chinese-Canadian history instituted, and subsequently celebrated, by official multicultural policy. But this engagement, it will become apparent, actually represents a refusal to participate in a particular brand of multicultural celebration that transforms ethnic enclaves, such as Vancouver’s Chinatown, into heavily disciplined zones of historical production and tourist consumption. Lee strategically positions the “even-now famous Disappearing Moon Cafe” (23), the fictional architectural structure standing at the centre of her narrative, as a site of resistance to any ideologically upheld celebration of Chinese-Canadian history that exhibits the past within contemporary architectural heritage. Spectrality, as both dissolving/disappearing architectural foundation and the core trope of Lee’s historical narrative, conditions the novel’s response to postmodern narratives of geographical space.

While Lee’s novel does provide a spatial or geographical narrative of early Chinatown, and thus attempts to unify synchronic and diachronic narratives of history, it nevertheless remains skeptical of multiculturalism’s celebration of ethnic spaces. The proliferation of ghosts throughout *Disappearing Moon Cafe* — the spirits of deceased Chinese railway labourers, the “white ghosts” that haunt early Chinatown, and the insubstantial spectrality of Chinese women in historical records of early Vancouver, to

give but a small number of examples — suggests that, when multicultural policy celebrates the ethnic “history” of architectural foundations, built structures, and heritage sites, a process of spectralization ensues, a process that drains substance and being from the experiences of early Chinese Canadians. Like the Cafe itself, historical narratives premised on multicultural space deal with ghostly foundations.

The Spectropoetics of Multiculturalism

In 1971, Canada began to develop an official policy of multiculturalism. State-sponsored ethnic histories have haunted Canada’s “house of difference” ever since, and not only in its literature, but also in all facets of the commodification of ethnic identity that passes under official multicultural policy for the celebration of diversity or the fostering of integration. In *The House of Difference*, a recent study of cultural politics and national identity in Canada, Eva Mackey provides a crucial reading of multiculturalism based on an architectural metaphor of containment, discipline, and management. Canada’s multicultural policy, Mackey suggests, validates a state-constructed image of a supposedly tolerant national history, one that rewrites Canadian history, in the name of pluralism and the acceptance of ethnic diversity, in terms of a “heritage” of tolerance (2). Smaro Kamboureli has developed a similar line of argument through her particularly scathing mimicry of the call to multiculturalism issued by all levels of Canadian government since the early 1970s: “Thou shalt be ethnic, our legislators say; thou shalt honour thy mother tongue; thou shalt celebrate thy difference in folk festivals, and thou shalt receive monies to write about thy difference” (“Of Black” 53). Kamboureli suggests elsewhere that such officially sanctioned commands are driven by a type of “sedative politics” that attempts to “recognize ethnic differences, but only in a contained fashion, in order to manage them” (*Scandalous* 82). Official multiculturalism strategically sanctions ethnic diversity through a politics of control, but it is not a politics that maintains merely a metaphorical house of difference, as Mackey and Kamboureli suggest. Multicultural policy spatializes ethnic diversity and participates in the restoration of sanctioned “heritage” sites in order to construct a narrative of tolerance and acceptance of ethnic diversity.

In the case of Vancouver’s Chinatown, for example, multiculturalism functions within urban space, constructing an image of Canada’s tolerance toward Chinese-Canadian history through the restoration, renova-

tion, and aestheticization of the architectural past. Vancouver's Chinatown becomes, under the mandate of multiculturalism, a historicized space invested with a program for a collective Chinese-Canadian memory that also functions within a Canadian legacy of tolerance. More importantly, multiculturalism's "house" of difference is architectural and exhibitionary as much as it is metaphorical. M. Christine Boyer argues that late-twentieth-century North American cities operate within a matrix of "well-designed fragments" (2), that is, within a spatial partitioning of urban diversity that resists totalizing narratives of urban experience and imagines the urban matrix as a spatial diffusion of distinct voices, identities, and experiences. Ethnic enclaves such as North American Chinatowns become, in this "postmodern war against totalities," part of an "aestheticized matrix" that allows urban citizens and tourists "to perfect only partial attachments — to this local community, to that particular history, to these traditions" (3). Such is the problem with postmodern urban spaces: ethnicity and difference become part of urban design and are thus marketed as tourist attractions ready to be consumed by the global economy.

Perhaps the best example of multicultural policy's approach to ethnic spaces and their histories is the walking tour, that staple of urban tourism through which local historical narratives are given spatial substance and significance. A pamphlet distributed by the Vancouver Heritage Conservation Board, entitled *Chinatown, A Walking Tour Through History* (1998), for example, narrates a two-hour tour through contemporary Chinatown that encompasses multiculturalism's emphasis on architectural heritage. It begins with a brief introductory history:

Chinatown sounds like it would be the place where most Vancouver residents of Chinese descent live. That is certainly not true today, but it was in the 1880s when the swampy fringe of False Creek around the intersection of Carrall and Pender Streets became known as Chinatown. Chinatown is one of the city's earliest commercial and residential districts, containing a remarkable collection of buildings from Vancouver's boom years in the early twentieth century. This tour will introduce you to the architecture and history of the neighbourhood. (1)

The rhetoric of *A Walking Tour* reproduces a liberal agenda of neutrality with regards to Chinese-Canadian history. After acknowledging that "the pioneers of British Columbia included the Chinese" (1), the pamphlet offers an extraordinarily brief gloss of the discrimination encoun-

tered by Chinese Canadians in early Vancouver, preferring instead to celebrate Chinatown as a “civic asset” (4). The pamphlet reproduces Canadian history in British Columbia according to a progressive model of tolerance, as Mackey suggests, but more importantly, it imagines contemporary Chinatown as a site of “safe” exoticism:

During [World War Two] and afterwards, Vancouver began to look at Chinatown in a new way. Suddenly the Chinatown that had seemed foreign, sinister and dangerous began to seem exotic, appealing and safe. Residents from all over the city traveled to Chinatown with the enthusiasm of tourists.... The Province also recognized Chinatown's special history and architecture by designating it a historic district in 1971. In 1979, the Chinatown Historic Area Planning Committee sponsored a streetscape improvement program ..., reflecting the City's new appreciation of Chinatown as a civic asset. (4)

Chinatown's “special history” becomes, in this program for local memory, a consumption zone for “sampling foods, buying curios and savouring the district's distinctiveness” (4). As the pamphlet suggests, part of the experience of local Chinese history involves a process of devouring ethnic experience and participating in the community's “new image” in the name of remembrance.

The tour begins with the oldest standing built structures in Chinatown. The tourist is instructed to experience the architecture of the Sam Kee Building, built in 1913 and “rehabilitated” in 1986, before moving west down Pender Street to the Chinese Freemasons Building (1901), the Chinese Times Building (1902), and the Chinese Cultural Centre (1981), among others. The pamphlet emphasizes Chinatown's early architecture only to assert the “monumental” acknowledgement of Chinese-Canadian history. Offering a brief write-up for each building, *A Walking Tour* limits its descriptions to architectural history, mentioning only such concrete facts as when each structure was built, who the principal designers and architects were, when they were renovated, and their function in present day Chinatown. Despite its initial suggestion that Chinatown was once a thriving residential district, the pamphlet offers no history of personal spaces or private dwellings, insisting instead upon Chinatown's commercial history. More importantly, as the tourist moves away from Chinatown's historic sites, the pamphlet directs her towards the district's recent architectural development and renewal. In a bid to attract tourists to present-day Chinatown's “revitalized streetscape” (9), the pamphlet guides the tourist away from the spatial remains of the past

and into the future of the district's status as an official (tourist) monument of Canadian multiculturalism and tolerance of diversity. Fittingly, the tour ends with the Dr. Sun-Yat Sen Classic Chinese Garden at 578 Carrall Street, completed in 1986 to coincide with the World's Fair hosted by Vancouver that same year. *A Walking Tour's* organization of spaces thus moves from the past into the present, producing what Michel Foucault calls a "heterotopology" of spatial relations ("Different" 179). Heterotopias, Foucault suggests, are "sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable" (178). Furthermore, these non-localizable locations have the "ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves" (181). For Foucault, the oldest heterotopias are gardens because of their symbolic investment, at least in Asian gardens, with representing the four corners of the world within a sacred space: "The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and the whole world at the same time" (182). *A Walking Tour* fittingly ends in such a "sacred" space, but another element is required to complete Foucault's notion of the heterotopia. Multicultural heterotopias like Vancouver's Chinatown transform local spaces into miniaturized representations of worldliness. Ultimately, *A Walking Tour* imagines Chinatown as a spatial exhibition of Chinese-Canadian history that celebrates ethnic experience in order to sell it to a world economy of tourists.

A Walking Tour's spatial mapping of Canada's legacy of tolerance is by no means unique. Movement through time by means of space is the ultimate goal of any walking tour, and it seems a given that most tourists will engage with a city's history in spatial terms. The walking tour is but a small example of the "spatial turn" (Jameson 154) in postmodern conceptions of aesthetics, architecture, and historical narration. Canada's policy of multiculturalism functions architecturally (in a sense) to manage ethnicity, while confirming the nation's tolerance of diversity in both local and global settings.

A question arises, however: is it possible to raise the ghosts of the past — those ethnic voices that haunt Canada's claim to historical tolerance and disrupt the façade of a tolerant heritage — without confusing them with the state-sanctioned friendly ghosts that inhabit the once foreign and exotic, but now safe and sanitary, architectural foundations of multicultural space? A particular narrative mode of spectrality has infiltrated recent ethnic Canadian literature in the guise of various elaborations upon what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction." According to Hutcheon, the lesson of this development in postmodern fiction is "that

the past once existed, but that our historical knowledge of it is semiotically transmitted" (122). Spectres from the past emerge in the gaps between historical narrative and the facticity of historical events. Ethnic spectres also haunt the linear, progressional logic of official historical narratives. Yet these ghosts are not confined to a distinctly Canadian haunted house of multiculturalism. According to Kathleen Brogan, whose research traces the development of ghost stories from their early gothic roots to their recent manifestations in contemporary ethnic American literature, ghostliness functions in multicultural, ethnic, or postcolonial literatures in general "to re-create ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and to press this new version of the past into the service of the present." Moreover, Brogan suggests, "ghost stories reflect the increased emphasis on ethnic and racial differentiation in all social groups. ... They also register the tectonic epistemological shift we have witnessed since the 1970s in the social sciences" (4).¹ Ethnic literatures are central to this shift, not only because they frequently invoke the spirits of the past in order to critique or disrupt contemporary social relations, politics, and official national histories, but also because they represent the possibility of imagining alternative narratives of historical knowledge. Official histories of ethnic difference also invoke ghosts from the past — *A Walking Tour* does after all remind the tourist that the pioneers of British Columbia also included Chinese labourers and merchants (a radical new idea in local history it seems) — but state-sanctioned ghostly visitations do not produce the same sense of violence, disruption, or revision as literary spectres, ghosts, and spirits from the past.

According to Derrida, ghosts occupy the spaces between all binary structures, disrupting the unity of any system of knowledge that claims to hold objective and/or authoritative truth. In historiographical terms, for example, ghosts disrupt the distinction between past and present, life and death, or even present and future. They disrupt linear thinking, rendering the pursuit of historical objectivity open to constant revision. Ghosts, in this historical sense, necessarily lack substance because they exist in the past. Yet they are never fully absent from the present moment. They haunt the spaces between complete presence and complete absence, between the present and the past, between life and death, and more crucially for our concerns, between space and time.² The trope of spectrality thus frequently manifests itself in literary responses to "official" narratives of national histories. Spectres, ghosts, phantasms, and spirits destabilize any possibility of historical periodization, and frequently disrupt "official" narratives. This analysis of multicultural spectres, then, reveals that ghosts

have always haunted national narratives of history. Quite possibly, no inherent difference exists between pre- and post-multicultural spectres. Part of Derrida's project involves a reminder of the importance of "*being-with*" spectres and ghosts, of instituting a particular "*politics of memory*" (xviii, xiv). Like Brogan, Derrida understands the project of the ghost or spectre to be nothing more or less than the positing of a radical plurality of narratives and voices within official (linear) narratives of history. Ethnic literature in the age of multiculturalism introduces such a politics through consistent interrogation of "official" Canadian history. Unlike the politics of memory in *A Walking Tour*, which constructs a linear-minded tactics of movement through time — from one building to the next, from the past into the present — in order to trace a history of tolerance on the surface of Vancouver's Chinatown, the politics of collective memory in ethnic literature frequently employ the trope of spectrality in order to remind us that the ghosts of the ethnic past cannot be found in official narratives of nationhood.

Published two years after the unveiling of Canada's Multicultural Act (Bill C-93) in 1988, Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is a product of a certain "spectropoetics" that permeated the Canadian literary marketplace throughout that century's closing decades. "Spectropoetics" is Derrida's term to describe Karl Marx's analysis of the process of commodification in capitalist cultures. As Derrida reminds us, "Marx always described money, and more precisely the monetary sign, in the figure of appearance or simulacrum, more exactly of the ghost" (45). For Marx, commodities are haunted by the spectrality of exchange-value. Derrida sees the process of commodification — the assigning to commodities an immaterial exchange-value that is puffed up and given substance (of sorts) through the process of exchange — as a type of poetics because a commodity's exchange value "cannot be anything other than the mode of expression, the 'form of appearance', of a content distinguishable from it" (Marx 127). A spectropoetics of multiculturalism, then, infuses ethnic experiences, identities, and histories with an exchange value that only has substance through exchange, and within a system of exchanges. Multiculturalism celebrates ethnic diversity through a capitalist agenda that transforms "ethnicity" into a marketable commodity, and one that, in the process of being exchanged, validates an ideologically constructed image of Canada's supposed heritage of tolerance. Yet ethnic identity, because it comes into being through exchange, cannot exist as anything other than spectral. Accordingly, multicultural policy raises ethnic ghosts, spectres, and spirits from the dead, so to speak, through a medium of exchange

that subsequently manages them and absorbs them into a legacy of Canadian diversity. There is thus a double function in the politics of memory: multiculturalism raises the dead, offers an invitation to speak, but only to insist that ethnic histories speak to a particular image of history. Multicultural policy thus exorcises the very ethnic histories it conjures.

Mary Condé, a recent critic of *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, exposes the complexities of literary production in the age of multiculturalism, arguing astutely that Lee's novel exhibits a "double consciousness" representative of recent ethnic Canadian literature. On one hand, Condé suggests, Lee is aware of her marketability as an "ethnic" writer "conforming to the expectations of the establishment in writing a multigenerational 'ethnic' novel" (172). On the other hand, the novel "contains and deploys brilliantly ... an awareness of its own marketability" that suggests "the fictions minorities write about themselves ... may represent their greatest danger" (185, 186). The question of marketability is a key topic of Lee's critics, and some are not so receptive as Condé to the text's double consciousness. Historiographical concerns predominate the discussion, but, all too frequently, the criticism does not acknowledge the novel's interaction with postmodern geographical narratives of local/global identity. Despite Alison Calder's argument that "the geographical specificity with which Kae Ying [Lee's narrator] locates her story is equalled in importance by the temporal specificity" (7), Lee's novel resists spatial narratives of history. Multicultural spectropoetics operates spatially, transforming local "ethnic enclaves" into zones of consumption where ethnic history can be experienced within a totalizing spatial narrative put on display and sold as the celebration of ethnic experience. There are no such zones of consumption in Lee's novel.

Canada's official multicultural policy allows for the literary production of ethnic histories that function within a liberal, progressive model of Canadian history, but it nevertheless contains the past through the preservation of heritage sites in the present. Vancouver's Chinatown represents perhaps the best example of Canada's spectropoetic production of "safe" historical narration. The commodification of ethnic experience within localized urban spaces, the appearance of the "world as exhibition" (Gregory 15-69), is central to our understanding of multicultural space. Official multiculturalism monumentalizes the Chinese-Canadian past in order to forget the complexities of ethnic diversity and the racially prejudicial treatment of Asian-Canadians throughout Canada's history. Under multicultural policy, Vancouver's Chinatown has become not just a

series of heritage buildings preserved and renovated in memory of Chinese-Canadian history, but also a spatial memory “field” in which Canada’s tolerant path can be traversed through Chinatown’s streets. Official multicultural policy (re)produces urban space as if it were an exhibit or spectacle, a localized space of tourist consumption that practises history through preservation and display. Effectively managing history according to a model of tolerant Canadian history, multicultural spaces practise a type of memory more akin to the “exhibitionary complex” of the museum, exhibit, or display (Bennett 59).

Lee’s narrative of early Chinatown confines Chinese-Canadian history to a controlled ethnic enclave, one haunted by disciplining “white ghosts” that, like the denizens of Foucault’s tower in his model of the Panopticon, maintain the space of Chinatown without ever really seeming to materialize within it. Yet Lee’s consistent troping of spectrality operates, on one of numerous levels, as a simultaneous acknowledgment of and resistance to multiculturalism’s disciplinary regime. The novel constructs historic Chinatown as a localizable space (one that can, in a sense, be mapped for tourists), but at the centre of Lee’s narrative stands the Disappearing Moon Cafe, an architectural structure lacking substance. Lee’s detailed account of the Cafe’s interior design marks a privileged moment in which the narrative operates descriptively within Chinatown’s built environment. The cafe is divided into two front sections, one half a “modern counter-and-booth section” and the other a “nostalgic replica of an old-fashioned chinese [*sic*] teahouse, which accounted for its popularity not only amongst its homesick chinese clientele but also outsiders who came looking for oriental exotica” (32). With a large dining room, “perhaps the most beautiful in all of Vancouver” (32), the replica half displays traditional Chinese design primarily for Europeans looking for ethnic experiences. As Mui Lan, the cafe’s principle proprietor, suggests, “white devils” were “poking their big noses in Tang People’s Street more and more” (32) shortly after Chinatown’s most prosperous years as a growing community within Vancouver.³ Mui Lan and the cafe thus confirm Jan Lin’s argument that Chinatowns are experienced in Western culture through processes of “alimentary gratification” and “pedestrian acts of urban tourism” (171). Lee’s narrative of early Vancouver suggests that Chinatown has always been a site for the commodification of ethnic experience and identity, but the cafe’s two distinct halves disrupt any process of localizing ethnic experience within Chinatown’s architecture.

In resistance to any essentialized notion of Chinese space, the cafe’s

modern section functions as the novel's principal site for the production of gossip, rumours, and stories about the Chinese community. Choy Fuk, Lee informs us, "liked the modern counter-and-booth section better. He loved the highly polished chrome and brightly lit glass, the checkerboard tiles on the floor, the marble countertop." More importantly, except for the customers, "there was nothing Chinese about it" (32). The modern half becomes a local "haunt" for Chinatown's men. Localizing history within a distinctly non-"Chinese" space — at least from a multicultural perspective that celebrates Chinese identity within monumental replica zones of consumption — Lee instead builds her narrative spaces as contested sites for the production of stories, local narratives, and gossip:

Nowadays, people were just plain malicious! Gossip! Chinatown was always full of gossip. [Mui Lan's] own restaurant reeked of it. Too many idle loafers! She of all people should know. They were always there, all too anxious to size her up. She felt pinned to the wall, like the unpaid bills. Frustrated, Mui Lan sighed, not too noticeably, yet the few scattered men sitting at the shiny counter in front of her stopped to stare, their smouldering cigarettes poised in mid-air. They made her feel like squirming, but that would have been very poor behaviour for a woman. (26-27)

Chinatown, "being the tight watchful community it was" (94), disciplines itself through the production of rumours and gossip, but Lee nevertheless insists that Chinatown's built environments produce a fundamental notion of discourse that remains silent in multiculturalism's history of Chinese-Canadian architectural heritage.

The "Limited Horizons" of Chinatown

Writing primarily in 1986, Lee's narrator, Kae Ying Woo, searches for a precise genealogical record of the Wong family's history. Bringing history into the text's present moment allows Kae Ying to think of herself as "one individual thinking collectively" (189). Lee's critics, though, remain skeptical about the efficacy of such an individualist experience of history. While Lien Chao argues that Kae Ying's idea of a collective self "epitomizes a process of transforming the historical silence and marginality of the community to a narrative voice of resistance" ("Collective" 238), Susanne Hilf laments that recent contemporary Chinese-Canadian novelists, and especially Lee, "deal with the question of *individual* identity"

rather than a “*collective* communal identity based on ethnicity” (95). Other critics, such as Condé and Eva Darías Beutell, prefer instead to read the text through its own skepticism about the potential for expressing “authentic” Chinese-Canadian identity in the Canadian literary marketplace. Beutell, in particular, suggests that *Disappearing Moon Cafe* “package[s] history as historiography, as a process of constructing historical significations that are not always or totally representable and need not converge or harmonize” (192-93). The novel’s metafictional moments emerge in the spaces between Kae Ying’s genealogical narrative and Lee’s inclusion of factual history relating to Chinatown. Lee intersperses “facts” — such as the Chinese Benevolent Association’s retrieval of the bones of deceased Chinese railway labourers from the 1890s to 1930s, the threat of various Chinese Exclusion Acts throughout the early twentieth century, and the Janet Smith murder case of 1924 (16, 30, 66) — throughout her “fiction,” while maintaining a critical removal from Kae Ying’s positivist faith that accurate history will reveal itself.⁴

Kay Anderson’s study of Vancouver’s Chinatown sheds some light on the text’s narrative confinement of Chinese-Canadian history to the “limited horizons of Chinatown” (Lee 222). Speaking about the idea of “Chinatown” as a distinctly Eurocentric conceptualization, Anderson refuses to address Chinese-Canadian history through a racialized notion of “Chineseness”:

“Chinatown” is not “Chinatown” *only* because the Chinese — whether by choice or constraint — have lived in enclaves. Like the idea of a Chinese race, “Chinatown” has possessed a tradition of imagery that has lodged it firmly in the popular consciousness of Europeans (and indeed of the Chinese themselves). Moreover, the premise of a uniquely Chinese race and place has shaped and justified practices that have inscribed it further in European society and space. (9)

Anderson follows a line of thought similar to that of Benedict Anderson, David Theo Goldberg, Derek Gregory, and other cultural theorists of the intersections of race and space. For these cultural geographers, spatial boundaries are socially imagined constructs that produce what Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities.” The “Chineseness” of Chinatown is made to seem natural by the European imagination, and thus conditions the spatial horizons of local history. Consequently, in Vancouver’s early history, Eurocentric thinking about spatial segregation constructs images of the supposed depravity and overcrowded spaces of

Chinatown even as it exoticizes the foreignness of such essentially “Chinese” spaces.⁵ Such a problem is still especially prevalent in the walking tour and other tourist narratives of ethnic identity in the postmodern city.

Maria Noëlle Ng criticizes *Disappearing Moon Café*'s spatial localization of Chinese-Canadian history within Chinatown. Concerned with the problem of “self-orientalization” (159), Ng suggests that, “without a trace of irony, Sky Lee recreates Chinatown as a gambling den and Chinese men as filthy, fanatical gamblers lacking refinement” (167). Ultimately, Ng argues that Lee's novel reproduces stereotypical images of Chinatown that (re)construct Chinese-Canadian identity according to European racialized categories. Ng's primary concern throughout her critique is that recent Chinese-Canadian literature indulges immoderately in nostalgic “recapitulation of what the white community has done to the Chinese, instead of actively accepting the Chinese now living in Canada” (164). Of course, whether or not we read a nostalgic representation of Chinatown in the novel depends on the value we place on nostalgic notions of history. Contrary to Ng's concern, Lee refuses to align her local history of Chinatown within nostalgic narratives of the past. Rather, in unison with Fredric Jameson's critique of nostalgia in postmodern architecture and art (19-21), the novel wrestles against multiculturalism's nostalgic (architectural) narrative of Chinatown's local history. Referring back to the novel's interior spaces, the *Disappearing Moon Cafe* is *half* nostalgic replica, thus rendering its “Chineseness” empty of signification.

Instead of nostalgically lamenting the loss of authentic Chinese identity through the clash of cultures in early Vancouver, Lee frequently situates historical events within a self-reflexive narrative of space. The Janet Smith murder case of 1924, for example, appears frequently throughout the text. While sleuthing in the “university labrarinth” (64), Morgan uncovers newspaper accounts of the case. Kae Ying's resistance to Morgan's “vacuous pursuit of still-life” (66) uncomfortably destabilizes her position of narrative authority throughout the text. Similarly disruptive, Morgan's retelling of the case's history emphasizes the inherent poetics of historical knowledge. Filling in the gaps that permeate the “crumbling literary effort” (65) of the past, he stresses the role of storytelling in the production of historical knowledge:

“O.K. Now listen!” Morgan cut in. “You want to know what I found out? It's 1924... in the heat of summer, the news rips through Chinatown like wild fire! A white woman is murdered! The prime suspect is a chinese houseboy named Wong Foon Sing! Chop-

sticks drop and clatter in surprise! Clumps of rice stick in throats. . ."
 ... Let me tell you, the whole town went nuts! The Chinese Exclusion
 Act — the Day of Humiliation — and then this killing." (66-67)

Morgan's historical work is indicative of the extent to which stories operate, in urban settings, as disruptive, non-localizable histories. Kae Ying characterizes him as "quite simply a haunted man" (64), and reveals that he "lived in the very basement where [the Janet Smith] murder had taken place" (69). Morgan offers a reading of Chinatown's history that does not suggest a distinct notion of "Chineseness." Instead, his retelling emphasizes history as a narrative process necessary for the recuperation of history. Morgan's status as a "eurasian" destabilizes any suggestion that Chinatown's history speaks for Chinese identity. The ghosts from the past move through Morgan, but in ways that refuse to be contained within Chinatown's borders.

How, then, do Lee's readers account for what seem to be stereotypical representations of the idea of "Chinatown" in *Disappearing Moon Café*? Lee's spectral tropes do not operate in the same way that ethnic ghosts materialize in such contemporary American ghost narratives as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. These American narratives relate experiences with the ghosts of history in a more traditional sense — assuming we can apply a "tradition" to the anachronistic function of spectrality — compared to Derrida's understanding of the experience of "being with" spectres. Morrison's and Kingston's narrative spectres have a certain being or essence, even though that essence refuses to remain stable or material. Character-ghosts haunt physical locales and fundamentally exist as part of an ethnic text's recuperation of history. In comparison, Lee's spectral tropes do not materialize as characters within her spatial arrangement of narrative. No character-ghosts haunt Lee's representation of Chinatown. Rather, space itself is spectral and thus produces spectral identities. Ghostliness emerges in the "contact zones" (Pratt 4) between Vancouver's European and Chinese spaces, producing a multiplicity of spectral identities.⁶

Lee's characters frequently take on ghostly identities, and the novel's troping of spectrality becomes part of the condition of modernization and the clash of cultures. In a letter to her sister, dated 1919, Fong Mei relates her experiences in Vancouver. She understands European modernity through a particular trope of spectrality used frequently throughout the text by members of the Chinese community in early Vancouver:

My new parents are even more prosperous than we could have imag-

ined. And my husband Choy Fuk has been so extremely kind and gentle. Everything here is so “ultramodern.” You don’t know what that means, but everyone here likes that ghost word. It means the best and the newest. Nye Nye and Lo Yeh have a refrigerator to cool their food. I hear say that it cost \$47.95, canadian [*sic*] currency. That’s more than enough to buy rice for your family for several years in China. It may sound incredible to you, but people are like that here. (42)

Through such passages as this, Lee’s narrative explores the clashes between Chinese and European cultures. Identities stripped of authenticity emerge from early Vancouver’s demarcation of space. Kae Ying emphasizes this sense of loss, registering the spectrality of spatial boundaries as a cause for the inability to locate authentic “Chineseness” in the present. “All I ever wanted was authenticity,” she declares; “meanwhile the people around me wore two-faced masks” (128). Fong Mei’s letter marks the beginning of a consistent troping of spectrality, one that functions as a response to western modernity. Despite the fact that early Vancouver was more of a “strange outpost community” (28), “backwash bush” (30), or “backwater settlement” (140), Fong Mei relates to her sister a familiar loss of authentic identity in a period of rapid modernization in Vancouver’s history. Morgan’s research into early Chinatown verifies that it was a thriving community in the 1920s (68), and Lee captures the ambivalences of these golden years of the city’s modernization in Fong Mei’s description of the disappearance of the thrill she and her sister used to experience when taken to “that western moving picture show in Toy Saan City. We were so thrilled,” Fong Mei declares, “we couldn’t sleep all night long. Here in the Gold Mountains, we go often to the picture shows which let chinese in, but no matter how hard I try, I just can’t capture that same wonderful feeling as before” (44). Through Fong Mei’s letter, the novel addresses the dispersal of spectral identities within an urban context undergoing modernization. From this point, *Disappearing Moon Café* begins to develop a narrative that consistently disrupts the spatial boundaries of Chinatown through the formation of spectral subjectivities and the experience of modernity.

Multicultural Space in Contemporary Vancouver

In Marshall Berman’s now classic account of modernity, “modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology.” Even though this experience, in his words, seemingly unites all of humankind, “it is a

paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity.... To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, 'all that is solid melts into air'" (15). Yet *Disappearing Moon Cafe* suggests the contrary. For Lee, the modern experience does not cut across conceptual boundaries of identity, as Berman suggests. Rather, the complexities of the modern condition produce imagined conceptions of borders, of localized communities, that are subsequently policed, maintained, and opened up to the techniques of self-discipline. While Berman's conception of modernity differs from Lee's, his adoption of Marx's trope, however, relates an experience of impermanence, of melting, and of insubstantiality similar to the experience of spectrality in *Disappearing Moon Cafe*. The novel employs its consistent troping of spectrality as a conceptual disruption of multicultural space. The novel's development of historical experience into one person thinking collectively is premised by a distinct loss of presence, a loss experienced both subjectively and spatially.

Contemporary research in the study of modernity frequently adopts spectrality as a trope for understanding the modern condition. Leo Charney, for example, characterizes modern subjectivity as an experience of drift and insubstantiality. This experience, Charney states, "describes neither certain texts nor a certain mode of engagement but the general activity of living with the empty present, carrying it forward through time and space." Moreover, the experience of drift allows the modern subject "to imagine the empty present both as ontology — as an unbridgeable structure no less insurmountable than the vision of full presence it displaces — and as epistemology, a way of knowing, a category of experience, a pragmatic structure, a negotiation of 'room for maneuver'" (7). In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, a similar experience of drift operates centrally in the narration of both male and female experiences. Traditionally, the women receive a sense of self, a function within the Chinese community, only with childbirth. But that sense of self is as completely insubstantial as the position of women within the community after childbirth. Voluntary contact with the white community, women's incapacity to reproduce, and hybrid identities each produce notions of ghostliness, insubstantiality, or death that circulate within the novel's Chinese community through gossip, rumours, and angry criticism. "Vicious ghosts" (107), "trapped spirits" (108), derelict male workers "neither here nor there" (77), "dead ghosts" (37, 49), "dead" women (58) and "unidentified receptacles" (31) flourish within the novel's representation of historic Chinatown, producing subjectivity as

a type of drift as equally insubstantial as the “disappearing” architectural structure at the heart of the novel.

Beatrice’s privileged upbringing as Fong Mei’s daughter, for example, alludes to this ghostly experience. Fong Mei’s decision to have Beatrice educated in Hong Kong registers an anxiety about the loss of authentic Chinese subjectivity in Chinatown’s close quarters with European “ghosts.” Beatrice experiences a privileged upbringing. Yet, although “pampered like royal offspring”, Beatrice loses substance, a process the novel relates as “inevitable”:

One night, she dreamt that her hands and feet dissolved; the next night, her arms and legs as well. Then her trunk. Finally, everything, until she was nothing more substantial than a puff of smoke. Instead of running up and down the halls and stairs ... she floated. She was not awed by this alteration. She felt comforted and happy that this world had especially opened up for her. (144)

This moment in the novel represents an experience of spectrality produced by Beatrice’s privileged relation to consumption. She floats amongst glowing woodwork, “mirrors reflecting lightness,” and the “symmetrical perfection” of floor tiles. In short, Beatrice experiences “the museum-like poignancy” (144) of living in modern consumer culture, an experience of lack, of insubstantiality, but more importantly, of display. As Fong Mei’s daughter, Beatrice becomes a spectral image of the family’s prosperity in Chinatown.

As Charney suggests, though, this modern experience of drift also functions epistemologically as a way of knowing the emptiness of the present moment. Lee’s novel, as already mentioned, disrupts any notion of an essential “Chineseness” inherent within Chinatown’s spaces. Lee’s frequent troping of spectrality relates an experience of living in a spatial arrangement characterized by empty, absent, and inauthentic cultural values, but Lee refuses to represent Chinese-Canadian subjectivity as a distinctly spatialized experience. The Disappearing Moon Cafe stands at the centre of Lee’s history of early Chinatown, but its function, from a historiographical point of view, involves the dispersal of historical knowledge away from architectural space. Its role is essentially spectral insofar as it consistently disappears or “melts into air” when interrogated or put under the microscope of multicultural history.

Canada’s multicultural policy refuses to wrestles with this problematic tension between the spaces of history and the narratives they produce, and thus produces spectropoetically manageable ghosts from the past.

Lee, on the other hand, takes these official multicultural spectres to task through a narrative *representation* of an architectural structure that has no thingly foundation. Destabilizing official multiculturalism's assertion that there exists, in "heritage" sites such as Chinatown, an always present unity between the spatial present and the historical past, *Disappearing Moon Cafe* refuses to let its own architectural centre *represent* Chinese-Canadian history and identity. Instead, Lee's characters drift within a spatial grid of knowledge constructed by the European imagination while, at the same time, disrupting any representation of an essential "Chineseness."

Kae Ying's narrative institutes a certain playfulness regarding the idea of "Chinatown" by refusing to represent Chinese-Canadian history in the contemporary period, in the age of multiculturalism. Her narrative functions diachronically, in a sense, and shows her determination to construct a linear and structurally organized family history. Her search for a "suant, digestible unit" (19) of historical knowledge is thwarted by what Condé calls a "naïve premise" (176), one that appears frequently throughout Kae Ying's narrative. But the novel as a whole expresses a healthy skepticism regarding the narrative pursuit of historical accuracy. As Kae Ying discovers, there are gaps everywhere in the Wong family's genealogy, the most notable examples being the family silence regarding Suzanne Wong's death and the family's incestuous past. Kae Ying's diachronic obsession with uncovering the family's secret history of incest merges uncomfortably with a synchronic or spatial narrative of early Chinatown. Lee thus tempts her reader's own hunger for a digestible history — a hunger similar to Kae Ying's — by playfully suggesting a potential unity between historical narratives (words) and spaces (things). Yet this unity is consistently disrupted.

Chao suggests that *Disappearing Moon Cafe* adopts a "power paradigm of silence vs voice to identify the historical transition experienced by Chinese Canadians from a collective silence to a voice in the official discourse [of Canadian history]" (*Beyond* 17). Even so, Lee remains fundamentally silent about contemporary Chinatown, and particularly as it is understood in such official documents as *A Walking Tour*. Writing about the localizable spaces of Chinese-Canadian history, Kae Ying admits that she rarely steps foot in Chinatown. In a nondescript manner, she refers to her home as "our little city lot, fifty feet wide, one hundred and forty feet long, from corner to corner to corner to corner" (122). The only other mention of her dwelling in contemporary Vancouver is that "the street scene in front of [Kae Ying's] is clean and green" (121). These descriptions certainly do not correspond to the imagined consensus of

how a Chinese-inhabited space appears, and Lee does not provide spatial coordinates to indicate where in contemporary Vancouver Kae Ying lives. Lee seems more content to point her readers to Kae Ying's career as an "investment research analyst for a small though influential Canadian holding firm" and her newest job offer with the Howe institute (122). As "the token, pregnant, ethnic woman" (123), Kae Ying flits about from job offer to job offer, doing business luncheons in Hong Kong. Contemporary Chinatown is not localizable in Kae Ying's narrative. Like the cafe itself, multicultural space is marked by an absence, albeit one that structures Kae Ying's narrative quest for an authentic Chinese-Canadian history. Unlike *A Walking Tour*, which celebrates Chinatown's history through architectural renovations and urban renewal, Lee's novel remains fundamentally silent.

The Significance of 1986

On a concluding note, despite Lee's silence, *Disappearing Moon Cafe* does exhibit a noticeable awareness of the spectropoetics of multiculturalism. In 1986, the same year in which Kae Ying writes, Vancouver celebrated its one-hundredth anniversary by hosting the world's fair.⁷ The city marketed Expo 86 as simultaneously a celebration of Vancouver's emergence as a global centre of commerce and tourism and a justification for the urban renewal of the city's False Creek district. Introducing a new rapid transit system shortly before the exposition's opening, and emphasizing the importance of transportation and communication technologies to the rising dominance of the global economy, Expo 86 confirmed a movement away from monumental structures towards functional legacies that would benefit Vancouver's local urban environment. Vancouver's False Creek district became, for a four-month period in 1986, a heterotopia of world experience, representing world spaces within a contained environment surrounding the borders of historic Chinatown. Michael Ames suggests that Expo 86 serves as a valuable example of how Canada exhibits itself as multicultural nation. "When it comes to exhibitions," Ames suggests, "nations today share a need to define themselves, both to their own people and to others, as socially progressive, morally virtuous, and technologically sophisticated states" (113). Yet, as Walter Benjamin notes, world's fairs are also "places of pilgrimage to the fetish Commodity" (164). As places of consumption, exhibitions produce the experience of world diversity within a spectropoetic transformation of the world into

local zones of amusement. Expo 86's theme, "learning within a context of fun" (cited in Ley and Olds 184), is suggestive of this experience of diversity through multicultural commodification.

Disappearing Moon Cafe disrupts Canada's official celebration of multiculturalism during Expo 86 by refusing to acknowledge the spectropoetics of production that transform urban spaces into spatial grids of worldly or ethnic experience. Lee does offer a spatial history of early Chinatown, but her narrative disrupts any notion of ethnicity that confines "Chineseness" to local spaces. Ultimately, the novel's consistent references to spectrality ensure an experience of "being with" ghosts, an experience of recuperating the past, without succumbing to multicultural policy's insistence that ethnic histories function to sell spatial or architectural images of diversity and tolerance.

NOTES

¹ This shift is experienced most significantly in the foundational archeological approach to knowledge, discourse, and history instituted by Michel Foucault's exploration of the human sciences in *The Order of Things* and *The Archeology of Knowledge*.

² Derrida's own words on the subject of spectrality perhaps best convey the inherent anachronism of ghosts and spectres: "Repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost. *What* is a ghost? What is the *effectivity* or the *presence* of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum? Is there *there*, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, an opposition that holds up? Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time* makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a *hauntology*" (10).

³ For a summary of early Chinatown's economic boom, see Paul Yee's *Saltwater City* (49).

⁴ In 1985, the Vancouver Art Gallery organized an exhibition of Chinese-Canadian history in British Columbia entitled *Images of Gold Mountain, 1886-1947*. The exhibition's catalogue is a likely source for Lee's historical understanding of early Chinatown, as the exhibition was heralded, at the time, as a groundbreaking display of images "conceived as a means of exploring the role of photography in reinforcing or breaking down stereotypical notions of people who are exotic to ourselves" (7). Equally foundational to Lee's historical narrative, Paul Yee's illustrated history of the Chinese in Vancouver, *Saltwater City*, also fuses visual material with narrative detail. Yee provides a particularly detailed account of the Janet Smith murder case (75-77), and it seems likely that Lee's historical account is a product of Yee's research. Given the available visual material at the time Lee's novel was published, one may wonder why *Disappearing Moon Cafe* refuses to narrate in more visual detail the history of early Chinatown.

⁵ Anderson's study explores at length the representation of early Chinese Canadians as inherently slovenly and biologically destined for living in overcrowded slums. See 73-105. Yee's *Saltwater City* also discusses the European racialized conceptions of the Chinese.

⁶ "Hybridity" normally characterizes this production of identities in the contact zones

between European and Asian space, but Lee's novel rather remarkably limits her cases of hybrid identities, preferring instead to express a sense of cultural hybridity as opposed to a more biological notion. Mary Louise Pratt describes "contact zones" as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination — like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today" (4).

⁷ For a detailed analysis of Expo 86, see Michael Ames's "The Canadianization of an American Fair" and his chapter on the exposition in *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes* (111-31). See also David Ley and Kris Olds's "World's Fairs and the Culture of Consumption in the Contemporary City" (184-88).

WORKS CITED

- Ames, Michael M. "The Canadianization of an American Fair: the Case of Expo 86." *The Beaver Bites Back?: American Popular Culture in Canada*. Ed. David H. Flaherty and Frank E. Manning. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1993. 237-46.
- . *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1992.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. Ed. London: Verso, 1991.
- Anderson, Kay J. *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1991.
- Beautell, Eva Darias. "The Imaginary Ethnic: Anachronies, (Im)Mobility and Historical Meaning in *Obasan* and *Disappearing Moon Cafe*." *Tricks With a Glass: Writing Ethnicity in Canada*. Ed. Rocio G. Davis and Rosalia Baena. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. 191-208.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. Trans. Harry Zohn. London: NLB, 1973.
- Bennett, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Berman, Marshall. *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. London: Penguin, 1982.
- Boyer, M. Christine. *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1994.
- British Columbia. Vancouver Heritage Conservation Program. *Chinatown, A Walking Tour Through History*. Vancouver: VHCP, 1998.
- Brogan, Kathleen. *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1998.
- Calder, Alison. "Paper Families and Blonde Demonesses: The Haunting of History in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*." *ARIEL* 31:4 (2000): 7-21.
- Chao, Lien. *Beyond Silence: Chinese Canadian Literature in English*. Toronto: TSAR, 1997.
- . "The Collective Self: A Narrative Paradigm in Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*." *Cross-Addressing: Resistance, Literature and Cultural Borders*. Ed. John C. Hawley. Albany: State U of New York P, 1996. 237-55.
- Charney, Leo. *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity, and Drift*. Durham: Duke UP, 1998.
- Condé, Mary. "Marketing Ethnicity: Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*." *Tricks With a Glass: Writing Ethnicity in Canada*. Ed. Rocio G. Davis and Rosalia Baena. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. 171-89.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, & the New International*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.

- Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- . "Different Spaces." *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*. Vol. 2. Ed. James D. Faubion. New York: New, 1998.
- . *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage, 1994.
- Goldberg, David Theo. *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.
- Gregory, Derek. *Geographical Imaginations*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994.
- Hilf, Susanne. *Writing the Hyphen: The Articulation of Interculturalism in Contemporary Chinese-Canadian Literature*. New York: Peter Lang, 2000.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991.
- Kamboureli, Smaro. "Of Black Angels and Melancholy Lovers: Ethnicity and Writing in Canada." *Us/Them: Translation, Transcription and Identity in Post-Colonial Literary Cultures*. Ed. Gordon Collier. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992. 51-62.
- . *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Lee, Sky. *Disappearing Moon Café*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1990.
- Ley, David and Kris Olds. "World's Fairs and the Culture of Consumption in the Contemporary City." *Inventing Places: Studies in Cultural Geography*. Ed. Kay Anderson and Fay Gale. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1992.
- Lin, Jan. *Reconstructing Chinatown: Ethnic Enclave, Global Change*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998.
- Mackey, Eva. *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1. Ed. Ernest Mandel. Trans. Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin, 1990.
- Ng, Maria Noëlle. "Representing Chinatown: Dr. Fu-Manchu at the Disappearing Moon Cafe." *Canadian Literature* 163 (1999): 157-75.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Yee, Paul. *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1988.