MAPPING CULTURAL IDENTITY:
JAPANESE NORTH-AMERICAN AUTHORS
BETWEEN MEMORY AND MYTH

Thesis Abstract

Ph.D. Candidate:
Alina-Elena Anton

Academic Advisor:
Prof. Univ. Dr. Odette Blumenfeld

January 2014
IAŞI
The contemporary preoccupation with multiculturalism and cultural diversity has generated an increased interest, perhaps even an academic trend, in the exploration of identity phenomena, as well as a reevaluation of earlier perspectives on ethnic and cultural identity as a relatively homogeneous reality. The challenge is particularly difficult when it comes to the articulation of identity at the level of ethnic (and biological) belonging versus national identification within the borders of two countries so marked by multiculturalism as Canada and the United States.

As the title shows, the thesis Mapping Cultural Identity: Japanese North-American Authors between Memory and Myth aims to explore the interplay between memory and myth in a series of literary writings by contemporary Japanese Canadian and Japanese American authors. The six literary works selected for investigation—three Japanese American books (John Okada’s No-No Boy; David Mura’s Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei; Julie Otsuka’s The Buddha in the Attic) and three Japanese Canadian works (Joy Kogawa’s Obasan; Kerri Sakamoto’s The Electrical Field; Terry Watada’s Daruma Days)—are thematically linked by the “guiding thread” weaved through the correlation of memory and myth in the articulation of identity. Ethnicity has been of particular interest to our critical endeavour, in that we have sought to probe the manner in which ethnic identity articulates itself through the agency of memory and myth. Mention must be made, however, that identity is by no means reducible to these singular dimensions. We only selected memory and myth from the whole “sea” of constitutive elements that make up identity because they are less explored as components in dialogue and are generally more difficult to grasp individually. Consequently, our thesis started from the main research hypothesis that the study of identity (and particularly ethnic identity) can be enriched and becomes more comprehensive through the dialogic investigation of two catalyzing elements, memory and myth.

With respect to memory, our analysis was interested, on the one hand, in the possibility of the individual recuperating and appropriating memories from the collective level and, on the other hand, in the dialogic relationship between these recuperated memories and individual memory. In terms of myth, two aspects were particularly of interest to us: the “model minority” myth—an ideologically motivated fiction projected by the dominant society onto the Asian North-American community even nowadays and often absorbed into the mental articulation of individual members, with potentially destructive effects such as alienation and even madness,—and the ancestral homeland of Japan as a mythical dimension integrated in the construction of individual identity through an imaginative process of
narrative representation and re-creation—starting from the notion that a space can only exist culturally through an *a priori* process of imaginative representation.

**Structure**

With respect to structure, the thesis consists of **four main chapters**, each with up to seven **subchapters**, plus an **introduction** and **overall conclusions**. The purpose of the analysis is first explained in the opening section, followed by clarifying remarks on the introduction of an identitary model articulated around memory and myth. Memory and myth are inextricably bound with each other and play a significant role in our endeavor to generate and sustain identity.

**The first part** is a theoretical endeavour that aims to articulate a reference framework for the subsequent investigation of the six literary texts chosen. Since the ensuing analysis becomes truly productive only in connection with the existing corpus of research, **the first sub-chapter** of the theoretical frame consists of a presentation of the most representative Asian and Japanese North-American works, as well as an overview of Asian American studies, with a focus on the main theories and investigative directions of the field.

**Section 1.2** is dedicated to investigating the relationship between the notion of “otherness” and the cultural-aesthetic authority of a minority voice. Awareness of a certain “estrangement” (*othering*) from the dominant culture is repeatedly present in the articulation of Japanese American and Japanese Canadian subjectivity. This sense of “otherness” manifested at different levels—physical, social, historical and mental—leads to a kind of “cultural authority of the Other” as “part of the political unconscious of the minority subject” (Palumbo-Liu 1994: 79). Indeed, as early as 1974, Frank Chin and the editors of the controversial anthology *Aiieeeee!* acknowledged that Asian Americans “have developed a culture and sensibility clearly dissociated from the Chinese and Japanese, as well as from the dominant American one” (12).

The last section of the theoretical chapter, **sub-chapter 1.3**, consists of a critical evaluation of the current state of Asian North-American studies, along with a discussion of the critical reception of Asian North-American literature in Europe and especially Romania. We considered that such an evaluation was necessary and significant, given that the investigation in question was conducted in geographical distance from the space in which Asian American consciousness has been historically concentrated. Our analysis noted a great disparity between the establishing of Asian North American projects as “sites of knowledge production” in the two countries where the consciousness of Asian descent has been
historically manifested. While in the United States ethnic issues arouse the interest of universities and came to be a topic of academic research as a result of the pressure imposed on the society by the civil rights movements of the 1960s (it was also now that Asian American studies first started to take shape), in Canada, the citizens of Japanese and Asian descent continue to be interesting today mainly to immigration studies. For this reason, the celebratory claim that the increased visibility of Asian Canadian literature signals a “coming to voice” of formerly silenced and marginalized groups in Canada ultimately fails to consider the potential containment of cultural difference in a multicultural context. In this sense, Anthony Chan’s pronouncement that “when it comes to Asian Canadian Studies, Canada is a failed nation” seems to be verified by the very marginal presence of such ethnic studies in Canadian universities.

In our specific area of interest, we consider it most striking that a minor in Asian Canadian literature continues to be conspicuously absent at the University of British Columbia even as we write this thesis, even if the UBC libraries contain extensive materials in Asian Canadians. In 2012, as part of its efforts to recognize Japanese Canadians affected by internment in 1942, the university called for the help of the Asian Canadian community in order to develop an interdisciplinary program that would highlight the contributions of Asian Canadians and examine anti-Asian racism that produced events like the forced removal of Japanese Canadians during the World War II. To a certain extent, the new program was supposed to function as a movement to expiate for the 76 Japanese Canadian students that UBC had unjustly expelled in 1942, after the passing of the War Measures Act. Yet the propositions developed after the community consultation failed to receive official approval from the Senate, so that the starting academic year (2013-2014) once again leaves students without access to such a valuable field. While the failure of the initiative may be attributed to organizational factors, we contend that it also bespeaks of the Japanese Canadians experiences as a still controversial topic, especially since this western province has historically exhibited a strong degree of racial antagonism towards the concentration of the Japanese community within its borders.

In Europe, these kinds of ethnic literary productions are even more marginally manifested than in Canada and the United States. Still, we contend that a wider presence of Japanese North American literature (and indeed Asian North American literary productions in general) would be both welcomed and valuable to the European framework. The door has already been opened to a certain degree, and Japanese North American literature has started to enter the European academic and cultural arena. With the internationalization of American
studies, white scholars have also become interested in American ethnic literatures, and some, like Helena Grice in the UK, have been teaching Asian American writers for a number of years. Asian North American literature has also penetrated into the academia in Germany, where we ourselves became acquainted with the field of Asian American studies and several of its representative texts. Even the Romanian university sphere has not been left untouched by this interdisciplinary field of investigation, although the texts have maintained only a marginal presence in academic courses and research—we found it difficult, for instance, to identify scholarship in this area when we first started our investigation, and the few studies available were mostly in English, a fact that limits their accessibility to academics and students specializing in English language and literatures (or cultural studies). With respect to the visibility of this literature to the general readership, however, the situation is more problematic, for very few Japanese American or Japanese Canadian works have been released on the European literary market—at least from what we have been able to find. For example, Japanese American writer Julie Otsuka’s second book *The Buddha in the Attic* will most definitely command some public European attention after having won the Femina Foreign Novel Prize in France, on November 5, 2012.

In Romania, general awareness of Japanese American and Japanese Canadian novels is equally limited. Our research revealed that so far only two works have commanded sufficient attention (in our estimation) to be translated into Romanian and made available to the general public. The first of these is Kerri Sakamoto’s harrowing story *The Electrical Field*, translated in 2006, eight years after the book’s release in Canada. The translation was, however, the work of a Romanian teacher of Japanese language (despite the fact that the original language of the novel was English, not Japanese), and not the endeavor of any academic specialist in the field of American Studies or even cultural studies. What is more, there are no extratextual elements that connect the published translation of the novel to the “minor” canon of Asian North American literature and none of the reviews included on the back cover mention the internment history of Japanese Canadians. Given the oblique presence of the traumatic event in the text itself (as will be shown in a later analysis), the novel could very well pass as just another detective thriller to the uninitiated reader—albeit the work does knowingly break the conventions of the genre. Only the book’s cover, with its reproduction of Olafur Eliasson’s Tate Gallery installation *The Weather Project*—which aims to explore ideas about experience, mediation and representation—can impart to the initiated reader symbolic connections with the fragmenting and disempowering experiences of uprooting and internment, the unreliable mediation of personal memory and its representation in fiction.
The second text, Julie Otsuka’s critically acclaimed novella *The Buddha in the Attic*, was only translated and published in Romania in 2013 (by Polirom), two years after the book’s first release in the United States. At the extra-textual level, the tome does a much better job of evoking the topic, presenting the reader with a cover that immediately connotes Asian dimensions (a set of three kimono-clad Japanese paper dolls displayed on a cream-colored background that imitates rice paper), and including at least one review that explicitly mentions the Japanese women imported to America as picture brides. The translation itself is quite accomplished and strives to preserve the haunting and incantatory rhythm of Otsuka’s poem-like book.

Chapter 2 aims to provide an overview of the historical presence and evolution of Japanese communities in North-America. Since these communities delineate themselves along generational lines, our presentation followed the same organization and looked at four generations of Japanese North-American communities: the *Issei*, or the first generation of Japanese immigrants who entered the United States and Canada at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century; the *Nisei*, or second generation which consisted of the direct descendants of the immigrants—at the time of World War II the members of this generation were in their prime years, either children or young adults, and had the misfortune of directly experiencing the internment and relocation; last but not least, the *Sansei* and *Yonsei*, the so-called third and fourth generations, which are still active or growing up today. The first generation, the *Issei*, only rarely told their life stories, partly because of a language barrier, partly because of a cultural practice of stoic dismembering the past upon emigration. To re-member the past was, for most of the *Issei*, a painful thing, made more agonizing by the events of the 1940s, during and after World War II. The term “ganbare” (lit. “to persevere, to persist, to do one’s best”) which became the slogan of that time of exile, thus also extended to storytelling. One simply did not reveal one’s pain. For the second generation, the *Nisei*, the events of the 1940s were not only physically traumatic, as the young *Nisei* were uprooted from homes, schools, and friends and banished to remote parts of the country. The experience was also a form of identity theft, their identity as Canadians and Americans stripped away, the capacity to remember thereafter stifled by the development of a capacity to forget. The *Nisei* are thus, in many ways, the “forgotten generation,” forgotten above all by themselves. It is therefore hardly surprising that the period of the 1940s was rarely spoken of, especially in front of children. For this reason, the third and fourth generations, the *Sansei* and *Yonsei*, emerged with a gaping hole in their past, which they continue to experience as a time dismembered, representing a loss of something that they had never had.
The second part of the paper, comprising Chapters 3 and 4, is predominantly analytical. It aims at completing the previously constructed theoretical framework by investigating the complex phenomenon of identity as it is manifested and imaginatively articulated in the six literary creations by Japanese American and Japanese Canadian authors, respectively. Focusing first on memory in its individual and collective dimensions, Chapter 3, and then on myth, Chapter 4—which follows the absorption and reworking of the two main myths—the “model minority” and the “ancestral homeland,” the analysis aims to establish a critical dialogue between the selected narratives.

Conclusions

Our analysis of Japanese Canadians and Japanese Americans has resorted to historical data only in as much as they helped illuminate the nature of the communities and the experiences that are narratively represented and re-created in the fictions under inquiry. The practical investigation of the selected cultural artifacts (the six novels by Japanese Canadian and Japanese American authors, respectively) was necessarily delineated by its very scope: to investigate the presence of the related concepts “memory” and “myth” in the articulation of the literary work. To this end, the sometimes succinct textual analyses included only the literary aspects that were culturally relevant to the proposed aim and focused on underlining the repeatedness of the same visions/themes in all major Japanese Canadian and Japanese American works—a prevalence which, in our opinion, makes visible the cultural fabric of the ethnic group under investigation as a weave of both memory and myth, with the ancestral homeland acting as an undercurrent (at times exploited consciously by the author, and other times willy-nilly seeping through the cracks in the author’s consciousness, like the pervasive “dust of memory” in Joy Kogawa’s and Kerri Sakamoto’s novels).

There is a plurality of approaches that explore and conceptualize memory. While the scientific literature of cognitive neuroscience and psychology focuses on the organic capacities of memory as storage for information that can be subsequently retrieved, philosophical and psychoanalytical investigations are much more preoccupied with the nature of the subjective mind/consciousness. For their part, cultural studies tend to focus on the expression or reflection of collective memory in the media, posing the processes of remembering and forgetting as core elements of memory. Remembering and forgetting are seen as cultural practices realized by means of narratives, which are themselves cultural practices. By absorbing valuable insights from memory studies, cultural studies have produced an array of rich conceptual designations such as collective memory, which has now
become “the cornerstone of cultural studies,” sites of memory and the quasi-complementary concepts of cultural memory and communicative memory. These last two notions are employed in our analysis of the way in which Japanese North-American writers turn to memory to weave their narratives.

Our conclusion is that Japanese Canadian and Japanese American re-memories of historical experiences are posed as counter-narratives that subvert the official Canadian and American histories, at the same time that they help/are necessary to the individual (author) and the community to which he/she belongs if they are to understand and begin to articulate an identity. Given that counter-narratives constitute forms of cultural memory in themselves, which contribute to the articulation of identities, remembering is ascribed a central role in the Japanese North-American communities—be it unmediated remembering of personal and shared experiences, or remembering mediated through ‘memory talk’ and fiction. Japanese Canadian and Japanese American identity is ultimately constructed as fluid ‘work-in-progress,’ evolving in response to social, cultural and political changes.

With respect to myth, in our age of the mind, the notion of myth has fallen into disrepute to a great extent. In the logocentric order of Western societies, myth has come to designate either a pre-Christian cosmogonic account of a people and/or a certain world order, or a fabricated, over-generalizing statement that promotes false or fictitious information, an unfounded belief that is sometimes used to justify particular social orders, practices and institutions. The prevalence of such reductionist frameworks, however, has not managed to eliminate the long-time fascination that myth has exerted on mankind in general, and on scholars and writers, in particular, as a result of its inherent power to signify, create meaning and foster identification. It is precisely this last characteristic that motivated the employment of myth as a significant element in our analysis of Japanese North-American identity. Myth still persists today despite the preference of modern society for purely linear, logical and historical modes of thinking. Our continued need for a general human connection and our search for a more intense and fulfilling existence beyond the material prove the fact that man has not lost his capacity for mythmaking. And it is artists and writers who most often step into the vacuum (left after the ousting of the mythical mode) and attempt to reacquaint us with the mythological dimension of existence. Since they naturally operate at the same level of consciousness as the traditional mythmakers of the past, any powerful work of art or literature they create becomes—like mythology—transformative. It breaks down the barriers of space and time, it invades the being of its receptor, and changes it forever. Given the narrative essence of mythmaking, it was inevitable that myth should seep into literature and
that the two become interwoven, albeit not completely overlapped. The most obvious manifestation of the relationship between the two notions has been the use of myths in literary works. There are, however, other maybe less evident connections between myth and literature, such as the derivation of literature from myth, or the absorption of myth and its ritualist practices into literature. However, this assumed mythic origin of literature (which is most explicitly enunciated by the renowned Canadian critic Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*) does not presuppose a collapsing of myth and literature into each other. On the contrary, literature is understood as an autonomous offspring and not a mere continuation of myth. It is precisely this reciprocal relationship between literature and myth which motivated the employment of myth as a significant element in our analysis of Japanese North-American identity.

In addition to the observation that the ideological ascription of a model minority fiction to Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians inevitably influences the consciousness of these ethnic writers and has an impact on the literature they produce, we concluded that myth is more or less covertly present in the consciousness of Canadian and American authors of Japanese ancestry, and inevitably manifests itself in the majority of their fictional productions. On the other hand, the ancestral homeland of Japan is articulated at times as a mythical dimension, at times as a constitutive myth that functions as a source of creativity, while elements, mores and behaviors from the Japanese cultural tradition seem to “haunt” the imagination of Japanese North-American writers, sometimes without being acknowledged, and prompt their preoccupation with the collective memory and historical experiences of their ethnic group. Volens nolens, these “ghosts” seep into the authors’ subconscious, influence their writing style and call for an exploration of the splintered identity that lurks beneath the seemingly acculturated American or Canadian self.

To summarize, our critical endeavor positions itself interdisciplinary, at the intersection of the already established fields of Asian North American studies and cultural memory studies, two areas that the thesis attempts to engage in constructive critical dialogue. The investigation starts from the assumption that “identity is of doing, not being,” according to Claudio Magris’ conceptualization (2011: 57, emphasis added); identity is seen as always in process, rather than a static and rigidly fixed reality.

Interest in this field of knowledge is justified both at a personal and an academic level. On one hand, there is a personal interest in the issue of cultural identity and the mechanisms through which it is negotiated and potentially articulated. On the other hand, the contemporaneity and thematic richness of the field under inquiry creates the possibility of
making valuable interpretative connections and meaningful contributions to the Asian North-American paradigm, as well as to the critical investigation of the field in European and Romanian contexts.

The literature selected for investigation ultimately verifies the main research hypothesis that the study of identity is enriched and becomes more comprehensive through the dialogic investigation of the two catalyzing elements of memory and myth. Japanese American and Japanese Canadian literary productions are repeatedly “haunted” by a certain sense of “estrangement”/“othering” within the framework of the dominant culture. This “cultural authority of the Other” ultimately gives rise to an awareness that if Japanese Canadian and Japanese American authors are to produce any valuable literature, they must do so—like David Mura—out of their sense of plurality, rather than “in slavish imitation of the [white] tradition” (2005: 70). To obtain any place in the world of tradition they must strive to achieve a difficult balance and imagine themselves out of their own contradictory stories. For this reason, their literary productions—and indeed most ethnic literature—will always be tinged with a socio-political awareness of the author’s own place in the world and hyphenated (ethnic) identity—which is not to say that their aesthetic achievements are in any way negligible. On the contrary, it is precisely because of their aesthetic value that these works turn out to have a profound transformational potential, not only for the ethnic readership, but for the majority of recipients.

For our part, contact with the six Japanese North American novels discussed in the present thesis and the endeavour to critically interpret them has proved greatly enriching, academically as well as personally. It has fostered a more insightful understanding of the identity phenomenon, not only within multicultural contexts, but also in the context of seemingly more unified national states (as Romania posits itself to be). What is more, we have also come to question the definition and stability of identity in relation to the academic endeavour itself. As a (white) young scholar working on a topic that cannot be articulated as the direct result of personal experience (unlike Asian North American scholars researching issues connected to their own ethnic groups), and writing in a language that is not our native tongue, we must confess to experiencing at times a rather disturbing sense of otherness. This experience has led to a re-evaluation of our own identity and, indirectly, a reassessing of the collective identity of the country we currently reside in, as well as the academic field we work in. We believe that this re-evaluation must be seen as equally significant to the critical endeavour of the thesis, if we are to talk about contributions to the field of Asian North American studies. As it is, we hope that our investigation can serve as a starting point for
future work in the area of Japanese North American studies by researchers in Romania, and potentially the larger European environment, given the current limited number of studies produced in this geographical area. To reiterate a previously expressed conviction, a wider presence of Japanese North American literature (and indeed Asian North American literary productions in general) would be both welcome and valuable to the European framework, as it would contribute to a better illumination and more nuanced investigation of “the interconnectedness of oppressions.”
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Literature


Secondary literature


Fujita, Gale K. “‘To Attend the Sound of Stone’: The Sensibility of Silence in Obasan.” *MELUS* 12, 1985: 33-42.


Magris, Claudio. “The Self that Writes.” 2008, retrieved from:  


Pelt, Tamise van. Otherness. Idaho State University, 2000, retrieved from: http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.100/10.2vanpelt.txt


Visvis, Vikki. “Trauma Remembered and Forgotten: the Figure of the Hysteric in Kerri Sakamoto’s The Electrical Field (Critical essay).” *Mosaic*. September 1, 2007.


Zevallos, Zuleyka Dr. “What is Otherness.” *The Other Sociologist*. Weblog entry, retrieved from: http://othersociologist.wordpress.com/otherness-resources