

“Dead Girl-Bag”: The Janet Smith Case as Contaminant in Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café*

TANIS MACDONALD

IN HER 1990 NOVEL *Disappearing Moon Café*, Sky Lee capitalizes upon the slipperiness of public and private historical narrative in order to examine the cultural codes of race and gender in 1920s Vancouver. In *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White asserts that the writers of historical narrative seek to organize events and experiences into “a form assimilable to structures of meaning,” and therefore, any reading of historical material must be aware of the influence of both real and imaginary events (1). Sky Lee’s staggered narrative emphasizes the ways in which the fictional Wong family’s history resists completion and dismantles the generational story’s traditional trope of defining the self through family. Kae’s desire to know the whole Wong generational story springs from an attempt to structure the meaning of family and self, but Lee builds in narrative gaps that resist satisfying the reader’s desire for a complete story. The narratives that describe the unsolved 1924 Janet Smith murder case foster a similar fascinating dissatisfaction, as the few known facts of the case have become obscured by sensational journalism and reportage that interpreted the case through ideologies of racial purity, and later, by the tainted genre of the “true-crime” narrative. Lee uses the Smith murder case as a correlative to the Wong family’s history, creating a counternarrative of Chinese-Canadian history that questions master narratives of nation. This paper will examine the ways in which Lee situates the historic and metafictional body of Janet Smith as both a contaminant that infects the Wong family and a catalyst that inspires their familial regeneration and prosperity.

The conflation of a societal poison and cure in a single sacrificial body is an ancient Greek construct, reified in post-structural theory by Jacques Derrida in *Dissemination*, and by René Girard in *Violence and the*

Sacred. In order to drive evil away from the city, the Greeks would appoint a human scapegoat, the *pharmakos*, to be sacrificed and thereby cleanse the city of its suffering. The figure of the *pharmakos* represents not only the invading evil but also the protected community: “the representative of the outside is nonetheless *constituted*, regularly granted its place by the community, chosen, kept, fed, etc., in the very heart of the inside” (Derrida 133). The figure of the *pharmakos* is reviled as the embodiment of societal ills, but nonetheless cherished as the element that will purify those same ills:

The ceremony of the *pharmakos* is thus played out on the boundary line between inside and outside, which has its function ceaselessly to trace and retrace. *Intra muros / extra muros*. The origin of difference and division, the *pharmakos* represents evil both introjected and projected. Beneficial insofar as he cures — and for that, venerated and cared for — harmful insofar as he incarnates the powers of evil — and for that, feared and treated with caution. Alarming and calming. Sacred and accursed. (133)

Girard emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balanced relationship between the community and the *pharmakos*, so that the sacrificial object will be able to serve as “a good conductor” of violence, “in the sense that metal is a good conductor of electricity” (39). He cautions against allowing too close a relationship with the *pharmakos*, in fear that the “sacred” violence of civil protection would become “a scandalous accomplice in the process of pollution, even a kind of catalyst in the propagation” of “impure,” annihilating violence (39). In *Disappearing Moon Café*, Lee writes the metafictional Janet Smith as *pharmakos* for Vancouver in the early twentieth century. Her position as servant to a rich family placed her firmly within the city, and her death sparked moral and racial outrage within the British-based white population of 1920s Vancouver. But the sensation surrounding her death precipitated a closer look at racial tensions in the city, and the Chinese community’s strategy of self-defense resulted in firmer legal and employment rights for Chinese workers. In Lee’s text, Janet Smith’s dead female body acts as a poison that becomes a societal cure for the era’s racial hysteria, a cursed blessing that haunts our shared history as Canadians.

To read *Disappearing Moon Café* as an “ethnic” text that challenges the dominant discourse of a national literature necessitates the recognition of Canadian history as mutable. Linda Hutcheon reminds us that a historic metatext may be used to illustrate the links between current

politics and past culture: “That border between past events and present praxis is where historiographic metafiction self-consciously locates itself. That past was real, but it is lost or at least displaced, only to be reinstated as the referent of art, the relic or trace of the real” (173). The Janet Smith case, unsolved after more than seventy years, constitutes prime material as a metafictional referent, for the case has managed to remain prominent in the public imagination, carrying that “trace of the real” alongside the fantastic ellipsis of its insolubility. In a recent article in *B.C. Studies*, Scott Kerwin asserts that the Smith murder case was “a social drama for the young metropolis of Vancouver and White British Columbia ... the sort of liminal event that social theorists argue leads communities to explore complex issues of identity and how they ‘see themselves’” (104). Kerwin’s note of cynicism about the interpretations of social theorists underscores the ways in which historical narratives re-write private events as public narratives, as well as the converse, the ways in which public events may be filtered through a prevailing ideology in an attempt to “make meaning” for the private citizen.

Historical narratives that describe violent death are no exception. Frank Jones, in his true-crime anthology *Trail of Blood: A Canadian Murder Odyssey*, suggests that while violence may be “the final desperate response to oppressive social conditions,” he believes that “murder may be the final eccentricity of larger-than-life characters who later take their places in the folk songs and folklore of our country. Like it or not, murder reveals something of our national psyche” (vii-viii). The folkloric construction of a “larger-than-life” public narrative is particularly prevalent, yet significantly opaque, in accounts of violent crime, in which the story pivots upon “facts” that are often romanticized or convoluted by investigators, journalists or other commentators. A story’s mutability is known among folklorists as the “emergent quality,” that is “the characteristic of ... any narrative that changes when it is told” (Stone ix). The Janet Smith case intrigues readers with its profusion of possible but unprovable solutions, much as a folk tale’s emergent quality signifies its prominence in the cultural imagination.

Three contrasting accounts of the Smith murder site, taken from texts published in the early 1980s, demonstrate the rhetorical varnish with which writers continue to brush the unsolved case. For the purpose of revealing inconsistencies in these highly constructed accounts, let us focus on two details of the case, the position of the victim’s body and her facial expression at the time of discovery. According to Jones, police investigators found Smith in the basement laundry room of her employer’s

home, “her head partly under the laundry tubs” with her eyes “open and staring” (209-10). Martin Robin, in *The Saga of Red Ryan and Other Tales of Violence from Canada’s Past*, reverses the position of the body, placing “her head under the ironing board and feet pointed towards the laundry tubs opposite,” but concurs with Jones about Smith’s facial expression, noting “a frozen stare in her opened eyes” (128). Edward Starkins, in *Who Killed Janet Smith?*, agrees with Jones that Smith’s “head lay beneath a laundry tub,” but his description of Smith’s face differs from both Jones’s and Robin’s accounts. Starkins’s beautification of the dead body is worth quoting in detail: “She had been a very pretty girl. Her skin was smooth and unblemished, and she had full, red lips and a wealth of thick blonde hair. Her expression did not reveal the slightest expression of horror or pain, which was remarkable considering the frightful damage that had been done to her head” (6). This *film noir* style places a veiled emphasis on cultural interpretations of femininity and criminal culpability. Is the murder of a beautiful woman more unjust than the murder of an unattractive woman? Is the murder of a beautiful woman more expected because of the desire she may have inspired? Rhetorical stylings such as these suggest how quickly meaning may be made of a single detail, and how a literary or investigative perspective introduces order into a written version of chaos. Linda Hutcheon emphasizes that historiographic metafiction gains force and credibility from the “tension between what is known about history and what is narrated in the text” (174); the tension between real and imaginary is already acute in an unsolved murder, even more so for cases in which the victim is a young attractive woman. The convolutions of the Janet Smith case have become so much a part of the telling that the profusion of conjecture has reached a perfect gridlock of detail.

Sky Lee avoids much of the detail of the Smith murder site in *Disappearing Moon Café*, concentrating instead upon the case’s effect on Vancouver’s Chinese community. Lee introduces the murder through Morgan’s parody of the sensational media coverage, mocking both white and Chinese attitudes, as well as suggesting a self-parody of Morgan’s own scandalous past: “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! Chopsticks drop and clatter in surprise! Clumps of rice stick in throats ...” (*Moon* 66). The multiple exclamations of this passage demonstrate Morgan’s sense of drama, and his grotesque sense of irony is brought to bear on the gossipy prurience of primarily British Vancouver residents: “People became openly obsessed with splattered brain matter. At dinner tables,

they might as well have been eating coagulating blood pudding. Newspapers egged them on at breakfast. More lovesick but banal diary tidbits for tea, dear?" (67).

Lee is aware that a more romantic view of the Smith case lay beneath the furor. She capitalizes upon the trope of ill-fated romance by recasting the co-workers as star-crossed lovers in Gwei Chang's August Moon tale:

The nursemaid was from heaven, and the houseboy a mere earth-bound mortal. Then, they met and fell deeply in love. The gods or the powers above were very displeased with this liaison between unequals. Worse still, the young lovers' pining after each other adversely affected their work. So, the powers-that-be split them apart and created a racial chasm between them, as impossible to cross as the heavens themselves. (223)

Lee is not the first writer to suggest a romantic liaison between Smith and Foon Sing; true-crime anthologists suggest a mutual flirtation between the two domestic workers, based upon gifts that Foon Sing gave to Smith and upon photos that depict them smiling and comfortable in each other's presence (Jones 214, Robin 127, Starkins 89-90). Lee's August Moon tale assesses the Smith case on the basis of class as well as race. Although Smith's whiteness is associated with heaven and Foon Sing's Chinese self is mortal, both characters are referenced by the infantilizing labels of their jobs: "nursemaid" and "houseboy." Though "unequal," both are defined by their class and their immigrant status, and the powers-that-be attempt to structure the meaning of their lives by establishing them as ethnic stereotypes: Foon Sing as a licentious opportunist, and Smith as the devoted "Scottish Nightingale," nicknamed because two workmen had allegedly overheard Smith singing while hanging out her employer's laundry on the very morning of her death (Jones 209, Starkins 79). While it would be inaccurate to suggest that Smith and Foon Sing were equally socially disadvantaged, leaders of the Scottish community expended a lot of energy to establish Smith as an icon of British womanhood, the better to imply that mutual affection between the two domestic workers was impossible.

Suffice to say that the Janet Smith case galvanized racial, sexual, and class tensions in Vancouver, and the public outcry that followed her death precipitated more than one attempt to insulate the city's population from moral turpitude and miscegenation. The 1924 "Janet Smith Bill" constituted one such attempt, proposed in order to prohibit white women from working with Chinese men. Despite the era's endemic racism, the Bill was

doomed to fail in the provincial legislature, not only because white women would “find themselves protected right out of a job” (*Moon* 68), but also because “the B.C. government did not have the constitutional power to enact laws depriving Asians of the ability to take up wage labour” (Kerwin 102). However, in the process of advocating for their economic livelihood, the Chinese community acquired a firmer legal footing in Vancouver. Sky Lee attests, “the Janet Smith Bill flopped and became Chinatown’s first real success story” (*Moon* 227). To consider that Chinatown’s first real success story sprang from the dead body of a white woman may seem grisly, but “an old hothead” in *Disappearing Moon Café* points out the starkly constructed cultural contrast between the “Scottish Nightingale” and Chinatown’s railroad labourers and “bachelor men”: “Who would have thought that one dead female could stir up such a fiasco?...No white one ever blinked an eye for the countless dead china-men ‘murdered accidentally,’ but one of their own catches it, and they all go crazy” (225).

The female body haunts *Disappearing Moon Café* as a symbol of forbidden sexuality and contamination, emphasizing sociocultural tensions around biological assimilation, racial purity, and incest. Lee’s characters are not only referring to Smith’s race when they call her a “no-good she-ghost” (79); though they are invoking a Chinese colloquialism for pale-skinned Caucasians, undeniably the dead nursemaid’s pallor is a metonym for her haunting power. As one of the few white people to which the text refers, Janet Smith acts as a symbolic parallel to Ting An’s “nameless and penniless” French-Canadian wife, she who fades into a ghostlike presence while still living, haunting her son Morgan with her “sad, sloppy expression” (173). The figure of Janet Smith becomes a metaphor not only for the forbidden attraction of white women, but also the forbidden bodies of married or underage Chinese women. Lee makes it clear that with relatively few women in the community, Chinatown was a place of thwarted desire: “Since 1923 the Chinese Exclusion Act had taken its toll. The rapidly diminishing chinese-canadian community had withdrawn into itself, ripe for incest” (147). Graham Huggan further suggests that Lee situates the forbidden female body as “an overdetermined site of racial/sexual ‘contamination’”:

In *Disappearing Moon Café*, that metaphorical ‘contamination’ spreads to the collective body of the Chinese-Canadian community... Lee charts the contradictions in the European fetishization of the gendered ethnic body: a process which allows the desired ‘other’ to be seen simultaneously *as the carrier of a disease*. A primary vehicle for this

racist/sexist fantasy is that other ‘unpardonable sin,’ incest. (Huggan 39-40)

The forbidden body of Janet Smith presages other female bodies that are off limits to the Wong men, foreshadowing Ting An’s affair with Fong Mei, and Morgan’s affair with Suzanne. Within the frame of the plot, the Smith case acts as a catalyst, a distracting public event that enables Fong Mei to initiate her affair with Ting An. The liaison saves the Wong family from the antigenerational curse of Choy Fuk’s infertility, but jeopardizes subsequent generations with its secrecy. By situating the affair’s beginning during the chaotic aftermath of the murder, Lee suggests that the unsolvable murder becomes a correlative for the untenable (and sometimes “untellable”) family history. Just as Smith’s murder remains a series of disjointed details that reach no satisfactory conclusion, so the Wong family is “a story full of holes,” or in Morgan’s terms, “assholes plugged with little secrets” (*Moon* 160). Both narratives depend upon their gaps to grant them the power to defer meaning. “No wonder no one writes family sagas any more!” exclaims Kae (128), demonstrating Hayden White’s argument that readers hunger after coherent narratives (4). Furthermore, Linda Hutcheon emphasizes that in postmodern fiction, “facts are made to seem fictional and fictions are made to seem factual” (182). Although Lee mocks the romantic family saga with faux title suggestions like *Temple of Wonged Women*, her fictional family is written as arguably realistic, while the theories that surround the Smith murder are so improbable that they suggest further peregrinations rather than the closed circle of complete narrative.

Lee notes that the sexual volatility of the Smith case owed much to its potential for dramatic posturing, suggesting that for white British Columbians, the event was as hysterical as it was historical: “the idea of a young, lone, yellow-skinned male standing over the inert body of a white-skinned female would send them into a bloodthirsty frenzy” (*Moon* 70). The possibility of sexual tension between Foon Sing and Smith was in fact a concern for a British Columbian population that wished to boast of its “pure” British ancestry. As Scott Kerwin suggests, “monitoring the racial boundaries of the province at its most intimate level” made “the sexual choices of men and women a public racial concern” (105). This public racial concern included a form of willful ignorance, as white British Columbians “openly wondered whether Asians and Europeans had the biological capacity to inter-marry” (Kerwin 84). *Disappearing Moon Café* mocks any doubts about reproductive capacity between races along with the contradictory but extant fear of producing racially mixed children. The

Wong family tree, placed prominently at the beginning of the text, reveals family secrets of race and paternity at a glance, while the narrative slowly and dramatically metes out such information. Ting An, as the son of Gwei Chang and Kelora, is a racial mix of Chinese and Canadian Aboriginal; Beatrice, John, Suzanne, John's daughters and Kae, by extension through Ting An and Kelora, are all part Aboriginal. Ting An's son Morgan is a mix of Chinese, Caucasian and First Nations heritage. Since Gwei Chang never tells his family about Kelora, the Wong children assume themselves to be pure Chinese. The Wong family's emotional investment in racial purity echoes that of MLA Mary Ellen Smith, the lady member who championed "race motherhood" in 1920s British Columbia. Ironically, Kae (unaware of her partial Aboriginal heredity) genetically marvels at Morgan's Eurasian appearance, thinking censoriously "that kind of thing just wasn't done in nice families" (*Moon* 84).

In *Disappearing Moon Café*, Lee conflates the sexually forbidden and the dead in the trope of the lost beloved woman; the forbidden female body becomes the *whole* story that accounts for the *holes* in the story. The epithet "dead," when directed at a woman, indicates either barrenness or dangerous fertility; the unpredictably fertile female body threatens the stability of the Wong family dynasty even as it ensures its continuance. Fong Mei, on the verge of being disowned by her mother-in-law, curses her own uterus for its childlessness, calling herself "useless," a "dead girl-bag" (49). Mui Lan curses Fong Mei as "stinky she-bag" when the younger woman does not become pregnant with a Wong heir (58). Years later, Fong Mei denounces Suzanne's "contaminated" pregnancy by condemning her as a "dead girl, dead girl-bag!" cursing her daughter's womb for the incestuous "monster" that it houses (202). The "bag" refers to the female reproductive system, but perhaps also the female body in general; Mari Peepre suggests that the text describes a patriarchal world in which "women were considered worthless baggage and were treated accordingly" (81). The "bag" as female body may be even more ambiguous if we regard the bag as packaging, the attractive female appearance that inspires desire. Given such a metaphor, it should come as no surprise to hear Janet Smith cursed as "a dirty she-bag" during Foon Sing's interrogation (*Moon* 77). The "dead girl-bag," especially the figure of Suzanne, seems like another *pharmakos* figure, embodying both the poison and the cure; she is fecund but cursed, desired for beauty but devalued as worthless, beloved yet sacrificed. Fong Mei's rising status from frightened bride to defiant lover to angry matriarch can be charted along a scale of relative "deadness." The spectre of Janet Smith, the dead servant, parallels Fong Mei's status in the Wong household before

she conceives a child. “I don’t care where you drag your dead body” says Mui Lan to the (supposedly) barren, servile young Fong Mei (59). Fong Mei struggles against being sacrificed on the altar of fertility; she fights for the “aliveness” that will only come with maternal agency. To be dead, in the Wong family, is to disappear, leaving barely a trace in the family narrative; but to be dead in the text of *Disappearing Moon Café* is to be a powerful, and inexorably feminine, haunting agent.

The Wong family secrets begin to slip out in a sequence that introduces the Smith case both as a historical event and as a correlative to the Wong family history, prompting Morgan’s warning: “If word got out, there were still plenty of people who’d take drastic measures to keep their grisly secrets” (70). Morgan primes the conversational pump with the Smith case in order to introduce the family scandals. His speech is loaded with ambiguity: “No matter where you turn, we’re all related in the end” (69). His claim that he will make “a killing” by revealing the identity of Smith’s murderer echoes Morgan’s guilt in Suzanne’s untimely death, and his eroticization of Smith’s dead body echoes the tone of true crime reportage: “A bright Sani-Queen washer and dryer now blocked the exact spot where illustrious legs once littered the floor” (69). Morgan lives in the same basement in which Smith was killed, a grandiose challenge to the novel’s putative realism and a metaphor for Morgan’s inherited piece of Wong tragedy. He lives at the “scene of the crime,” just as he remains forever at the scene of Suzanne’s death, to the extent that he pursues a second incestuous affair with young Kae who “look[s] just like Suzie” (190).

Lee changes the address of the murder site from 3851 Osler Street, the “historical” address in the posh district of Shaughnessy Heights, to 1414 Osler Street, which we might call the murder site’s “metafictional” address. Marke Andrews, in an early review of *Disappearing Moon Café* that appeared in the *Vancouver Sun*, points out that Chinese-speaking readers may translate the numerals 1414 as *yit-say yit-say*, or “death at once, death at once,” making this choice of numbers a “cultural allusion for insiders” (qtd. in Condé 246). The phrase’s repetition works against its literal meaning to suggest perpetuity; though death may happen “at once,” the Smith death lingers in the Wong family consciousness. The address change indicates an erosion of fact, Lee’s contribution to the emergent quality of the Smith legend.

Lee’s narrative of the interrogation of Wong Foon Sing at the Chinese Benevolent Association is striking for its violent innuendo, especially the envious questions about sexual impropriety from “old coolies” who

“could almost make-believe that they were generals” (*Moon* 219). The interrogation scenes give readers a window into the lonely and frustrating world of these “bachelor men.” The men equate the murder with their own thwarted desire, and their questions are as lascivious as they are accusatory:

“You must have had a pretty cozy situation up there in a big empty house. Working all day, so close to a nice young girl, eh? Maybe it was too much of a good thing for a pumpkin-head like you to bear.” All of Wong’s interrogators pressed forward, fixing their eyes on him, anxiously waiting for some telltale twitches or skulking around the mouth. “Tell us, Cousin! Was it enough to drive a man crazy? Crazy enough to want to ...” (76)

The possibility of being driven crazy by a socially imposed celibacy is not a new idea to these bachelor men. Living in the long shadow of the Chinese Exclusion Act, most of the older “Gold Mountain” labourers lived without wives or children, making Vancouver’s Chinatown a place of suppressed desire. During the interrogation, Gwei Chang stands behind Foon Sing so that “he wouldn’t have to look at his face,” a position that evokes both the confessional and the torture chamber (81). Set against such sociosexual tension, Ting An’s sexual liaison with Fong Mei seems less an adulterous affair than an inevitability, and Choy Fuk’s sexual possession of both wife and mistress seems obscenely indulgent.

Lee interrupts the interrogation about one-third of the way into the text, and neither Janet Smith nor Wong Foon Sing appear as characters again until the book’s epilogue, “New Moon.” Lee’s enforced narrative break places the reader into a state of suspenseful ignorance about Foon Sing’s involvement in the case. It may be that Lee halts the interrogation of Foon Sing in order to interrogate the rest of the Wong family. In the end, the reader is left only with Gwei Chang’s conjecture about Smith’s death and Foon Sing’s possible guilt or innocence.

In the novel’s epilogue, the wild accusations of the interrogation escalate into deliberate torture. The feminized image of Foon Sing, “a beautiful boy” (76), and the men’s heavily sexualized speech culminates in Gwei Chang’s shouted order, “he’s going to keep his mouth shut against the authorities if we have to stuff it with his own hot dog,” implying both castration and oral rape (81). Foon Sing’s partial drowning becomes an eroticized invasion that leads to a social death and an informed rebirth:

“Lift him out!” someone yelled, his voice thrilled by the savageness of what they were doing. Hands reached over the wet shirt, and the houseboy crumpled onto the sopping floor, but he did not start to breathe again. Not right away. Someone kicked him in the stomach, and then Foon Sing coughed and sputtered, wheezing long and hard for air. He couldn’t get up, not with his elbows and wrists tightly strapped behind him... He still looked blurred, as he had when his face was just under an inch or two of water. Nice touch, plunging his head backwards into the tub so that Gwei Chang and his men all had a good view of his tortured face. But more importantly, he could gaze up at his own mortality, the tip of his nose just below the surface of subsistence, his mind rapidly seeping away. (218)

In this violent imitation of the missionary position, the men watch Foon Sing’s face for signs of guilt with the same eagerness that they might watch a woman’s face for signs of ecstasy. His blurred face becomes one of the “disappearing moon” images that Lee scatters throughout the text. His brush with death echoes Smith’s demise, aligning with reports that claim Janet tried to speak to Foon Sing when he found her with her eyes open, perhaps gazing up at *her* mortality (Robin 128). In Janet’s alleged attempt at dying words, and Foon Sing’s “mind rapidly seeping away,” we discover parallel inadequate speech acts. Foon Sing is nearly killed, but he is reborn as someone who will “keep his mouth shut” and not jeopardize the Chinese community. Gwei Chang pays for his part in the interrogation; he gains a new perspective on his generation of Chinatown men, and is saddened by “what chinamen had allowed themselves to become in the face of [white hysteria] — pitiful men, with no end for their self-pity in sight” (*Moon* 226). Years later, Gwei Chang relives the “submerged violence” of the interrogation, and he “fought the hand on the back of his neck, pushing his face down into murky waters of memory” (218), as though it was he, and not Foon Sing, who was nearly drowned that August night in 1924.

While waxing philosophic about Foon Sing’s possible guilt, Gwei Chang foreshadows the affair between Morgan and Suzanne: “He was young, and she was young. And who can keep young people apart? They attract like magnets, don’t they?” (218-19). When Gwei Chang rewrites the Janet Smith case as an August Moon Festival story, he also draws a parallel between himself and Kelora as lovers whose desire could not bridge the racial chasm. Gwei Chang’s question, “Easy to see that there was no happy ending here, but why did it have to end in death?” (223),

becomes the feminist touchstone of Lee's text. The question interrogates male complicity in female death, refuses the patriarchal sacrifice of a beautiful woman in order to appease the old gods of order, and repudiates the female body as *pharmakos*. In asking this question, Gwei Chang mourns Kelora, who haunts him as a "silken breeze" even during his interrogation of Foon Sing (78), and his mourning aligns him with the lonely bachelors even though he is a powerful patriarch.

Gwei Chang goes on to prove himself no stranger to contaminated subjectivity. He poisons the well of paternal trust in his long deferred zeal to claim the industrious Ting An as his son. When Gwei Chang assesses that Ting An's French-Canadian fiancée "was nameless and penniless enough to make the perfect target for him" (232), this thought serves as a chilling echo of Gwei Chang's earlier theory about Foon Sing as Janet Smith's murderer: "He must have noted that she took everything that she was given, like a child, without forethought or after. She was also lonely, uprooted as he was once. He understood this and could manipulate it for her attentions" (222). Gwei Chang equates Ting An with Foon Sing, two fools who ruined their lives over desire for white women. Janet Smith's purported flirtatiousness led to speculation that she was murdered as a result of jealousy (Jones 207, Starkins 39-41), and when Gwei Chang refers to Ting An's intended wife as "another blond demoness — this one not dead enough" (*Moon* 232), he summons the ghost of Janet Smith to imply that death is the proper punishment for such sexual demonesses. Gwei Chang eschews the tender tone of his August Moon story to suggest that desire for a white woman may be all right for a "dead boy" like Foon Sing, but not for a son of Gwei Chang. But the irony of Gwei Chang's desire for Kelora undercuts his righteousness. Gwei Chang asserts that the family name requires that Ting An must marry "a real wife from China" (233), and though Gwei Chang sees the white woman as the contaminant, it becomes clear that the Wong name has been poisoned since Gwei Chang's abandonment of his Aboriginal first wife, Kelora. Ting An's explosion of anger at Gwei Chang's hypocrisy seems satisfyingly defiant, but soon Ting An returns to living out his life as a "lost Wong male"; his alcoholic death demonstrates his familial "ability to 'eat bitterness,' to internalize grief and to remain silent in the face of trouble" (Peepie 81).

It is no coincidence that Lee gives her fictional family the same name as the prime suspect in the Janet Smith case; Foon Sing is indeed "one of the family," another lost Wong man trapped by his desire for a forbidden female body. The family tree calls Morgan and Suzanne's dead baby boy

the “last Wong male,” according to the strict rules of filiation, but Kae’s infant son, Robert Lee, reclaims the feminine surname of his formidable great-grandmother, Lee Mui Lan, suggesting possibilities for matrilineal recuperation. Kae’s baby boy may be read as a Wong male that happens to bear the Lee name. (Indeed, Henry Lee, Kae’s husband, makes such a minimal appearance in the text that baby Robert seems more Wong than Lee.)

For the non-Chinese reader, the “disappearing moon” of the title remains a ghostly metaphor for both female shame and haunting. Janet Smith’s white blondeness makes her a kind of disappearing moon, a ghostly galleon of a face that hovers behind this text. The chaste and female moon may be read in Fong Mei’s attempts to hide her face in order to save it; she is mortified as a “barefaced bride” (45). Under Mui Lan’s baleful eye, “Fong Mei’s colour drained away” as though she had “no face left at all, having lost her standing as a human being” (58). The “lopsided” face of the maiden on Fong Mei’s teak linen chest suggests the face of a violated or shamed virgin figure (136). This frail beauty stands in sharp contrast to the seductive solidity of Song Ang’s naked posterior like “two great moons” as she commands Choy Fuk to wash her feet (104). The maternal Fong Mei, who is forceful to the point of tyranny and fights for subjectivity by sloughing off her “dead girl-bag” status, eventually eclipses the bashful female moon.

In *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada*, Smaro Kamboureli warns that “ethnic subjectivity is never utterly free and of itself,” and that the ethnic subject is perpetually “interpreting how she has already been constructed, thus speaking back to, or together with, what defines and delimits her as ethnic” (94). In her desire to speak back to the Janet Smith case, Sky Lee has said that she did not know how to write about the event until she considered reading the event through its projected effect on a Chinese family (“Interview” 387). If we regard the Smith case as an event that defined Chinese ethnicity in Canada in the 1920s, then Lee’s use of the case as metatext works to delimit Chinese ethnicity in Canada in the 1990s. Without a doubt, a politics of difference, however problematic, has proven to be more valuable than degenerative nostalgia to communities who seek to situate themselves as hyphenated Canadians. This politics of difference plays upon the extreme malleability of historical narrative; according to Hayden White, an event is “real” only when someone remembers it, and is able to align this memory in a chronologically ordered sequence (20). Reading *Disappearing Moon Café* through Kamboureli’s theory that a “failure

to know the Other” may be a form of cultural “negative capability,” the forbidden and textually contaminated body of Janet Smith represents the poison that “both reveals the alterity of the Other and exposes the fallacy that dominant culture is transparent, dominant in and of itself, a community of pure hegemonic will or one that fully knows itself” (Kamboureli 130). Historical certainty and cultural hegemony are winnowed away by this curative threat. The same negative capability assures that “the secret of the white woman’s death would never be fully revealed” (*Moon* 221), for to reveal all in the world of *Disappearing Moon Café* would be to dissolve the education provided by the haunting, the cure that follows the poison. If Lee puns on the idea that Smith, as a “foreign ghost,” is an actual haunting presence, perhaps she installs the same sort of pun in the portrayal of Wong Foon Sing as the “Iron Chink,” the device that performs the work (in this case, the emotional and political work) of many people (*Jin Guo* 96).

If we consider Janet Smith “the perfect target,” a woman whose violent death alerted British Columbia to a need for greater social and cultural tolerance, then Smith’s reinstatement as a referent of art in *Disappearing Moon Café* ushers in a series of historical displacements that demands a broader perspective of Canadian history and citizenship. Such displacements seek to inform (or perhaps trouble to the point of haunting) Canadian narratives of nation that are relentlessly British-based. Kamboureli points out that Canada is “a state that forgets it is still attempting to define itself” (100), and Lee’s text reproduces an early twentieth century Canada that becomes defined, and eventually delimited, by scandal. If this metafictional text acts as “both an inscription and invention of a world” (Hutcheon 171), Sky Lee inscribes a world wherein a single culture cannot presume either transparency or dominance, and invents a world in which a woman’s dead body recodes the gaps in Canadian historical narrative.

WORKS CITED

- Condé, Mary. “Marketing Ethnicity: Sky Lee’s *Disappearing Moon Café*.” *Literature of Region and Nation: Proceedings of the Sixth International Literature of Region and Nation Conference*. Ed. Winnifred M. Bogaards. Saint John: U of New Brunswick P, 1998. 239-55.

- Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. 1972. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981.
- Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. 1972. Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977.
- Huggan, Graham. "The Latitudes of Romance: Representations of Chinese Canada in Bowering's *To All Appearances A Lady and Lee's Disappearing Moon Café*." *Canadian Literature* 140 (1994): 34-48.
- Hutcheon, Linda. "History and/as Intertext." *Future Indicative: Literary Theory and Canadian Literature*. Ed. John Moss. Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1987. 169-84.
- Jones, Frank. *Trail of Blood: A Canadian Murder Odyssey*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1981.
- Kamboureli, Smaro. *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Kerwin, Scott. "The Janet Smith Bill of 1924 and the Language of Race and Nation in British Columbia." *B.C. Studies* 121 (1999): 83-114.
- Lee, Sky. *Disappearing Moon Café*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1991.
- . "Is there a mind without media any more?" Interview with C. Allyson Lee. *The Other Woman: Women of Colour in Contemporary Literature*. Ed. Makeda Silvera. Toronto: Sister Vision, 1995. 382-403.
- . "Sharon Lee." *Jin Guo: Voices of Chinese Canadian Women*. Toronto: Women's Press, 1992. 91-98.
- Peepre, Mari. "Resistance and the Demon Mother in Diaspora Literature: Sky Lee and Denise Chong Speak Back to the Mother/land." *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 18 (1998): 79-92.
- Robin, Martin. "The Houseboy." *The Saga of Red Ryan and Other Tales of Violence from Canada's Past*. Saskatoon: Western Producer, 1982. 127-51.
- Starkins, Edward. *Who Killed Janet Smith?* Toronto: Macmillan, 1984.
- Stone, Kay. *Burning Brightly: New Light on Old Tales Told Today*. Toronto: Broadview, 1998.
- White, Hayden. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987.