

**DISPLACEMENT AND SELF-REPRESENTATION:
THEORIZING CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN BIOTEXTS**

by

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Abstract

Displacement and Self-Representation: Theorizing Contemporary Canadian Biotexts

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This study focuses on Canadian writers who choose to frame their questions about cultural difference and national belonging within the context of writing about their own lives and their own personal experiences of displacement. Its particular emphasis is on texts like Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family, Daphne Marlatt's Ghost Works, Roy Kiyooka's Mothertalk, and Fred Wah's Diamond Grill that use a range of innovative textual strategies as a way of actively working through these questions, rather than merely seeking to reflect or represent them. Although all four writers deal explicitly with minority subjectivity and its representation within a Canadian literary context, it is their self-consciousness about how to parlay this material into textual form that initially sets them apart as a group.

The first chapter looks at where the term "biotext" comes from and how, as a language "event," it is related to the contestatory long poem written in Canada in the 1960s and '70s. This chapter suggests that authors of the biotext combine aspects of autobiography with a commitment to a process poetics in order to negotiate what Stuart Hall calls the practice of "cultural recovery." Chapter 2 examines how, by beginning to tease out the various layers of his own displaced self, Ondaatje sets out a number of the challenges that the other three works actively take up. Chapter 3 shows how Marlatt's growing awareness of her own gendered self adds to her feelings of

displacement and alienation from language as she documents her travels throughout Ghost Works. The subject of Chapter 4, Roy Kiyooka's Mothertalk, exemplifies, from yet another angle, the complexities of writing cultural memory and exploring self-representation because of the ways the same life stories get filtered through different sets of lenses. Chapter 5 explores how by claiming the space of the hyphen, Wah rejects both the delimiting claims of the ethnic as well as the claims of the nation. The final chapter suggests that these biotexts facilitate an illuminating examination of the complex relationships between language, place, and self, and the multiple ways that these relationships are manifested in textual form.

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Chapter 1. Introducing the Biotext

I. The Long Poem and After

This study focuses on writers who choose to frame their questions about cultural difference and national belonging within the context of writing about their own lives and their own personal experiences of displacement. Its particular emphasis is on texts like Michael Ondaatje's Running in the Family, Daphne Marlatt's Ghost Works, Roy Kiyooka's Mothertalk, Fred Wah's Diamond Grill that use a range of innovative textual strategies as a way of actively working through these questions, rather than merely seeking to reflect or represent them. These four "biotexts" not only are linked by their shared focus on questions of belonging and self-identification, but, perhaps more obviously, by their textual strategies of estrangement and the challenge they pose to generic classification. Although each of these writers deals explicitly with minority subjectivity and its representation within a Canadian literary context, it is each writer's self-consciousness about how to parlay this material into textual form that initially sets them apart. What, if anything, does the kind of generic disruption at work in these texts have to do with their shared emphasis on displacement and self-representation?

The answers to this question are complicated by the fact that the attempt to group these four texts together in a study seems to contradict their very resistance to definition. Not only is it important to avoid oversimplifying the connections between and among the separate texts, it is also crucial to avoid sounding prescriptive about the nature of the tentative links that can be established between generic disruption and the representation of a minority subjectivity per se. It is necessary therefore to

look at each of these particular biotexts as responding to its specific historical moment and to a specific conceptualization of the self. According to the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, three modes of subjectivity have been especially prominent in Western discourse: the enlightenment subject, the sociological subject, and the postmodern subject. Broadly speaking, in the enlightenment theory of the subject the self is constituted as a sovereign and autonomous being whose utterances reflect a stable identity. Such a theory of the subject has traditionally informed conventional autobiographical practices.

However, displaced subjects or subjects who are “othered” in some way serve to interrogate this idea of a stable or naturalized self. The sociological theory of subjectivity helps account for such difference by suggesting that identity is not a given, but rather is mediated through social relations. Such theories have focused on the politics of representation, the problems of speaking for others, and the institutional constraints that privilege some voices over others. Traditional “coming to voice” narratives grow out of the sociological theory of the subject in the sense that previously marginalized voices make themselves heard and resist being written or spoken about by others. According to Hall, the theory of the postmodern subject insists upon an even further decentering of the subject. The postmodern subject is situated within a context of a radical heteroglossia of multiply situated, fragmented, and competing identities and delights in the performativity of voice and the cacophony of interacting voices.¹

The four authors that are the focus of this study use their diverse biotexts to challenge the theory of the enlightenment subject by producing subjectivities that are constructed as multiple, performative, and in flux, while

¹ See Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” in Modernity and its Future. Thanks to Sophie McCall for bringing Hall’s useful distinction to my attention.

also bearing in mind the political contexts of the subject's competing claims for legitimacy. They thus take into consideration aspects of both the sociological and the postmodern theories of the subject as they write the tension between historical determinacy and postmodern flux into their texts.² In order to capture the subject as fluid and in motion, each author seeks a writing strategy—an innovative poetics of difference—that foregrounds process, performance, and permeability. At the same time each writer strives to depict the subject's response to the shaping influences of social and historical pressures. The tension that is generated by the impulse to write one's self into place while, at the same time, recognizing the various and complex nodes of belonging—and not belonging—that are inextricably linked to ethnic, national, cultural, and gendered subjectivity, gives rise to the formal innovations at work, albeit in different ways, in each of these biotexts.

The term "biotext" comes from George Bowering's Errata where he describes the writing of the biotext as the privileging of the literary form—the very place where the writer of the poem or the fiction finds himself. According to Bowering, "Autobiography replaces the writer. Biotext is an extension of him" (24). Bowering's distinction emphasises the ongoing sense of discovery that is linked to the idea of the subject as performative and in process. Fred Wah borrows the term from Bowering in his acknowledgments to Diamond Grill. Wah also uses the term in Music at the Heart of Thinking and again in his essay "Poetics of Ethnicity." In the latter he describes one of his poems as "a posed biotext in response to some ancestral ghosts" (105). The term is particularly useful in the context of this

² Hall's categories are, of course, contested. For example, there is no straightforward definition about what constitutes the postmodern subject (see Hutcheon, The Politics of Postmodernism). However, Hall's categories are useful as a general guideline for the purposes of the present study.

study because it captures the tension at work in each of these texts between the thematic content and the linguistic and formal aspects of the texts. It does so by examining both the aspects of a life being lived, the “bio” (with an emphasis on the self, the family, origins, and genealogy) and the site where the various aspects of that life are in the process of being articulated in writing, the “text.” The term does not allow for a simple separation between the self and the text; it acknowledges that the writer articulates his or her self through the writing process in which the text itself comes to life. As Wah argues in Diamond Grill, “A biotext, more than other literary genres, seems an innately cumulative performance” (n.p.). For the four authors in this study, the true space of belonging is the space of the text itself.

The focus on performance and process in all of these works is linked to their resistance to more settled generic categories. The word biotext captures some of the ambivalence towards conventional generic categories in each of these texts. All four works are, in a sense, forms of life-writing: they mix travel writing, autobiography, biography, journal entries, letters, social history, and self-portraiture. In Running in the Family (1981) Ondaatje returns to Sri Lanka, his place of birth, in an attempt to reinvent memories of his father and to re-construct their relationship. In Ghost Works (1993), a collection of three autobiographical travel narratives (originally published separately as Zócalo, “In the Month of Hungry Ghosts,” and How Hug a Stone), Marlatt travels to Mexico with her then-lover Roy Kiyooka, returns to her birthplace of Penang, and visits England, the birthplace of her mother. In Mothertalk (1997) the life stories of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka are told to, interpreted, and organized by her son Roy Kiyooka, although they are later reorganized and edited by Daphne Marlatt, in ways that, as we will see, add a

further complexity to our reading. In Diamond Grill (1996), Wah captures fragments of his childhood on the Canadian prairies and contextualizes them within narratives of family history and the legacy of Canadian immigration policies. The notion of biotext is thus useful for looking at all these texts not only because it captures the textualized nature of the life being written, but also because, as Wah suggests, it allows our way of seeing the text to avoid being “hijacked” by “ready-made generic expectations, the cachet exuded...by those other two terms, autobiography and life-writing” (“Interview with Ashok Mathur” 97).

My own thinking about the biotext as a potentially new and provocative generic “event” has been shaped by revisiting the challenge to genre already posed by the Canadian long poem in the 1960s and ‘70s.³ Roy Miki argues that in the 1960s and ‘70s a “far-reaching transformation” took place in Canadian writing, evident in the appearance of texts that were loosely called long poems. Although the narrative long poem has had an extended history in Canada, it emerged as a new and provocative object of theoretical debate with the publication of the proceedings of the Long-liners’ Conference on the Canadian Long Poem, held at York University in 1984.⁴ This important text offers a collection of papers, panels, readings, and discussions that seek to capture the spirit and purpose behind an innovative

³ In the decade and a half since the Long-liners Conference, much critical attention has been paid to the long poem. In her introduction to The New Long Poem Anthology Sharon Thesen suggests that the long poem is “widely acknowledged by writers and scholars as a vital and powerful form in postmodern Canadian writing” (15). The proceedings of the Long-Liners’ Conference were published in a special issue of Open Letter. In 1991, Kamboureli published On the Edge of Genre, her book-length study on the contemporary Canadian long poem. Bolder Flights: Essays on the Canadian Long Poem was published in 1998.

⁴ Participants included Barbara Godard, Eli Mandel, Frank Davey, Ann Munton, Louis Dudek, James Reaney, bp Nichol, Charles Bernstein, Dorothy Livesay, Russell Brown, and Dennis Lee.

and challenging form that resisted traditional poetic categories and raised a range of questions about the role of narrative, authorial voice, and locality in Canadian poetry. The long poem (or at least its Canadian manifestation in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s) incorporated elements of the epic, the lyric, and the documentary while challenging the very assumptions that were invested in these particular generic categories. Miki argues that the vagueness of the title "long poem" reflects "the apparent resistance to generic classification and a willingness even a delight to work polyphonically with multiple genres and subject positions in the writing process" ("Future's Tense" 38). If the epic form of the long poem is a form in which the poet strove to capture the unified spirit of a culture, the long poem of the '70s allowed the poet to acknowledge the diversity of cultural voices and the difficulty of representing a single unified cultural or national voice.

In the long poem, letters, journal entries, and documentary sources combine with more traditional narrative fragments in an attempt to capture the polyphony of a given time and place and to serve to undermine the idea of a single unified national voice as well as the idea of a unified authorial voice with which to capture it. The long poem allowed for a range of voices and a focus on a variety of times and places and allowed for a number of genre crossings. The long poem of the '70s also put a new emphasis on the actual writing process. In the introduction to The Long Poem Anthology Ondaatje explains how these elements come together in his selection of entries for his collection:

I wanted to explore the poets who surprise me with their step, their process. That is what draws these nine together. These poems are not parading down the main street. Some jeer anonymously from the

stands, some are written in such frail faint pencil that one can barely hold them, they shift like mercury off the hand. The stories within the poems don't matter, the grand themes don't matter. The movement of the mind and language is what is important.... Somehow the poems move when you are not watching so that new objects and tones come into relief. We are not dealing with poetry whose themes are hardened into stone, into a public cultural voice. Between readings the tents are folded and the company moves on. In the daylight sometimes one can hardly see them at all. (12)

Perhaps most importantly for my own purposes, the long poem allowed poets to incorporate life-writing into their poetic texts so that the lyric "I" gets placed within the context of a shifting and changing cultural milieu. As Miki suggests, in the long poem the autobiographical "I" meets the fictive "I" to become a textualized "I" ("Future's Tense" 39).

Many of the writers who both wrote and theorized this new manifestation of the long poem were from the prairies or the west coast of Canada. Many were influenced by the school of Tish poets that came out of the University of British Columbia in the late 1950s and '60s. Most reacted against what they considered to be centralist definitions of Canadian literature. As D.M.R. Bentley suggests, the Tish poets reoriented the long poem in Canada "away from the imperial-national ethos of the epic and toward the local-personal matrix of the lyric" (17). Bentley sees the early Tish poems as the first of a group of what he calls "contestatory long poems" that were "directed not merely against but toward supplanting Canada's established poetic and ideological orders" (18). Just as the Tish poets constructed themselves in response to what they perceived as a central

Canadian aesthetic, they were viewed in turn with some skepticism by more “central Canadian” poets and critics because of their rejection of a so-called national poetics. Moreover, because of their alliance with the Black Mountain group of American poets, Tish poets were critiqued for being too American-centric and not “Canadian” enough. For example, in Poetry of the Colonized Mind: TISH Keith Richardson argues that “in taking on the poetics of the Black Mountain group, Tish also took on its political and cultural values which were anarchistic, individualistic and indifferent to Canadian culture and social tradition” (13). Miki acknowledges the critical suspicion towards Tish in his brief history of the movement:

There are lots of critics and writers who didn't like Tish; they wanted Tish to go away. Somehow it was not only an affront to them, but I think it represented a whole different take on poetics in Canada.

Things had been going in one direction in the east, and now there was this group of writers doing quite interesting things—powerfully interesting things—on the west coast, and dealing with the west coast as a particularized place. In Canada, the battle was between nationalism and regionalism. And the Tish poets were bringing in something called localism. (“A Tishstory” 97)

Among the most active writers associated with this group of poets and among the most prolific writers of these contestatory poems were Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah. Indeed, all four were central players in the resurgence of the long poem in the 1960s and '70s. They have all written a number of long poems, they all either contributed to or were the subject of the Long-liners Conference (Ondaatje and Wah were both participants), and all are collected in either Ondaatje's The Long Poem Anthology or Thesen's

The New Long Poem Anthology (Marlatt and Kiyooka are represented in both).

A number of the questions that have concerned theorists of the Canadian long poem in the last three decades are similar to those that my study of the biotext seeks to illuminate. It is no accident that the writers who are working with new and innovative ways to articulate the displaced subject were among those who played with traditional generic classifications in their long poems. In fact, I have chosen to look specifically at writing by Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah not because they are the only writers working with new forms to articulate questions about displacement and self-representation but because they self-consciously have been sharing their work for over thirty years. Thus, one of the most exciting aspects of researching these four writers is uncovering the various pieces of their ongoing conversation. This conversation has taken the form of various dedications, (Marlatt's Zócalo is dedicated to Kiyooka and his Pear Tree Pomes is dedicated to Marlatt), as well as acknowledgments (Marlatt thanks Ondaatje for his contributions to Ghost Works, and Ondaatje thanks Marlatt for her editorial suggestions for Running in the Family). The conversation is also evident in editorial projects such as Wah's introduction to Marlatt's Net Work: Selected Poems and in Ondaatje's introduction to The Long Poem Anthology. The ties between these writers are not only poetical and political (both Wah and Marlatt were on the editorial board at Tish), but also deeply personal (all are or were friends, and Kiyooka and Marlatt lived together for eight years in Vancouver in the early 1970s). Not surprisingly, therefore, there is a wealth of correspondence between Marlatt and Wah, Kiyooka, and Ondaatje at the National Archives in Ottawa. These letters and postcards and

insights on various drafts of each other's texts provide evidence of a history of sustained support, both personal and professional. This larger, more general history of community is important.

What is particularly interesting for the present purposes, however, is how all four writers' shared interests compelled them to use the biotext to give new life to concerns they had begun to explore in their long poems. These concerns include, but are not limited to, a working through of the diverse aspects of subjectivity and overlapping networks of belonging, a consideration of the opacity of language, and the articulation of a textualized "I." Perhaps most importantly, the biotext, like the long poem (and unlike more conventional and referential autobiographical texts), demands a reader who does not just consume some prefigured meaning (or the subject) from the text, but is also an active participant in constructing the text's meaning. The subject in these texts is one who is self-consciously writing itself into being, or as Miki suggests, "the writer writing and being written by the text" ("Future's Tense" 50).⁵

Although there are many ways in which the concerns of the long poem and the biotext overlap, one of the striking differences between the two forms is the way that the "autobiographical gesture" in the long poem (Kamboureli, *Edge* 90) is made explicit and central in the biotext. If, in the long poem, there is a conscious attempt to create a dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet, in the biotext the writer

⁵ This sense of process is demonstrated in part by the fact that each of the texts in this study can be considered a later draft of a previously published piece. Ondaatje published excerpts of *Running in the Family* in *The Capilano Review* alongside Marlatt's *In the Month of Hungry Ghosts*. Marlatt renamed her piece "Month of Hungry Ghosts" and republished it in *Ghost Works* with the previously published *Zócalo* and *How Hug a Stone*. There are a number of versions of Kiyooka's *Mothertalk* in his papers in Vancouver, and Fred Wah rewrites familiar material in *Breathin' My Name With a Sigh, Waiting for Saskatchewan*, *Diamond Grill*, and, most recently, *Faking It*.

is even more self-consciously the subject of the text and the articulation of self becomes a central focus.

Moreover, in the biotexts I am looking at the focus is even more narrowly concerned both with the self's relationship to a parental figure and with a complex history of multiple displacements. Running in the Family, Ghost Works, Mothertalk, and Diamond Grill all respond to a moment in Canadian literary history when questions of race and ethnic origin were beginning to be opened up. As Wah suggests, it wasn't until the late 1970s that identity and difference became subjects for literary examination: "We started talking about the J.C. history in B.C. and that's when Joy Kogawa's book Obasan came out in the late '70s. All of a sudden there was a kind of opening for questions of historical identity, like 'where did you come from'" (in Rudy n.p.). Historical and cultural specificity are thus crucial to an understanding of these works. As a result, notions of place, home, and belonging are all central to the biotext. However, the concept of "home" is not taken for granted, but rather problematized. Indeed, feelings of comfort in stasis are replaced by freedom in movement. If the long poem was characterized by the focus on the subject "in place," or grounded in a particular locale, Running in the Family, Ghost Works, Mothertalk, and Diamond Grill emphasise the subject who is displaced or out of place.

Each of these four biotexts is concerned with the representation and negotiation of the past in the present. Memory plays an important role in each of the texts. All are as much about the pull of origins, continuity, linearity, and genealogy as they are about rupture, interruption, interrogation. Each text expresses issues related to marginality explicitly in the content of the writing as well as textually through choices of language and

form. And although each text is highly personal and self-reflective, each is framed by, and in turn, foregrounds the specifics of historical, social, and cultural forces. This study examines how, in the process of self-representation, these writers challenge generic boundaries and normative narrative patterns as they negotiate and articulate the fragmentation of a cross-cultural life.

II. Autobiographical Intention and the Biotext

Although none of the texts in this study can properly be called autobiographical, each begins with an autobiographical intention.⁶ As a genre, autobiography brings with it a range of expectations in terms of theme, subject matter, and representation. Philippe Lejeune refers to autobiography as a contractual genre dependent upon distinct codes of transmission and reception. He suggests that the author's signature is a declaration of autobiographical intention, an explicit project of sincere truth-telling, and a promise to the reader that the textual and the referential "I" are one. Lejeune's notion of an "autobiographical pact" maintains a powerful hold on discussions of autobiography.⁷

Traditionally the genre of autobiography has been implicated in a specific notion of selfhood, and the "autobiographical occasion" becomes a site on which cultural ideologies intersect and dissect one another (Smith xix). Historically texts that affirm the stability of subjectivity and history are taken

⁶ In the introduction to her study *Auto/biographical Discourses*, Laura Marcus refers to the "autobiographical intention" as the autobiographer's sincerity in his or her attempt to understand the self and to explain the self to others (3).

⁷ For Lejeune's articulation of the "autobiographical pact," see his *On Autobiography* with a foreword by John Paul Eakin. For discussions of Lejeune's significance in recent feminist theories of autobiography, see Smith and Watson's *De/Colonizing the Subject* and Brodski and Schenck's *Life/Lines*, particularly Nancy K. Miller's discussion of autobiography in France (45-61).

as the foundational texts in the canon of autobiographical narratives. Both the genres of autobiography and biography (as well as self-portraiture) are thus traditionally thought of as emphasizing a subject that can somehow be “known,” (what Hall refers to as the enlightenment subject). However, the stability of the signifying subject that is assumed in traditional definitions of autobiography has come under considerable attack more recently in poststructuralist challenges to and redefinitions of the genre.

Poststructuralist approaches to the genre deconstruct the stable and unified subject of the autobiographical text. In Mapping Ourselves, Buss outlines the debate around the autobiographical subject by offering a useful description of what she calls the “rock and the hard place” of current theories of subjectivity as expressed in autobiographical writing. She contrasts the humanist position as represented by Georges Gusdorf, on the one hand, with the poststructuralist position as represented by Paul de Man. Buss explains that, whereas Gusdorf valorizes the concept of the “unique individual” and the “singularity of each individual life,” poststructuralists question both the control of the subject over his/her self-construction as well as the referentiality of language. The self therefore is constituted in and by language rather than prior to language, so that, according to the poststructuralist position, the autobiographical act describes only “an illusive, unstable version of self that did not exist before the act of writing” (4).

By both engaging with and resisting autobiographical conventions, Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah demonstrate their consciousness of and concern for the politics of genre. Their emphasis on formal experimentation and their constant interrogation of generic boundaries help to illustrate their awareness of how, for these particular writers, genres are never innocent or

naive but rather are formal constructs implicated in the very processes of ideological production. According to Shirley Neuman,

The Canadian life-writing which is most sophisticated and thoughtful about the problems of inscribing the self in literature, and most innovative in its presentation of auto/biographical content, is not auto/biographical in any strict formal or generic sense at all. Instead it crosses and recrosses the borders between auto/biography and fiction in order to question static and holistic conceptions of the writing subject. ("Life-Writing" 333)

Rather than emphasize the finished version of a life, Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah, Kiyooka are more interested in the performativity and active positioning of the subject. Their texts focus on the process of writing a life (including ruptures, gaps, and the workings of memory), the necessary fictionalizing that goes into reconstructing a life, the communal nature of writing a life (demonstrated by interruptions from family members, layers of interpretation, and competing versions of the same story), and what Wah calls the necessity for "faking it."

Although all autobiographical texts are to some extent shaped by process, fictionalizing, and community, Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah self-consciously explore these preoccupations through their textual strategies. Although self-representation may be the impetus behind each of the biotexts, both the linearity and the sense of development traditionally associated with autobiography are constantly deferred. Here is where their poetics of process is most evident. The writer becomes the reader as knowledge is rethought as experience throughout the text. Each of the texts resists a developmental narrative. Rather than depicting in a unified manner a unified

subject's progress from youth to maturity, these texts are broken, disrupted. Wholeness, unity, linearity are rejected in favour of a more fragmentary approach to piecing together the details of a life. If traditional autobiographies or Bildungsromans emphasize the subject's coming to wholeness and his or her "fitting in" to the social fabric, these biotexts serve to disrupt these expectations.

In his entry on poetry in the Literary History of Canada, Laurie Ricou includes Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah as members of a group who are "magnetized by the temptation of narrative (the sequential pattern of a journey, the Bildungsroman implying a rediscovery of one's family), yet want to write the long poem which will undo the narrative and remove the putty and twine which held it together" (33). The dual impulse (the putting together and taking apart) in these writings reflects the impetus both to voice experience as well as to reflect the challenges to articulation the authors confront. In Diamond Grill, for example, there is no omniscient or self-present narrator in the text; rather there are narrative strands held together by a "Fred Wah" who is extremely self-conscious about the process of piecing together a life. Similarly, in the case of Mothertalk, both Daphne Marlatt's editorial statements and Kiyooka's manuscripts suggest that the fragments of Mary Kiyooka's story have been shuffled and reshuffled by Roy Kiyooka and by Marlatt.

These texts also foreground the collective and communal nature of the writing process. Here, too, biotext is a more useful term than autobiography because it takes the emphasis off the "auto" or "self" that is the source of autobiography. In each of these texts, the impulse to write actually begins

with the search for a family member.⁸ In Running in the Family Ondaatje searches for memories and stories to fill the gap in his life caused by the loss of his father. His text, in fact, begins with his dream of his father and it is his father's ghost that pulls him back to Sri Lanka. Ghost Works shows elements of a palimpsest by blending the threads of Daphne Marlatt's life with her mother's and her son's as she searches for a trace of her mother throughout the text. Mothertalk focuses on the lives of Roy and his mother, Mary Kiyooka, by layering their voices. Wah's book captures pieces of his own childhood, but, perhaps more importantly, it evokes fragments of his father's life. The impulse to give voice to and then to imagine a dialogue with his father, first articulated in Breathin' My Name With a Sigh and Waiting for Saskatchewan, becomes the central focus in Diamond Grill.⁹ None of the writers can focus on their own lives without mapping or plotting the lives of other family members, without looking for connections, collectivity. To understand their lives is to trace their genealogies back and to recognize that their lives are part of a larger web. This collective impulse resists the individualization traditionally associated with both autobiography and biography. Identity and personal history for these writers are self-consciously embedded in other persons and histories.

In each case, the missing family member is associated with a place other than here, be it the author's birthplace or the parent's birthplace.

⁸ Laura Marcus explains how in the past critics have claimed that autobiography could only be recognized as the important area that it is by being sharply demarcated from biography. She explains that "very recently—and the impetus has come primarily from feminist critics—the inadequacy of this conceptual divide has been clearly revealed and far more exciting conjunctures occur, showing how autobiography and biography function together" (273).

⁹ In her article "Fred Wah's Syntax: A Genealogy, a Translation," Pamela Banting argues that, although the father content might not appear until Breathin' My Name With a Sigh, at the level of Chinesed syntax the father is present in the very earliest books.

Questions of place, or home, and the movement between cultures therefore play a significant role in each of the narratives. As the authors attempt to bridge, both physically and imaginatively, at least two places in their narratives, they create a tension between a “here” and a “there.” This pull of origins located in an elsewhere further serves to disrupt the notion of a unified subject. For example, in Running in the Family, Ondaatje explores the ruptures in identity caused by his various movements from Sri Lanka to England to Canada and back to Sri Lanka. He no longer feels “Sri Lankan” or “Canadian” in any simplified sense of the word. Similarly, Marlatt’s focus on the discursive nature of the displaced subject can be traced to her own cultural background. Born in Melbourne, Australia, to British parents, she lived in Penang, Malaysia, until her family emigrated to Vancouver in 1951. The text Zócalo describes how, when in Mexico, Marlatt (or the “she” of the text) is constantly aware of the similarities and differences between “here” and “there.” She feels both pulled and pushed by the strangeness of the new place. Although she feels some attraction to Mexico, she cannot let go of her grounding in home (the West Coast of Canada). In her trips both to Malaysia and to England (recorded in Month of Hungry Ghosts and How Hug a Stone), she returns to her ancestral homes in an attempt to capture the voices, sensations, and memories of the past. However, she discovers that any sense of connection to these places is made difficult because each place is necessarily filtered through her own Canadian consciousness. She is forced to explore the disjunction between memory and reality, past and present, there and here. The text itself foregrounds the mediation that results from this exploration.

Unlike Marlatt and Ondaatje, Wah and Kiyooka are not first-generation immigrants but rather descendants of immigrants. Nevertheless, even though they don't experience firsthand the physical act of immigration, their lives are shaped by the effects of immigration policy. A sense of movement—over oceans and over prairies—recurs throughout both of these texts. For both Wah and Kiyooka, their feelings of dislocation are heightened by their experiences of racism, both personal and collective. In Mothertalk, Kiyooka's mother, Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka, describes the movement first from Japan to Canada and later from Calgary to Opal, Alberta after the forced relocation of Japanese Canadians during W.W.II. She describes the emotional toll that leaving behind her two eldest children in Japan has taken and tells how this separation haunts her life story. Her children are a very real physical tie to Japan, which forces her constantly to be aware of, and to negotiate, her two "homes." Similarly, in Diamond Grill, Fred Wah tells how his father and aunt were sent back to China for their childhood and adolescence before being returned to the Canadian prairies as young adults, and recounts the devastating effects of this cross-oceanic bartering, both on his family and on his own sense of personhood.

The biotext, then, is a useful term to help group those texts that insist both on self-representation and on the interrogation of self-representation. Diamond Grill is arguably less a story about Wah's own life in all its complexity than it is a description of a cafe, of the prairies, and of Nelson, British Columbia. In fact, the intense focus on the minute details of a specific place and the cadences of everyday speech illustrate how Wah's is one version of a layered and varied story. And yet, like the other texts, Diamond Grill is clearly an inscription of self, and an utterance of a life. In trying to

evoke their pasts, writers like Wah explore the multiple levels of subjectivity from which they speak. They negotiate the tension between articulating a sense of self (in its wholeness and unity) and interrogating a sense of a finished self (on the basis on gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality). They complicate notions of individuality by offering a sense of connection to a group. They also demonstrate how a history of multiple displacements contributes to cultural difference and undermines the notion of a unified subject position. In other words, by emphasizing process, multiplicity, collectivity, and difference, the biotext allows Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah to write the subject as a possible site for active cultural and ideological struggle.

Recently a range of autobiographical critics (feminist critics, in particular) have focused on what both the humanist and the poststructuralist definitions of autobiography mostly do not treat—that is, subjects who are othered on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. The writers I look at challenge both poles of the humanist-poststructuralist debate. Although they seek to complicate the theory of the enlightenment subject that does not allow for competing aspects of identity, and they cannot ignore larger social and historical forces, such as state policy or immigration laws, that help shape a subject, they do not want to remain fixed by static definitions. Neuman's essay "Autobiography: From Different Poetics to a Poetics of Differences" is a particularly useful intervention in current debates about subjectivity and autobiography, one that helps to provide a critical framework for the writers in this study. Like Buss, Neuman acknowledges the "rock and the hard place" of humanist and poststructuralist theorizing of autobiography. Although she is suspicious of both positions, she is equally

suspicious of much of the theorizing that has emerged out of this in-between position. She asks what happens when a poetics of difference emerges in the field of autobiographical theory, and suggests that the attempts to offer different poetics focused on racial, gender, and sexual identities demand an “authenticity” that tends to blur the differences within groups. According to Neuman, “theories of group identity prove reductive of differences” (221). Instead, she seeks to explore ways in which these different poetics might be integrated into a “poetics of differences,” which would acknowledge that subjects are constructed by discourse but also that subjects construct discourse.¹⁰ Even though the writers in my own study are to some degree shaped by their ethnic or immigrant consciousness, they also cannot be collapsed into ready-made ethnic categories. Their ethnicity is not a stable signifier; it is undercut by various other strands of identity. It is precisely the tension evoked by such complexities that is my focus. An examination of Running in the Family, Ghost Works, Mothertalk, and Diamond Grill will show how a “poetics of differences” is a necessary critical framework for approaching these biotexts.

III. A Poetics of Differences: Cultural Recovery and the Biotext

The subject that, in all four cases, is being articulated in these biotexts is one that is multiple, complex. Closely related to the challenge posed to the enlightenment subject in each of these biotexts is the texts’ interrogation of

¹⁰ Neuman is working out of a tradition that includes a range of voices. Of course, issues of identity and identification are central in contemporary North American critical discourse. Some of the more important theoretical works include Homi Bhabha’s “Minority Maneuvers and Unsettled Negotiations,” in which he emphasizes the importance of the “in-between” and “interstitial articulations” through which categories of difference constitute new social movements; Werner Sollors’ work, particularly Beyond Ethnicity, in which he formulates his important notions of consent and descent in the negotiation of American ethnicity; and Henry Louis Gates’ interrogation of centre-margin considerations of ethnicity in “Ethnic and Minority’ Studies.”

seamless definitions of both national and ethnic identity. By foregrounding their shifting allegiances to more than one place and more than one language, the movement between them, and, at least for Wah and Kiyooka, the lasting negative effects of Canadian state policy on their lives, these writers question notions of national belonging and disrupt the narrative that incorporates the displaced subject into a national and cultural uniformity. In her introduction to Making a Difference, Kamboureli suggests that “labels are vexing and sneaky things because they are intended to express a stable and universal representation of both communities and individuals” (4). Just as stable definitions of “Canadian” come under interrogation in these works because of the multiple points of belonging, so too do stable definitions of Chinese-Canadian, Japanese-Canadian, Sri Lankan-Canadian, and WASP-Canadian. Wah has said that in Diamond Grill he wants to explore, through memory and imagination, the “sureness of shifting” of racial identity (“Interview with Ashok Mathur” 101). He explains that “you’re not the same anything when you’re half Swede, quarter Chinese, and quarter Ontario Wasp” (Diamond Grill 36). All of these texts complicate notions of ethnic or cultural “purity.” Each writer recognizes that although various determinants of identity may be constant their forms are constantly changing.

In their attempts to articulate their various experiences of displacement, all four writers self-consciously and counter-discursively attempt to express their individual identities as different, as hybrid, as “other,” based on their lived experiences of cultural, ethnic, racial, and gender difference. If dislocation and displacement arguably help to create a consciousness of cultural difference, the complex history of Canadian immigration and migration has provided an ideal context for the examination

of ethnic and immigrant consciousness. In fact, narratives of life-writing have always occupied an important place in Canadian literary history because of their focus both on the historical and social pressures constituting the immigrant subject and on the literary manifestations of the immigrant experience. Many anthologies that survey mainstream Canadian literature include entries from the exploration narratives of Samuel Hearne and David Thompson as well as the travel writings of Anna Bromwell Jameson, and the settlement narratives of Catharine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie. The place of Laura Salverson's Confessions of an Immigrant Daughter (1939) and Frederick Philip Grove's In Search of Myself (1946) within the Canadian canon also suggest the extensiveness of this literary tradition.¹¹

Critics have tended to treat these first-person texts as important elements of Canada's narrative of nation because of their use of narratives of development and their incorporation within a nation-building framework. For example, the goal in texts like Salverson's and Grove's is to acknowledge a sense of belonging within the host country. In the "Author's foreword" to Salverson's text, she accepts and celebrates her eventual hard-won sense of belonging:

I cannot help but feel that any newcomer to our Dominion has only himself to blame if he fails to find some measure of human satisfaction. How many opportunities he will find which did not exist in the days of

¹¹ Although narratives of displacement (exploration, travel, settlement) have had a long history in Canada, their disruptive potential (in relation to monological readings of both nation and ethnicity) is only recently beginning to be theorized. In 1995 Essays on Canadian Writing published a special issue called "Writing Ethnicity" which includes a number of articles that do engage with ethnicity and life-writing and the challenge to genre and classification that many of these texts pose. The essays by Dawn Thompson, Janice Kulyk-Keefer, Graham Huggan, and Marlene Kadar are particularly illuminating in this regard.

which I write this book! Opportunities to make the most of himself whatever his talent or bent. (5)

In these earlier texts, the term "Canada" exists as a relatively stable and central signifier. Each of the subjects is more or less unified, the narratives are more or less developmental and linear, and the end goal is belonging. In this tradition of writing oneself into the host country, it is precisely "difference" or "otherness" that needs to be contained and controlled. This critical stance is still evident in anthologies and essays written today; it is echoed in reformulations of Atwood's position that, in Canada, "we are all immigrants to this land." The argument that suggests that Canadians are similar, in spite of, and maybe even because of, our differences tends to erase real difference in favor of a universalizing sameness.¹²

This viewpoint has been challenged by a range of writers in Canada. Books like Running in the Family, Ghost Works, Mothertalk, and Diamond Grill foreground how difference is constituted in relation to family, community, and nation. As a result of this focus, these texts encourage a reevaluation of traditional critical frameworks both of ethnic minority literature and life-writing in Canada, and their relationship to one another.¹³ By writing texts that question traditional generic and national boundaries, by

¹² These questions around sameness and difference echo the reactions to the Multiculturalism Bill (Bill C-93) that was passed in Canada in 1988. Although the Bill ostensibly recognizes and promotes cultural and ethnic differences, many critics see it as a way of essentializing difference on the basis of race and ethnicity. A critic like Wah rejects the cataloguing implicit in multicultural policy because it relies on a notion of ethnic and racial purity ("Half-Bred Poetics"), whereas Neil Bissoondath refuses to be called anything other than a "Canadian" writer. He rejects any notion of hyphenation outright (Selling Illusions).

¹³ In general critics have not focused on the literariness of these two genres. Autobiography especially has not traditionally been considered sufficiently literary to be included in literary histories of Canada. In studies both by New and Keith the discussion of life-writing is mostly confined to the nineteenth century. Enoch Padolsky describes how in the past ethnic studies have been dominated by the disciplines of history, sociology, and other related areas of the social sciences rather than by literary criticism.

articulating their multiple sites of belonging, and by self-consciously insisting on their positioning throughout their works, the writers of these biotexts carry out complex acts of cultural recovery. By cultural recovery I am referring to what Hall calls a kind of exploration, sifting, negotiation of the past, both historical and personal, public and private, in order to begin to understand it. Hall outlines his notion of cultural recovery in a number of essays in which he explores diasporic questions linked to race, ethnicity, and identity. In his article "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference," he discusses the potential of what he calls the "new ethnicity." He refers to a "new phase" in black cultural politics, which he calls the change from a struggle over the relations of representations to a politics of representation itself. Hall argues that we speak out of a particular place and a particular history, but that our relationship to the past is necessarily a constructed one. Our relationship to the past, he argues, is one that is constituted "partly through memory, partly through narrative, one that has to be recovered" (19).

Although Hall's work needs to be read within a British framework, his thinking about diasporic identities is still helpful when looking at writers like Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah who are attempting to voice themselves according to the various threads of their identities throughout their texts. Like these writers, Hall frames his theorizing about identity within the context of familial links. In much of his critical work, he is highly conscious of positioning himself as a man born and raised in Jamaica but having moved to England and who lives in "the shadow of the black diaspora," or "the belly of the beast" ("Cultural Identity" 392). Referring to his son, a product of a mixed marriage, Hall suggests that he is not

“Jamaican” in any unproblematic way and that he will have to “discover that identity” (“Ethnicity” 19). He says:

He can't just take it out of a suitcase and plop it on the table and say “That's mine.” It's not an essence like that. He has to learn to tell himself the story of the past. He has to interrogate his own history, he has to relearn that part of him that has an investment in that culture.
(19)

Hall's son lives in England but, because he is a half-black Jamaican, he is racially othered. This fact is, at least in part, the impetus behind his having to relearn his past, “discover his identity.” He does not “blend” easily into his British present.

This notion of an ethnic identity that is, at least in part, in process or needing to be negotiated is the subject of much contemporary diasporic theory. For example, in Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan's essay “Is the Ethnic Authentic in the Diaspora?” his eleven-year-old son asks him, “Am I Indian or American?” Radhakrishnan responds “both,” and then offers “brief down-to-earth definitions of ethnicity and how it relates to nationality and citizenship” (203). However, Radhakrishnan uses the essay to interrogate his own too-pat response with a whole series of questions about what “both” might actually mean. He concludes with the hope that the question about his son's identity will be “a matter of rich and complex negotiation and not the result of some blind and official decree” (213).¹⁴

¹⁴ A wide range of ethnic minority writers in the United States are attempting to come to terms with questions of cultural “hybridity.” Gloria Anzaldúa has her own version of this project: “What I want is an accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture” (qtd. in Singh, 13).

The work by cultural theorists in this field is a useful tool for looking at the biotexts in this study. By writing back in a kind of dialogue with an older family member and by attempting some form of self-representation by writing a version of a life, the Canadian writers I am focusing on articulate their sense of self and their relationship to a wider community. However, given their own complex negotiations of the past, they cannot do so in a straightforward way. Central to these biotexts are concerns that parallel Hall's emphasis on the negotiation of one's relationship to the past. Thanks to Marx, Freud, Saussure, and the "relativization of the Western world," Hall argues, the possibility of somehow accessing a true or real or essential self has been problematized ("Ethnicity" 12). However, and this is a key point, this is not to suggest that the past, or where one comes from, is not crucially important. In fact, Hall suggests that "there is no enunciation without positionality" ("Ethnicity" 18). In other words, there is no way that people can speak, act or create unless they come from some place, some history, unless they inherit some cultural traditions (18-19). The question is, how is that place, that past negotiated? Hall argues that:

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a "production" which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation. This view problematizes the very authority and authenticity to which the term "cultural identity" lays claim. ("Cultural Identity" 392)

This is precisely the challenge that texts like Running in the Family, Ghost Works, Mothertalk, and Diamond Grill pose. It is the self-conscious

interrogation of identity that sets these texts apart from earlier texts with similar thematic concerns.¹⁵

The impulse to contextualize one's stories within the social and historical pressures that shape them is an important aspect of the negotiation of the past. Cultural identity, according to Hall, comes out of this tension between what happened and how we understand what happened: "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything that is historical, they undergo constant transformations" ("Cultural Identity" 394). As Hall suggests in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," "all discourse is 'placed'" (392). The four writers in this study self-consciously position themselves within the broader historical frameworks that shape them. For example, Ondaatje manages to capture some of the upheaval surrounding Sri Lanka's struggle for independence from colonial rule. Daphne Marlatt's return to Malaysia is framed in terms of her privileged positioning as white, as coloniser. Moreover, her "Britishness" in Canada is a constant reminder of Canada's own "postcolonial" positioning. Roy Kiyooka's text examines the forced upheaval of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War and its effects on his family. Wah puts a great deal of emphasis on the larger social, national, and historical processes at work and shows how external pressures shape the construction of identities in his family. He includes specific references to Chinese-Canadian history, including the history of the head tax, the Chinese Immigration (Exclusion) Act, and voting rights. These are texts

¹⁵ There is of course a tradition of ethnic minority writing in which the voicing of experience is more important than the questioning of the language of expression. In his article "Shirt of the Happy Man: Theory and Politics of Ethnic Minority Writing," Joseph Pivato argues that writings by ethnic minority authors are grounded in their real experiences, their families, and cultural backgrounds. He argues that this grounding "does tend to privilege transparency over more freely imaginative writing" (34) and that the "ethnic minority writer believes in the transparent relationship between word and world. The word used in the work refers to an object outside the work" (35).

that do not ignore their grounding in the material realities that have shaped them even though they cannot deliver those pasts unprocessed. Part of the purpose of these works is to foreground the process involved in remembering and re-presenting.¹⁶

IV. A Different Poetics

It is these texts' grounding in autobiography that allows for their self-consciousness about identity. Referring specifically to recent work in and on feminist autobiography, Laura Marcus argues that "the pervasive hybridity attributed to autobiography...has made it the crucial site for the exploration of new identities" (281). By choosing to write some kind of autobiography, and by choosing to challenge the genre, these writers all focus on the need to remember, and on the need to explore and examine their pasts and their relationships to their pasts, but they also acknowledge how this is an exploration of who they themselves are. For writers like Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah, as we have seen, cultural recovery does not consist of a binary between a here and a there or a now and a then. Rather, like Hall's son and like Radhakrishnan's son, these writers negotiate how the there, or some version of it, operates in the here. It is in the re-telling of their pasts that their identities become constructed. .

This impetus results in the focus on a poetics of process in each of the four texts. It is the sifting, the negotiation of the past in the present, the act of cultural recovery, that is both the subject (thematic content) and the means of

¹⁶ David Palumbo-Liu has written about the relationship between ethnic literatures, memory, and history. In "The Politics of Ethnic Memory," he suggests that although many ethnic texts are written in order to problematize official accounts of history and to offer a kind of "counter-memory," all too often ethnic memory is reinscribed as history and stabilized like history. Palumbo-Liu argues for a strategy of reading ethnic texts that rejects the "homeland" proffered by history without stabilizing ethnic memory in its place.

representation. Each text juxtaposes fragments of past and present, memories, documents, allusions, recipes, photographs, and a collage of voices. In fact, Diamond Grill begins and ends with exactly the same image. There is no chronological ordering. These texts do not “settle” anything. In these texts personal memory comes up against documented history. The subjects and narrators of the texts constantly remind the reader that they are working through the material, that there is no finished product for them to relate, but that the story continues.

What is unique and exciting about the authors in this study is the manner in which they link an emphasis on experience and historical specificity with a desire to question the ways that experience is represented. They rely on memory as a kind of counter-discourse, while also questioning its reliability. The slippage in each text between past, present, and future helps to emphasize the untrustworthiness of remembering and the uncertain process of cultural recovery. And in each text the focus on the act of writing further emphasizes the process of fictionalizing at work in all life-writing. In fact, the authors attempt in their biotexts to capture the complexity of representing their social, national, and cultural frameworks. Throughout their books, Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah negotiate the complexities of cultural difference. Each emphasizes the role of language in the construction of identity. Jeff Derksen’s remarks on Wah’s poetics can be applied to this groups of writers as a whole:

In wresting representation away from cultural discourse in which assimilation becomes invisibility as difference is integrated into a grammar of universalization, Wah writes his particular and differentiated subjectivity. Language is the defamiliarizing, estranging,

and “disorienting” tool that, through its own hybridity and plurality, enables differentiated subjectivities to articulate multiple positions. (76)

Although all the texts in this study grapple with important sociological realities in English Canada (including immigrant, class, race, and gender displacement and alienation), the ways in which difference and cultural conflict are given literary representation are as crucial as the subject matter in this set of texts. As Sherry Simon suggests, “literary language is not a given, but always an expression of affiliation or transgression” (121). Each of these authors is highly self-conscious about his or her use of language as a means of destabilisation. As Wah argues in his essay “A Poetics of Ethnicity,” “the tactical imagination of a ‘national unity’ is, for some writers, a ‘disunity’” (108). Instead Wah argues for a non-aligned poetics of ethnicity: “this principle of synchronous foreignicity, ...of embracing antithesis, polarity, confusion, and opposition as the day-to-day household harmony, is a necessary implement in art that looks for new organizing principles, new narratives” (“Poetics” 104). Marlatt describes how her own sense of difference or disjunction can be articulated by “using montage, using juxtaposition, knitting disparate and specific images from both places. Seeing the world as multidimensional as possible and ourselves present within it” (“Entering In” 223). The narrative fragmentation in Ondaatje’s work reflects his interest in the plurality of stories and his rejection of metanarrative.

In “Asiancy: Making Space for Asian Canadian Writing,” Miki outlines a link between an avant-garde poetics and writers of colour. He describes how formal disruptions such as the generic crossing of fiction, history, and autobiography and documentary become strategies of resistance to norms. Similarly, Myrna Kostash argues that embracing a poetics of estrangement is

an important strategy for ethnic minority writers who wish to foreground their difference from a perceived mainstream: “we may not wish to belong to the club. We may wish to live with tension and distress. We may wish to remind ourselves, over and over, that we live on the wrong side of the tracks, on the edge of town” (19). For Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah, the biotext is a site where they can construct their estrangement (ethnic, racial, gendered) at the level of language. Theirs is a poetics of the hybrid—resisting classifications of genre, mixing fiction and history and insisting on the importance of cultural memory and the telling of stories while simultaneously foregrounding the challenges implicit in their representation.

* * *

The four substantive chapters that follow look at four biotexts to examine what happens to a stable sense of self when it is undercut by various nodes of belonging. What role does the effect of displacement play in a self-representational poetics? What happens when one’s roots are uprooted? What is the relationship between a sense of self and a sense of home and how is this relationship articulated? I begin my study by focusing in Chapter 2 on Ondaatje’s Running in the Family because, of the four texts I look at, it is the first clear example of a biotext as I am defining it. I look at Running in the Family as a text that is related to the other texts in Ondaatje’s oeuvre, but distinct because of its self-conscious focus on the facts of Ondaatje’s own life. After The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and Coming Through Slaughter in which the narrative voice was clearly linked to, but also sharply separate from, that of the authorial subject, Ondaatje’s use of his own life for subject

material came as a shock for most of his readers. Questions that critics had been asking about Ondaatje's self-identification with his narrators were brought to the forefront in this text.

I will look at Running in the Family in the context of Ondaatje's other texts which, I will argue, are concerned with similar issues of self-representation, alterity, and generic disruption. In Running in the Family, however, these issues are refocused by the subject that is in the process of being constituted. Although Ondaatje attempts to write himself into Sri Lanka and to enact a sense of belonging throughout his text, he ultimately fails to make connections. It is the failure that is at the heart of this text that complicates debates about the intersection of politics and aesthetics in Running in the Family. I will take up both sides of this debate in order to show how the subject in process in this text helps provide a clue to the even more complex self explorations found in more recent configurations of the biotext.

In Running in the Family Ondaatje introduces the self-in-motion or the unsettled self. He attempts to recapture a sense of origins or roots through his family's long and complicated history in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. His travels allow him to place himself in a past that he has very little access to except through memories—his own which are vague and untrustworthy and his relatives' which are exaggerated and often conflicting. Nonetheless, for Ondaatje, the notion of belonging is still relatively stable. It is located at the intersection between two cultures. Although it may be a slippery concept, it is conceivable. Although he experiences moments of anxiety, for example the recognition that he is both self and other as he travels through Sri Lanka, his anxiety is tempered by a belief in the recuperative power of storytelling.

Stories of his family's mythic past help to heal the ruptures of a displaced present.

The healing power of story cannot be taken for granted in the subject of the Chapter 3, Daphne Marlatt's Ghost Works, however. Grouped together, the three separate texts that make up Ghost Works become a provocative example of a biotext. Marlatt's text has the most in common with Running in the Family. "In the Month of Hungry Ghosts" was first published alongside excerpts from Ondaatje's text in a special issue of The Capilano Review, edited by Sharon Thesen. Ondaatje and Marlatt have read and commented on each others texts extensively. In both texts, the narrators are clearly haunted by the memories of a dead parent. Both narrators are spurred on by dreams to enact journeys to their birthplaces. Each of the texts is made up of prose and poetry, journal entries and letters. What distinguishes Marlatt's text is her heightened self-consciousness about difference—both cultural and gendered—and how it is played out through language. Like Ondaatje, Marlatt is an immigrant who uses travel in an attempt to learn about her past; however, the more she attempts to narrate self and place, the more she discovers the discomfort of language. She learns that "story" in fact can be oppressive as it works to disempower women. Marlatt's focus on etymology, syntax, and structures of language takes on a force of its own in Ghost Works. This focus on the self as a discursive subject marks her three texts as constituting a turning point in Marlatt's oeuvre as she shifts from the preoccupation of her earlier long poems with the subject in place.

My focus on Marlatt in Chapter 3 leads directly into my discussion of Mothertalk in the next chapter. Examining the published version of

Mothertalk in the context of Kiyooka's own papers and manuscript of the text highlights the complexities of writing cultural memory and exploring self representation. Kiyooka's text is a fascinating blend of a physical and an imaginative journey. For Mary Kiyooka, the pain of dislocation was very real. Roy Kiyooka too was a victim of the relocation of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War when his family moved from Calgary to Opal, Alberta. Because this forced relocation obviously served to construct Kiyooka as someone who did not belong, his mother's movements between Japan and Canada help to provide him with the basis for his sense of identity. Her story becomes the basis for his imaginative reconstructions of home. Thus in Mothertalk life-story can provide a sense of self, but only when it is retold, reshaped, and taken ownership of. Kiyooka's own fictionalizing is ultimately a tool for empowerment, especially in the face of the oppressive fiction created for him by the Canadian state.

Mothertalk is an important text in this study because it so clearly foregrounds the tension at work in ethnic minority auto/biography between the desire for straightforward, linear representations of experience, and the tendency toward more disruptive textual strategies of disorientation. As Marlatt's reworking of Kiyooka's reworking of his mother's narrative makes clear, the space of the page is crucial in the production of various versions of selfhood. I focus on Mothertalk as an expanded text that allows for the gaps and fissures caused by the multiple voices at work to erupt.

My final close reading will be of Wah's Diamond Grill. His is an important text to end with because I think he most self-consciously articulates the disruptive potential of the biotext, and his text shows how the biotext has developed in the decade and a half since Ondaatje's first attempt. Although

storytelling is important in Wah's text, stories are polyvocal, performative, shifting. There is no real attempt in Diamond Grill to piece fragmented subject back together. I examine Breathin' My Name With a Sigh, Waiting for Saskatchewan, and Diamond Grill, as well as his series of "Poetics" essays in order to explore, in more detail, Wah's complex notions of hybridity, hyphe/nation, and alienethnic poetics and to consider how they function to challenge traditional critical frameworks of both life-writing and ethnic minority literatures. Although Wah does not embark on any physical journeys, there is constant movement in this text. The subject in process in Diamond Grill most clearly demands a new form of representation. By rattling and clanging "a noisy hyphen," and by depicting a sense of community, origins, and roots at the same time as he challenges them, Wah creates a text that pushes the limits of borders and boundaries and labels and challenges the reader to negotiate a poetics of copresence, interaction, and permeability instead. All of these biotexts clearly demand new more active reading strategies that acknowledge the activity of the subject engaging in new forms of self-representation.

Chapter 2.
“The shape of an unknown thing”:
Writing Displacement in Running in the Family

I. Introduction

My study begins with Michael Ondaatje’s Running in the Family (1982) because, of the four texts in this study, it is the earliest example of what I am calling a biotext, a text that challenges formal and generic definitions as a way of articulating the complexities of the subject in process. Just as crucially, Running in the Family serves as an important predecessor for Ghost Works, Mothertalk, and Diamond Grill because it is a self-conscious expression of a displaced subjectivity. If all autobiographers need to struggle with self-representation in their texts, autobiographers who have to straddle more than one place and culture in trying to sort through the fragments of their pasts face an even greater challenge because of the double or multiple sites of belonging involved. By examining his own history in the context of the fragments of his father’s life, the stories of his various relatives, and the complex mapping of his birthplace, Ondaatje weaves together a meaningful, if fragmentary, expression of a life. As in the texts by Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah, in Running in the Family, an emphasis on process and performance permeates a search for origins and the exploration of a cross-cultural identity. The biotext serves as a useful authorial strategy for this multifaceted project.

Ondaatje challenges the limits of traditional formal and generic definitions in all of his writing. He has written in a wide variety of genres: he has collaborated on plays; he has made a documentary film on the poet bp Nichol; and he has worked as a photographer and literary critic, as well as a poet and a novelist. Although he is currently best known as a novelist, in part

because of the huge success of the Booker Prize winning The English Patient (1992), he began his writing career as a poet. As one of the first and best known “poet-novelists” in Canada, he is particularly conscious of generic boundaries and how they can be usefully trespassed. His first book of poetry, The Dainty Monsters, was published in 1967. In 1969 he wrote his first long poem The Man With Seven Toes, and in 1970 he published his second long poem, The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems. In these works Ondaatje introduced his characteristic formal and generic experimentation and blurred the borders between fact and fiction by mixing document with fiction, poetry with prose, and by layering a number of competing voices.

Even in his earliest writing, Ondaatje demonstrated his concern with the limitations of genre and his eagerness to push his writing in new directions. In the 1960s and '70s the long poem offered him the space in which to do so. In his introduction to The Long Poem Anthology (1979) Ondaatje suggests that the so-called “contestatory” long poem is uniquely suited to a Canadian frame of reference:

it seems to me that the most interesting writing being done by poets today can be found within the structure of the long poem. Canada supposedly sparked the idea for Imagism but it really is not the country for Haiku. After the perfect lines about the frog or cricket or eclipse we turn around and have to come to terms with the vastness of our place or our vast unspoken history. (11)

According to Ondaatje, the rambling long lines of the long poem and the form's emphasis on process and procedure help to give voice to alternate geographies and histories not contained by the traditional lyric. In his own

work he made use of the form to examine the lives of a range of marginal or “othered” historical characters.¹⁷

In his long poems Ondaatje experimented with how far he could push the limits of form: “I want my form to reflect as fully as possible how we think and imagine. And these keep changing, of course. With each book I try to do something I think I can’t do” (in Kamboureli, Making 241). In 1982 Ondaatje attempted something entirely new when he turned his attention to the details of his own life and decided to document two journeys he made in 1978 and 1980 to his birthplace of Sri Lanka. He thus expands on his characteristic mixing of genres by introducing a self-consciously autobiographical focus. Although Running in the Family is not a long poem, it shares many of the elements of Ondaatje’s works that are. Like his other work, Running in the Family is a mixture of poetry and prose. As in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid, there is an emphasis on polyvocality in Running in the Family; a number of voices interrupt each other, thus adding layers to the stories being collected. In Running in the Family there is the same blend of history and legend that is found in his long poems. The escapades of Ondaatje’s relatives and ancestors take on a near-mythic quality as the stories are passed on through the different generations. Ondaatje also dramatises his ambivalent relationship to documentary sources. Just as in his long poems, in Running in the Family “official” sources of information are challenged and often replaced with rumour, gossip, and hearsay. However, despite the many connections to his other texts, the focus on the details of his own life and on the various factors that make up his sense of self mark this

¹⁷ Ondaatje has said that he is most fascinated by the minor characters of history—the people whose stories don’t usually get written about. He told Linda Hutcheon that he is drawn to “the unspoken and unwritten stories—the ‘un-historical’ stories” (Other Solitudes 198).

text as a significant departure from his earlier works, which mainly focus on the lives of historically marginalized figures.

Because of its focus on Ondaatje's own life, Running in the Family is a text that is very much informed by Ondaatje's own cross-cultural identification. His desire to sift through the contents of his own life in order to recreate a sense of origins is couched in the journey that is at the heart of this text: the journey to discover his father, Mervyn Ondaatje, and the place that he was born, Ceylon.¹⁸ As a result, his process of self representation is complicated by his conflicted allegiances to people and to place. Born in Sri Lanka, then Ceylon, in 1943 on a tea estate in Kegalle, he left his birthplace to study in England at the age of eleven with the expectation that he would return. Instead he immigrated to Canada in 1962 where he attended Bishop's University. He never returned to Sri Lanka and he never saw his father again. Ondaatje explains:

I went to school in England. I was part of that colonial tradition, of sending your kids off to school in England, and then you were supposed to go to Oxford or Cambridge and get a blue in tennis and return. But I never went to Oxford or Cambridge, I didn't get a blue, and I didn't return. (in Bush 89)

This separation from his childhood home complicates any easy sense of belonging when he returns decades later. His journeys to Sri Lanka are not straightforward homecomings; the connections he seeks are tenuous. The text itself thus becomes the site of an exploration of self through familial connections, origins, and place; it becomes the site of Ondaatje's complex act

¹⁸ Ondaatje refers to Sri Lanka by its former name Ceylon throughout the text as a way of foregrounding the specific historical time that his text recalls. He makes clear that this is not a study of the present day Sri Lanka, but rather a place reserved in the memories of his sources.

of cultural recovery. Throughout the book he struggles to come to terms with a disconnected past through the acts of imagining and writing himself into a particular time and place.

In his attempts to forge a relationship with a past he does not remember, Ondaatje carries out both the physical and imaginative acts of journeying, of listening, and of transcribing. Often the stories he hears do not correspond to his own memories, and historical documents tend to contradict one another. The result is that, in the midst of his journey, Ondaatje discovers the extent of his disconnection or, the trauma of his uprooting. The difficulties he has in narrating his story (in distinguishing between rumours and lies, in organizing fragments of information, in translating from the oral to the written) demonstrate the challenges involved in his own process of cultural recovery. These challenges are played out in the non-linear, fragmentary, and often disorienting textual strategies he employs.

Ondaatje's textual strategies of estrangement have alternatively been read by critics who either applaud his postmodern experimentation or who see his anti-realist representations as irresponsible and ultimately alienating. Arun Mukherjee rejects Ondaatje's text on the grounds that "responsible" immigrant narratives should represent or be faithful to history; that they should engage with the structures of power; and that "visible minority writers" should not only be "original," but also "authentic" ("Sri Lankan Poets" 32). W.M. Verhoeven responds to such a reading by arguing that Ondaatje's postmodern techniques are liberating tropes that raise crucial questions about the language of the self, including one's ethnic identity. He suggests that "Ondaatje's experimental writings consistently question conventional, centered notions of the self, identity and origin, and hence the

existence of traceable ethnic roots" ("How Hyphenated" 99). For Mukherjee, the articulation of one's authentic ethnic identity is not only a plausible and possible goal of ethnic literatures; it is the only productive goal. In contrast, Verhoeven suggests that such an ideal is limited and short-sighted (he reduces Mukherjee's project to "folkloristic nostalgia and political correctness" [106]) because it denies the liberating potential in what he sees Ondaatje's text attempting to be: "a discourse on the problematic and indeterminate nature of identity, self, and language" (103).

Much of the critical discourse about Running in the Family (and, in fact, Ondaatje's work more generally) tends to be divided between these two opposing poles. However, a closer reading of the text shows how Ondaatje, in fact, negotiates the tension between these two critical positions. In Running in the Family Ondaatje engages with the specific stories and place and people that continue to shape him, while highlighting his own complex processes of negotiating that past. His acute curiosity about where he came from, his desire to document the historical specificities of his family and his birthplace and forge meaningful connections, and perhaps most importantly, his acceptance of the explanatory and recuperative powers of storytelling render problematic any approach to ethnic autobiography that celebrates ethnicity solely as a metaphor for the postmodern condition. Nonetheless, his feelings of dislocation and separation and the resulting sense of doubleness, coupled with his suspicion of linearity and plot, will not allow for a more straightforward narrative of his origins, or the kind of coming to voice narrative that relies on a unified concept of the ethnic subject and developmental narrative of assimilation or belonging. He thus acknowledges the processes involved in identity formation and the challenges inherent in its

representation. To deny his awareness of and sensitivity to either side of the debate is to simplify his own complex self-identification.

II. Tracking the Self

While many of the central issues in Running in the Family—including the representation of otherness or alterity—have their roots in Ondaatje's earlier texts, in Running in the Family Ondaatje makes the details of his own life the subject of the text. Part memoir, part travelogue, part fictionalized biography, and part autobiography interspersed with poems and photographs, it is a text that focuses on self-representation, while still defying traditional autobiographical expectations. In his "Acknowledgments," Ondaatje says that Running in the Family is "a composite of two return journeys to Sri Lanka, in 1978 and 1980" (175), and he suggests it is not a history but a portrait or "gesture" (176). Critics do not agree on how best to define the text. Timothy Dow Adams says the text is closest to memoir, "a genre that operates somewhere between biography and autobiography, focusing as much on the observer as the observed" (97). Linda Hutcheon calls the text a "postmodern memoir" (Other Solitudes 201) and John Russell defines it as a "non fictional novel." It has also variously been called an "existential biography," a "personal history," and an "account of the recovering of language and self in a context saturated with memory" (in Kamboureli, "Alphabet" 80).

These definitions all acknowledge the autobiographical impulse in Running in the Family, an impulse rooted in the search for self and the desire to document a life. This same project is at the heart of most of Ondaatje's narratives, but it is most dramatically brought to the surface in this text. It is fascinating to trace how issues he works through in all of his writing

eventually get filtered through the lens of his own past in Running in the Family. Tracking a life is an obsession throughout his writing. In fact, each of the long poems that were published before Running in the Family is a kind of fictionalized biography that consists of the imagining of and the writing of a life. Often in Ondaatje's texts the subject of the text is lost and needs to be found:

again and again persons (or their identities) get lost in Ondaatje's stories—lost in legend, lost in the bush, lost in the past, lost in history, lost in memory, lost in myth—and in each case people go after them in order to recover them, to remember them, or to recreate them: hence the remarkable array of archivists, historians, detectives, reporters, and biographers that crowd Ondaatje's books. (Verhoeven, "DeFacing the Self" 181-2)

In The Man With Seven Toes Ondaatje attempts to reconstruct a lost episode in the biography of Mrs. Fraser, a woman who was shipwrecked on Fraser Island off the coast of Queensland and who lived among the aborigines for six months before being restored to her home. In The Collected Works of Billy the Kid Ondaatje writes a version of Billy's life by contrasting opinions of Billy from a wide variety of sources. Pat Garrett, acting as a kind of parallel figure to the reader, tracks Billy through the text, trying to pin him down and bring him to justice. Similarly, Coming Through Slaughter is a fictionalized biography of Buddy Bolden's life, written as a mystery story complete with a detective and a set of clues. Here, the character of Webb acts as a mirror of both the author and the reader. Both are on a journey to reconstruct the mysterious Buddy Bolden. Often in these texts the main character is

overshadowed by his tracker. The searcher is as important an element to the story as the one who is being searched for.

In both Billy the Kid and Coming Through Slaughter, the onus is put on the reader to figure out what kind of character the protagonist of the story is. In each of these texts the narrative carefully circles around its central figure, as various characters offer their versions of the protagonists. It is up to the reader to follow along with the detective at work. The texts thus foreground the idea of discovery. Neither text is a story about its central character so much as it is a story of how characters are constructed from a variety of different angles. These texts do not offer up a finished or final version of their protagonists; the characters remain subjects in process.

Ondaatje also challenges the notion of official history by spinning tales and layering alternate stories around the historical documents that pertain to characters like Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden, thus turning historical figures into literary figures. Historical sources structure all of Ondaatje's fictionalized narratives. For example, Coming Through Slaughter begins with a newspaper article about Buddy Bolden;¹⁹ the building of the Don Valley bridge is the focus of In the Skin of a Lion; the relative tranquillity of the Tuscan villa in The English Patient is ripped apart by the bombing of Hiroshima. Ondaatje tends to start with the kernel of fact and move outward, creatively spinning a fictional world around the initial documentary impulse. It is a strategy he also appreciates in other authors' works. For

¹⁹ Ondaatje was at work on another project and he came across a newspaper reference: "Buddy Bolden, who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade." This reference was enough to provoke Ondaatje's obsession with the character even though the "facts" he knows about Bolden are only enough to fill one page of the novel. They are sparse and leave many gaps; they provide only a working outline. Ondaatje's project is to work with these gaps rather than the facts in order to come up with versions of Bolden's and Billy's lives. He has a very wide definition of document in his writing, which allows him to make use of rumours, gossip, and sometimes even lies.

example, in his afterword to O'Hagan's Tay John Ondaatje writes, "the story remains potent because of the way O'Hagan has found a legend and retold it in the form of a myth. The cast is small. Narrators are recognized as minor characters. The mysterious centre is given power to grow" (266). Such a process requires a careful reader who can read the text at a number of levels and pay attention to both the story as well as the "metastory" of how the story is being constructed.

In Running in the Family the tracking of self is equally complex. Ondaatje uses similar processes of layering stories and circling around the main character. Although the initial autobiographical impulse in Ondaatje's book seems straightforward enough, and the desire to journey back and experience his childhood home (and to make connections between there and here) is a driving force in the narrative, from the beginning conventional expectations (both in terms of autobiography and referentiality) are challenged. Ondaatje explains the impetus for his journey home: "In my mid-thirties I realized I had slipped past a childhood I had ignored and not understood" (16). Unlike more conventional autobiographies, however, Running in the Family is not the narrative of Ondaatje's whole life. In fact, there is very little information in the book about his own childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. It is more of a relational account, more a story of the impact of a particular place and a particular time as captured in the present moment of his travels. Thus, the story of Ondaatje's own journey takes shape through accounts of his family, descriptions of Ceylon, lunch time conversations, and fragments from journal entries. Because Ondaatje feels cut off from his past, the story cannot unfold in a linear fashion and his

childhood does not explain or make sense of his present. As a result, understanding (both of self and others) is continually deferred.

Ondaatje writes this sense of deferral into his text in a number of ways. One of the most obvious is the way the self functions in this text. As in The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and Coming Through Slaughter, there is a split focus on the searcher and the one being searched for in this book. Ondaatje and his father are thus equal protagonists and the focus of the text switches between their lives. Ondaatje's journey begins with research that consists of the journey itself, interviews with various family members, letters, and old photographs. As a result, rather than being the central subject of the text, Ondaatje acts more as a detective, recorder, organizer, and transcriber of narratives of events. Considering the autobiographical impulse that drives the text, Ondaatje's absence as the central figure is striking.

Ondaatje's self-conscious positioning as both the subject and the object of research helps to illustrate the fictionalizing that goes on in any autobiographical narrative and the constructedness of the autobiographical subject.²⁰ His shifts from writer to listener to recorder introduce an unsettling split in the narrating subject. For example, on the first unnumbered page of the book the third-person narrative introduces a gap between the subject and the author of the text: "He snaps on the electricity just before daybreak. For twenty five years he has not lived in this country, though up to the age of eleven he slept in rooms just like this—with no curtains, just delicate bars across the windows so no one could break in"

²⁰ Donna Bennett explains how the act of constructing a life story is, "by its nature, already an act of fiction making" because narratives of lives (autobiographies and biographies) "must confront both a surplus of information, which requires filtering, and information gaps, which mean that what has been lost needs filling in or what is untellable must be elided" ("No Fear of Fiction" 203).

(n.p.). Although the first-person narrative takes over immediately following this passage, the effect of this introduction of the third-person pronoun as an unexpected precursor to a supposedly autobiographical narrative is that the unified nature of the writing subject is undermined from the beginning.

Ondaatje also confounds traditional autobiographical expectations by offering various conflicting versions of his family history. Rather than following the anticipated progression (birth-childhood-departure, maturity-return), chronology is abandoned as the past interrupts the present and vice-versa. Ondaatje uses the image of the labyrinth that opens the section "Jaffna Afternoons" to symbolize the maze of information that he encounters in his search for clues to his past. Shortly after he arrives in Sri Lanka he writes, "the morning has been spent with my sister and Aunt Phyllis trying to trace the maze of relationships in our ancestry" (18), and he calls his Aunt Phyllis "the minotaur of this long journey back," and "the minotaur who inhabits the place one had been years ago, who surprises one about the original circle of love" (18). He describes the process of collecting memories as circular and often confusing. He explains, "No story is ever told just once. Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgements thrown in. In this way history is organized" (19).²¹

²¹ Ondaatje uses related images for gathering information in a number of his other books. The research process is never conceived of as linear or chronological. For example, fragments of information about Buddy Bolden are like "spokes on a rimless wheel." In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* he also uses the maze image: "Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in" (20). The narrator in *In the Skin of a Lion* says that "this is the story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning" and "she listens to the man as he picks up and brings together various corners of the story, attempting to carry it all in his arms" (n.p.).

Ondaatje's access to his own family history is obviously mediated through people like Phyllis and he reminds the reader of this mediation in a number of sections. In fact, there are times when Ondaatje seems to abandon control of the narrative thread altogether as different voices interrupt the narrative. In places large segments of quotations are inserted in the text so that the sources of the various stories are never made clear (147-151). In other sections, accounts are filtered through at least two distinct voices. The section "Final Days: Father Tongue" is made up of three different monologues (164-172), and "Lunch Conversation" is a transcription of a confusing and circular conversation among a group of friends and family members (85-89). These narrative techniques serve to distance Ondaatje from any one version of his family history. He acknowledges his necessary reliance on family members and their gossip as his historical sources:

how I have used them....They knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong. They lead me through their dark rooms crowded with various kinds of furniture—teak, rattan, calamander, bamboo—their voices whispering over tea, cigarettes, distracting me from the tale with their long bony arms, which move over the table like the stretched feet of storks. (90)²²

Rather than offer an already processed version of his past, Ondaatje supplies his readers with a range of seemingly unmediated stories to decipher and to make sense of. The result is often more disorienting than explanatory, thus making it difficult to interpret what any "true" version of events might be.

²² Lisa Lowe refers to the role of gossip in the novel *Dogeaters* as "the popular discourse that interrupts and displaces official representational regimes," an "unofficial discourse" that runs "counter to the verisimilitude and the organized subordination of written narratives" ("Decolonization" 112). Gossip functions in a similar way in Ondaatje's text.

Ondaatje's emphasis on family and a larger social community is another important deviation from a conventional Western autobiographical text with its focus on an individual life. Since, as we have seen, Ondaatje's reconstruction of his past is filtered through other people and their stories, making sense of his own life is inextricably connected to retelling his family's stories and making them part of his own story. He introduces the importance of the family and his disconnection from them near the beginning of the narrative: "I realised I would be traveling back to the family I had grown from—those relations from my parents' generation who stood in my memory like frozen opera. I wanted to touch them into words" (16). In an interview with Hutcheon, Ondaatje says, "Running in the Family is a book about a family and a father, essentially" (Other Solitudes 198). In her afterword to the text Nicole Brossard says that "Running in the Family is first and above all else a written representation of life that penetrates to the bone of generations of Ondaatjes, the reality of their exuberance and of their mal de vivre" (180). Entire sections of the text are grounded in the past and set in the Ceylon of Ondaatje's parents' and grandparents' generations. Their escapades are recorded in detail. For example, much of the narrative is centred on Ondaatje's flamboyant and eccentric maternal grandmother, Lalla, and his father's extravagant youth is the subject of the section entitled "A Fine Romance."

In fact, the figure of the absent father is at the centre of this book. The text begins with a dream about Ondaatje's father and it is his father's ghost that pulls him back to Ceylon: "What began it all was the bright bone of a dream I could hardly hold onto. I was sleeping at a friend's house. I saw my father, chaotic, surrounded by dogs, and all of them were screaming and

barking into the tropical landscape" (15). The focus on Mervyn Ondaatje helps to illustrate Ondaatje's tendency to circle around a character, keeping him at a distance even as he is trying to "capture" him. Ondaatje's circling of his father is also an attempt at self-understanding. The reader is offered many versions of this figure, but they are all second- or third-hand reports. The dual focus on Ondaatje and his father blurs the boundary between autobiography and biography. The more Ondaatje discovers about his father and other family members, the more he begins to recognize his attachment to something larger than himself and the shaping force of it on his own life:

That night, I will have not so much a dream as an image that repeats itself. I see my own straining body which stands shaped like a star and realise gradually I am a part of a human pyramid. Below me are other bodies that I am standing on and above me are several more, though I am quite near the top. (20)

This literalized image of the family tree helps to foreground the importance of familial connection that is central to the text. At the end of the book he thanks family members for being "central in helping me recreate the era of my parents" (175).

Ultimately, however, the gaps between Ondaatje's own memories of his father and of Sri Lanka and the stories he hears about them emphasize the fragility of his connection with his past. This fragility will not allow for a coherent and unified narrative of self. Even the ending is tentative, unsure. In the final section, "The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society," Ondaatje

most clearly associates himself with the figure of his father.²³ In the first part of this section, Ondaatje traces a day in the life of his father years after his parents' separation. He documents his father's downfall into alcoholism, depression and, finally, death. At certain moments the pronouns change unexpectedly so that "he" and "I" become interchangeable. In the section "Thanikama," the "he" and "I" switch in the middle of the narrative so that it is unclear who the subject of the passage is. These pronoun shifts forge an intimate connection between the narrator and Mervyn Ondaatje. However, in the last lines of "Final Days Father Tongue," the pronoun changes to "you" and there is a beautiful and moving direct address from son to father: "In the end all your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues. Not that we ever thought we would be able to fully understand you" (172). "The book," writes Ondaatje, "is incomplete" (172). Given the nature of the unfinished subject—the subject in process—that is being written in this text, coupled with the figure of the absent and unknowable father, there is no way to "get this book right" (172).

The desire behind writing a text based on one's own life begins with the belief that the past can offer some kind of explanation for who one is in the present. However, the negotiation of the past in the present is one of a number of factors that complicates access to an unmediated history. As Ihab

²³ Ondaatje did not see his father after he left Ceylon at the age of eleven. Therefore, the memory of his father is very much a construct. He does to his father what he does to most of the main characters of his books, starts with the kernel of truth but quickly moves outward, mythologizing as he creates. For example, his version of his father as a romantic (albeit self-destructive) artist is quite different from his older brother Christopher's version. Christopher Ondaatje calls *Running in the Family* "a love letter to the father he never knew, a large and glamorous man away in the distance," but suggests that, on the contrary, "I had been deeply involved with that man, and I had had to grapple with his demons, which never seemed romantic or amusing" (38). To read the two brothers' memoirs of their returns to Ceylon side by side is an interesting lesson in "truth-telling" because of the way that the two versions of the same story very often conflict.

Hassan suggests, “Autobiography simulates the past in the present. It feigns recollection. But it cannot escape the pressures of its moment, the prejudices of its author. Why not admit, then, these pressures, these prejudices, from the start?” (282). In Running in the Family Ondaatje acknowledges the pressures of the moment while still insisting on recuperating some version of the past. Although this book is, in many ways, a magical story of fabulous characters, it is also very much an attempt at reconstituting a self. The self that emerges in the text is one that is tentative, in process, not altogether “at home.”

III. Tracking the Other

As we have seen, any notion of tracking the self is complicated by the myriad versions of self available to the autobiographer. In all of his writing, Ondaatje uses a range of textual strategies to show how the autobiographical subject is constructed. By layering different voices and versions of a story, and by interrupting the linearity and chronology of his narrative, he demonstrates how any story of self is, to some extent, a fiction. In Running in the Family, however, Ondaatje takes the exploration and representation of self a step further by placing it in the context of a time and place he cannot fully understand. The challenge to “get this book right” is made even more difficult because of Ondaatje’s problematic relationship to his birthplace, his own cultural displacement and his multiple subject positionings, and the recognition that his autobiographical “self” is, in some ways, “other.”

Ondaatje’s text exemplifies the problematics of representing a displaced self. An engaged critical reading of Running in the Family needs to take into consideration an array of contemporary theoretical concerns about ethnicity, nation, hybridity, and migrancy, even though Ondaatje does not

openly foreground such concerns. Not only does Ondaatje self-consciously negotiate the process involved in writing a life (his own and his father's), he adds to this challenge the difficulty of coming to terms with his cross-cultural identifications. Ondaatje's lineage is complicated by his multiple movements. He is at home neither in Canada nor in Sri Lanka. His history of migration raises questions about both ethnic and national belonging. The formal and generic complexities of the text are responses to these challenges.

Postcolonial by birth and nationalization, a male from a privileged Sri Lankan Burgher background, a migrant, a Toronto writer working in the academy, Ondaatje has a complex network of affiliations (Spearey 48). He tells Hutcheon, "I do feel I have been allowed the migrant's double perspective, the way, say, someone like Gertrude Stein was 're-focused' by Paris" (Other Solitudes 197). His doubled consciousness means that it is impossible for him to locate his identity within a single, unified space. The experience of one place is continually processed through the experience of another. Ondaatje dreams of the heat and drought of Sri Lanka in a cold apartment in Kingston, Ontario. He wakes "tense, not wanting to move as the heat gradually left me, as the sweat evaporated and I became conscious again of brittle air outside the windows searing and howling through the streets and over the frozen cars hunched like sheep all the way down towards Lake Ontario" (15). The here and there are in constant dialogue so that the often naturalized relationship between self and place is interrogated. Ondaatje discovers that he is neither "Sri Lankan" or "Canadian" in any

straightforward way.²⁴ Ondaatje's statement at the opening of the section "The Karapothis" illustrates his ambivalence: "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner" (65). Before he travels to Sri Lanka, he feels drawn there, pulled by an extraordinary force. However, once he arrives in Sri Lanka he discovers that he is not altogether comfortable in his environment.

Critics have attempted to deal with the focus in Ondaatje's work on the movement between cultures by grouping him into the category of so-called cosmopolitan writers or transplanted third-world writers who write from the metropolitan centre.²⁵ Cosmopolitan writing is defined as having a focus on the homelessness associated with migrancy. Leela Gandhi defines such writing as "entirely explicit in its commitment to hybridity. Positioned on the interstices of two antagonistic national cultures, it claims to open up an in-between space of cultural ambivalence" (153).²⁶ In Making a Difference

²⁴ Ondaatje's positioning has always posed a problem for critics in Canada who, on the one hand, want to claim him as a Canadian writer, but on the other hand, find it difficult to locate him as such because his texts don't deal explicitly with "Canadian" material. He rarely sets his books in Canada. Nonetheless, his works are taught in Canadian literature courses and collected in a number of anthologies. He has edited his own anthologies of Canadian long poems and short stories. He has been awarded the prestigious Governor General's Award for both poetry and fiction, and he identifies with Canada as his home. In fact, on a number of occasions he has suggested that Canada made him a writer, that the sense of an artistic community that he discovered here upon arrival nurtured and supported him and made it possible for him to write.

²⁵ Because of its presumed challenge to and interrogation of national boundaries, cosmopolitan or immigrant writing has been the subject of much recent criticism. See, for example, Salman Rushdie's Imaginary Homelands; Fran Bartkowski's "Travelers vs. Ethnic: Discourses of Displacement"; "Ethnic Selves/Ethnic Signs: Invention of Self, Space, and Genealogy in Immigrant Writing" by Azade Seyhan; and the final chapter in Rosemary Marangoly George's The Politics of Home. "Traveling Light: Home and the Immigrant Genre." For an extended definition of "cosmopolitanism," see Timothy Brennan's Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation. For a powerful critique of cosmopolitanism, see Ahmad's In Theory.

²⁶ In Salman Rushdie and the Third World, Timothy Brennan talks about the "Third-World Cosmopolitans" whose works have as much to do with the metropolitan "centre" as the third world. Brennan refers to the "in-betweenness" of this position and suggests that with these novels comes the "declaration of cultural hybridity" (35).

Ondaatje says that he sees himself as belonging to a generation of writers that “was the first of the real migrant tradition...of writers of our time—Rushdie, Ishiguro, Ben Okri, Rohinton Mistry—writers leaving and not going back, but taking their countries with them to a new place” (241). Because questions of belonging, homelessness, and migrancy are central in Ondaatje’s works, his writing is in dialogue with the writing of other so-called cosmopolitans, whose work Aijaz Ahmad defines as having “floated upwards from history” (127). And yet Ondaatje’s writing is marked in part by intense pain, and despite the emphasis on dislocation in his writing, his texts maintain a sense of the urgency of location that is often missing in celebrations of migrancy. Unlike some migrant writers, Ondaatje does not see cultural ambivalence as the ultimate goal of self-expression. Because Running in the Family is a text that is concerned with the particularities of both history and memory, and because it mourns the loss of both, it does not easily fit the definition of the migrant text.

Running in the Family is more a text about the possibility of return than it is about ambivalence. Having left Ceylon at age eleven, Ondaatje has no immediate access to any community outside of his family in Sri Lanka. Thus, the focus on his family is a way into a time and place he himself cannot remember. His identity is linked to something larger than himself. And, although life history is not the same as social history and family structures are not the same as broader social structures, they are related in the fact that both are materially rooted and grounded. In his text Ondaatje makes use of family stories to probe a broader social history.

A number of critics have found this aspect of Ondaatje's text highly problematic. Mukherjee especially takes issue with Ondaatje's personalizing of social history. She writes that:

The artist in [Ondaatje's] version is not a participant in the social process, he does not get drawn into the act of living, which involves the need to deal with the burning issues of his time, such as poverty, injustice, exploitation, racism, sexism, etc., and he does not write about other human beings unless they happen to be artists—or members of his own family. (Oppositional Aesthetics 98-9)

She also argues that "Ondaatje's success is won largely through a sacrifice of his regionality, his past, and most importantly, his experience of otherness in Canada" (50). According to Mukherjee, Running in the Family does not give a realistic portrayal of Sri Lanka because Ondaatje's tendency to mythologize and romanticize actually hides the "truth" of the place and its people: the aesthetics (the dream-like quality, the fragmentary ordering, the generic slippage) mask the politics of place.²⁷ She writes, "Reading Running in the Family one gets the impression that the other Sri Lankans—the fishermen, the tea-estate pickers, the paddy planters—are only there as a backdrop to the drama of the Ondaatje family" (121) and "Ondaatje's unwillingness or inability to place his family in a network of social relationships makes the

²⁷ A similar argument could be made about the kind of aestheticizing of the descriptions of hard manual labour that occurs in In the Skin of a Lion. Ondaatje's descriptions of the tanners in that book are among the most beautiful passages in the text. He writes: "Dye work took place in the courtyards next to the warehouse. Circular pools had been cut into the stone—into which the men leapt waist-deep within the reds and ochres and greens, leapt in embracing the skins of recently slaughtered animals....And the men stepped out in colours up to their necks, pulling wet hides out after them so it appeared they had removed the skins from their own bodies. They had leapt into different colours as into different countries" (130). The description is lush and sensuous and very beautiful. Yet it manages to describe the workers' complete and utter immersion in this work and the sense that it is a burden that is as familiar and inescapable as their own skins.

book a collection of anecdotes which may or may not be funny depending on one's own place in the world" (122).²⁸ Similarly, Chelva Kanaganayakam suggests that Ondaatje glosses over a history of conflict in favour of the relative sanctuary of his privileged family's private myths. He argues that "the work's weakness lies in its refusal to participate actively in the referential, in its reluctance to condemn or praise; in foregrounding the 'narrative' at the expense of the 'national,' Ondaatje abandons a wonderful opportunity to assert a much needed sense of belonging" (41).

Critics who focus on Ondaatje's lack of connection to a wider community overlook the fact that because Ondaatje's relationship to his past is in process—and the text itself is an exploration of that process—there cannot be a tangible sense of connection and belonging. Not only is Ondaatje removed from the referential, having emigrated from Sri Lanka when he was still a child, but his relatives are also distanced by race and by class from the kind of "authentic" Sri Lankan reality that Mukherjee and Kanaganayakam refer to. Ondaatje tells Hutcheon, "Here I was writing about a group of people that seemed utterly separate in some ways from the world around them, unaware of what was going on around them politically or whatever" (201). As Burghers, Ondaatje's family would have been separated both from the colonial rulers and the Sinhalese and Tamil denizens of the island. The fact that many Burghers were British educated further cut them off from their homes in Sri Lanka. Daniel Coleman suggests that there are a range of

²⁸ A wide range of postcolonial critics has critiqued arguments like Mukherjee's, which are based on the demand for an authentic voice. For example, Gayatri Spivak questions whether the recovery of a subaltern voice is a kind of essentialist fiction. According to Spivak, it is impossible to construct a category of the subaltern that has an effect clearly and audibly above the persistent and multiple echoes of its inevitable heterogeneity. She argues that the intellectual must resist reconstructing the subaltern as another unproblematic field of knowing ("Subaltern Studies").

factors that prevent Ondaatje from connecting to his past: "Ondaatje's severance from his own national and cultural past, then, is the effect of the combined history of his élite Burgher class ancestry, his British colonial education and his family's history of divorce and emigration" (114).

Ondaatje examines his family's detachment from a larger sense of community and the hybrid nature of their lineage in several of his descriptions:

This was Nuwara Eliya in the twenties and thirties. Everyone was vaguely related and had Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood in them going back many generations. There was a large social gap between this circle and the Europeans and English who were never part of the Ceylonese community. The English were seen as transients, snobs and racists, and were quite separate from those who had intermarried and who lived here permanently. My father always claimed to be a Ceylon Tamil, though that was probably more valid about three centuries earlier. Emil Daniels summed up the situation for most of them when he was asked by one of the British governors what his nationality was—"God alone knows, your excellency." (32)

Ondaatje's focus on his mixed lineage tends to reinforce the unknowability of his heritage and keeps his relatives suspended at a distance from him. In the section "Thanikama," he refers to his parents' generation as "a mid-summer dream. All of them had moved at times with an ass's head, Titania Dorothy Hildem Lysander de Samram, a mongrel collection part Sinhalese part Dutch part Tamil part ass moving slowly in the forests with foolish and serious obsessions" (160). This lack of an "authentic" ethnic identity makes it difficult for Ondaatje to connect fully to a larger sense of community. He shows more

ambivalence than connection. Although he seems to celebrate the excess of their privilege in a number of passages, there is also a melancholic undertone to many of the descriptions of the frivolity of his relatives and their social circle and the lack of any certain, traceable roots.

IV. Tracking the Text

The fact is Ondaatje does not comfortably belong in Sri Lanka. And he writes this lack of belonging into his text in a number of ways. He knows that the stories he hears cannot encompass the whole truth of the place. He continually interrupts the stories in order to acknowledge the dangers inherent in representing otherness with his choice of intertexts and his discussion of maps and mapping. Aware that Empire was itself, at least in part, a textual experience, Ondaatje foregrounds the history of appropriation throughout his text.²⁹ Recognizing his distance from any kind of Sri Lankan community (other than family), he realizes that his text can only be another attempt at mapping. He tells Hutcheon that his book is “part of a long tradition of invasions and so forth” (*Other Solitudes* 201). The addition of the quotations from Edward Lear, D.H. Lawrence, Leonard Woolf, and others is paradoxically both an associative and disassociative move. For example, D.H. Lawrence’s description of the roads with their “animals, apes, porcupine, hornbill, squirrel, pigeons, and figurative dirt!” (65) prefigures Ondaatje’s own depictions, particularly of the wild pig: “My wild pig. That repulsively exotic creature in his thick black body and the ridge of non-symmetrical hair

²⁹ As Elleke Boehmer suggests, “The Empire in its heyday was conceived and maintained in an array of writings—political treatises, diaries, acts and edicts, administrative records and gazetteers, missionaries’ reports, notebooks, memoirs, popular verse, government briefs, letters ‘home’ and letters back to settlers. The triple-decker novel and the best-selling adventure tale, both definitive Victorian genres, were infused with imperial ideas of race pride and national prowess” (13).

running down his back" (118). Similarly, Ondaatje seems to revel in William Charles's passion for the Sri Lankan jungle:

Here are majestic palms with their towering stems and graceful foliage, the show flower, the eatable passion flower. Here the water lily swims the rivers with expanded leaves—a prince of aquatic plants! The Aga-mula-naeti-wala, creeper without beginning or end, twines around trees and hangs in large festoons...and curious indeed these are from having neither leaves nor roots. Here is the winged thunbergia, the large snouted justica, the mustard tree of Scripture with its succulent leaves and infinitesimal berries. (68)

The various accounts from previous travelers are a reminder of the appropriative nature of any travel or exploration narrative, including, inevitably, his own. According to Ondaatje, "very few foreigners truly knew where they were" (69).

The section "Tabula Asiae" raises further questions about the politics of representation. By playing with the notion of "tabula rasa," Ondaatje compares Asia to a blank slate, a land to be conquered: "The island seduced all of Europe. The Portuguese. The Dutch. The English. And so its name changed, as well as its shape,—Serendip, Ratnapida ('island of gems'), Taprobane, Zeloan, Zeilan, Seyllan, Ceilon, and Ceylon—the wife of many marriages, courted by invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language" (54). Ondaatje's discussion of the maps that hang on the walls of his brother's home in Toronto also points to the colonizing potential of representation: "On my brother's wall in Toronto are the false maps. Old portraits of Ceylon. The result of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of sextant. The

shapes differ so much they seem to be translations...growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy" (53). He refers to the representations as "false." Each is different—the shape of the island actually changes—depending on the needs and desires of the conqueror. Again, it is difficult not to apply Ondaatje's warning to his own text or "version" of Sri Lanka and the needs and desires that inform it.

Ondaatje is obviously acutely aware of the power of agency in these representations—representations that have led to a history of brutal invasion and colonization. The most explicit discussions of the power of representation are in the most overtly "political" section of the text, "Don't Talk to Me About Matisse." The title is a reference to a poem by the Sri Lankan native poet Lakdasa Wikkramasinha whose poetry is directly engaged in a Sri Lankan revolutionary politics. His poem is a condemnation of European colonization, both physical and aesthetic. It is a tract on the politics of cultural representation. For Wikkramasinha, Matisse and other artists representing the "European style of 1900" are "murderers": "to our remote / villages the painters came, and our white-washed / mud-huts were splattered with gunfire" (71). It should come as no surprise that Ondaatje's own poems that depict Sri Lankan peasants and villagers—the toddy tapper, the cinnamon peeler—immediately follow Wikkramasinha's powerful lines about appropriation. This act of juxtaposition emphasises Ondaatje's awareness that he is implicated in Wikkramasinha's condemnation.

The explicit reference to Wikkramasinha also supplies the poet's words with a potency and power that find resonance within Ondaatje's text. Again, like his inclusion of the various epigraphs by Lawrence and Woolf, the

Wikkramasinha intertext has a paradoxical function. As Ajay Heble argues, including the poem is

at once a way of undermining the representational legitimacy of his project (doesn't anything that Ondaatje says about cultural and political phenomena in Sri Lanka inevitably run the risk of playing into the grid of Western thought and representation so sharply invoked and criticized by Wikkramasinha?) and of declaring his faith in imaginative understanding. ("Rumours" 195)

Ondaatje admits that voices like Wikkramasinha's are the "voices I didn't know," yet, by including them within his mapping of a particular time and place, he both foregrounds and engages them. The voices he didn't know have a sense of community and history in common. They are connected by a shared sense of political struggle. Ondaatje refers to his friend Ian Goonetilleke as a man for whom "history is always present" (71). Ondaatje's own text is an attempt to capture that sense of a living history (hence his emphasis on life-writing, orality and the living imprint of memory), but he is acutely aware that, given his own distance from that part of his history, he cannot be entirely successful. He tells Hutcheon that, although the focus on family and intimacy is an important component of Running in the Family, "the map and the history and the poetry made a more social voice, became the balance of the family story, the other end of the see-saw" (Other Solitudes 201).

Ondaatje uses a range of strategies to foreground the textual nature of the past. He undermines a referential narrative by incorporating a range of destabilizing techniques including the foregrounding of history as narrative, multivoicedness, and intertextuality. All serve to complicate any direct access

to his family history and emphasize the complex processes involved in his identification with his past. For example, Ondaatje continually undermines the authority of his sources. The people he interviews often have unclear memories and rich imaginations. In his acknowledgments he admits, "while all these names may give an air of authenticity, I must confess that the book is not a history but a portrait or 'gesture.' And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts" (176).

Throughout the text written documents literally dissolve in one's hands; very little is solid or fixed. For example, novels lose their pages: "In the bathroom ants had attacked the novel thrown on the floor by the commode. A whole battalion was carrying one page away from its source, carrying the intimate print as if rolling a tablet away from him" (161). Church records deteriorate; the pages of guest books (seemingly "true" records of events) are ripped out and destroyed. Looking over the ledgers of the church he writes: "The black script must have turned brown over a hundred years ago. The thick pages foxed and showing the destruction caused by silverfish, scars among the immaculate recordings of local history and formal signatures" (56). The erosion of these various texts clearly challenges the authority and availability of documented "truth."

At the same time that Ondaatje challenges these written accounts, he is paradoxically inscribing his own version of place, family, and community. The impulse to tell himself the story of his self is at the heart of Ondaatje's text. Connection drives Ondaatje's search for meaning. Although aware of the slippage between fact and fiction, there are crucial moments in the text

when he seems to crave the “truth”—to see beyond the gossip and rumours and lies to something different. In the section “Tropical Gossip,” he asks,

Where is the intimate and truthful in all this? Teenager and Uncle. Husband and lover. A lost father in his solace. And why do I want to know of this privacy? After the cups of tea, coffee, public conversations...I want to sit down with someone and talk with utter directness, want to talk to all the lost history like that deserving lover.

(43)

Similarly, he begins the section “Lunch Conversation” with a direct appeal to his family members: “Wait a minute, wait a minute! When did all this happen, I’m trying to get it straight” (85). But, despite his demands for the truth, the lunch conversation that follows is an incongruous and bizarre mix of fragments that do not add up to anything complete.

Nonetheless, Ondaatje remains intent on inscribing himself into a virtually unknown landscape. The book begins as he wakes from a dream “in a jungle hot and sweating” (15) and he realizes that “he was already dreaming of Asia.” “Asia” he writes,

the name was a gasp from a dying mouth. An ancient word that had to be whispered, would never be used as a battle cry. The word sprawled. It had none of the clipped sound of Europe, America, Canada. The vowels took over, slept on a map with the S. I was running to Asia and everything would change. (16)

For Ondaatje, “Asia,” in its vastness lacks specificity; his journey is, at least in part, an attempt to define it, make sense of it, attempt to make it his own. This is part of Ondaatje’s process of cultural recovery, the taking ownership of the past in the present. As Hall suggests, “there is no way in which people

of the word can act, can speak, can create, unless they come from some place, they come from some history, they inherit certain cultural traditions...the past is not only a position from which to speak, but it is also an absolutely necessary resource in what one has to say" ("Ethnicity" 18-19). Running in the Family is a text of cultural recovery in the sense that it allows for unsettlement and doubt while still insisting on the necessity for self-exploration and representation, what Ondaatje calls in his most recent book of poetry, Handwriting, "a last chance for the clear history of the self" (60).

The text captures Ondaatje's process of writing himself into being. Part of this process consists of storytelling. He shows he has inherited his family's love for exaggeration in the stories he tells about Lalla and his father. There are moments in the text that are Ondaatje's own pure whimsy and invention.³⁰ In Toronto, when asked how his grandmother dies, he responds "natural causes" and later in the text he tells the fantastic story of her being swept away in the storm:

It was her last perfect journey. The new river in the street moved her right across the race course and park towards the bus station. As the light came up slowly she was being swirled fast, "floating" (as ever confident of surviving this too) alongside branches and leaves, the

³⁰ Recent feminist criticism explores the tendency in women's autobiographical texts to deemphasize the legitimacy of historical or factual accounts and to play up the role of fiction or imagination in their self-representations. Given how women's roles in history have traditionally been undervalued, their absence from most "objective" historical accounts is not surprising. They have to actively write their way into the past. Recently, a number of postcolonial critics have turned their attention to the postcolonial autobiographical texts and the ways in which generic distinctions are interrogated. For example, Linda Warley shows how Sara Suleri's Meatless Days cannot be pinned down in terms of genre because the whole notion of home and community is so complicated for Suleri. Similarly, Torres Lordes explores how Latina autobiographies challenge traditional notions of autobiography by juxtaposing history, myth, fiction and fantasy.

dawn starting to hit flamboyant trees as she slipped past them like a dark log, shoes lost, false breast lost. She was free as a fish.... (107)

There are a number of similar magic realist moments in the text where Ondaatje abandons the limits of verisimilitude altogether.³¹ He also seems to take pleasure in passing on the incredible stories of his father on the train or in the jungle carrying the dogs. These fabulous stories also allow Ondaatje to position himself in the line of family historiographers. By fictionalizing his family history, by filling in missing gaps, and by adding his own voice to the versions of others he is taking some ownership of his past.

Interspersed with the various stories from Ondaatje's family and his own imaginative reconstructions are moments in which Ondaatje seems to be writing the text we are reading. These moments seem paradoxically unmediated, untranslated. Although metatextuality—a self-consciousness about writing which is actually being written into the text—is traditionally associated with the modern and postmodern (by drawing attention to the process of writing, the author draws attention to the textuality of the event and therefore to its mediation), in Running in the Family the sections in which Ondaatje writes appear to offer the most direct connection to Sri Lanka. In the midst of the pieces and fragments that he collects are Ondaatje's own direct responses to the land, his family, and his father. Almost confessional, these sections emphasize his own attempts at forging connections. In fact, the importance of writing permeates the text. For Ondaatje, writing is intimately

³¹ Stephen Slemon describes the function of magic realism in postcolonial texts as: "a literary practice ... closely linked with a perception of 'living on the margins,' encoding within it, perhaps, a concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems.... The use of magic realism, then, can itself signify resistance to central assimilation...a way of suggesting that there is something in the nature of the literature that confounds the capacities of the major genre systems to come to terms with it" (10).

connected to his search for his ancestors and his past.³² Several sections are written as journal entries with headings that begin either with the date or time of writing. These headings help to reinforce the immediacy of the entries. In these sections Ondaatje is most clearly the main character of the text; the focus is most directly on him. The act of witnessing and transcribing is most explicit in the sections entitled "Monsoon Notebook." The emphasis on the sensory brings these sections most clearly to life and helps to position Ondaatje firmly within the landscape:

Driven through rainstorms that flood the streets for an hour and suddenly evaporate, where sweat falls in the path of this ballpoint, where the jak fruit rolls across your feet in the back of the jeep, where there are eighteen ways of describing the smell of a durian, where bullocks hold up traffic and steam after the rain. (58)

Although Graham Huggan has read this passage as an example of Ondaatje's tendency to exoticize, Ondaatje's actual self-representation within the description ("sweat falls in the path of this ballpoint") takes away from the exotic element for the writer, if not for a reader like Huggan.³³

If exoticizing implies a distancing effect, the active negotiation of the event arguably has the opposite effect. Ondaatje's position as a narrator experiencing the events first-hand is further emphasized by his descriptions of his own writing. He writes:

³² In her collection on third-world women writers, Chandra Mohanty refers to the "importance of writing in the production of self and collective consciousness" (33). Linda Warley talks about how Suleri's self-conscious awareness of the difficulty of writing throughout *Meatless Days* allows for a text that is "fragmentary, exploratory, irruptive and elusive" (112).

³³ It is significant that when Huggan quotes this passage of the text he leaves out the phrase about the ballpoint pen and puts an ellipsis in its place. This is a crucial deletion because the reference to writing is what situates Ondaatje in place.

At midnight this hand is the only thing moving. As discreetly and carefully as whatever animals in the garden fold brown leaves into their mouths, visit the drain for water, or scale the broken glass that crowns the walls. Watch the hand move. Waiting for it to say something, to stumble casually on perception, the shape of an unknown thing. (162)

In passages like this, the surroundings and the inscription of the surroundings are equally emphasized. And, paradoxically, both the immediacy and the textuality of the event are foregrounded. The place—the smells and sounds and sights of Sri Lanka—are crucially important. Even in the midst of a Canadian winter, the lasting impression of the sensory details of Sri Lanka help evoke the place:

Now, and here, Canadian February, I write this in the kitchen and play that section of cassette to hear not just the peacocks but all the noises of the night behind them—inaudible then because they were always there like breath. In this silent room (with its own unheard hum of fridge, fluorescent light) there are these frogs loud as river, gruntings, the whistle of other birds brash and sleepy, but in that night so modest behind the peacocks they were unfocused by the brain—nothing more than darkness, all those sweet loud younger brothers of the night.

(113)

Although the directness of the sensory appeal of Sri Lanka, does not encompass the whole “truth” of the place, it does provide Ondaatje with the kind of first-hand experience that is essential for his own process of imaginative reconstruction.

Ondaatje's journey back to Sri Lanka is a journey to discover his roots. However, what Ondaatje discovers instead are the layers of stories that make up his past. He realizes that the past cannot be delivered somehow pure and unprocessed. Instead he attempts to illuminate both the immediate sensory details of the place that shaped him as a child, the various versions of the past as filtered through friends and family members, and his own processes of negotiating that past and the various concrete factors that have cut him off from it. In the search for some kind of connection or sense of belonging, Ondaatje comes up with numerous ruptures and gaps. The elegiac tone of much of the book and the sense of loss that pervades the text are caused by these disruptions. However, if there is lamentation there is also consolation. Running in the Family is also a text about coming to terms with loss by reconstructing the story of the past. In fact, the dual impulses of lamentation and consolation mirror the tension between alienation and belonging that structure the text.

IV. "Getting it Right"

Running in the Family illustrates how one's relationship to the various details of one's past clearly impact the nature of one's self-representational poetics. In a letter to her father the writer Abena Busia expresses the difficulties in summing up a life when the touchstones of belonging are not altogether self-evident:

I'm trying to write an article for a collection on multicultural states. The trouble is, such reflections always assume so much: that we know who "we" and "us" and "they" and "them" are; that we know where and what "home" is; that we have a sure sense of "margins" and "centres" to help us articulate the manifold implications of the

movements of history that have brought into being these multicultural states in which we all live. Yet, as I sit down to write, I must begin with the fragments, the bewildering geography of my life that is part of your legacy to me. (267)

Tied up in Ondaatje's reconstruction of his past is his negotiation of the various aspects of his cultural difference. Since traditional immigrant narratives have tended to be written in the realist mode with an emphasis on the documentation and representation experience, for many contemporary writers, the revaluation of genre is intimately connected with the revaluation of the terms of their ethnicity (Kadar, "Reading Ethnicity" 70). Ian Angus argues that "in the case of ethnic identity, which normally draws upon a sense of a traditional cultural unity inherited from the past, it is nevertheless the case that a contemporary politics of identity actively recovers and rearticulates the received culture and projects it into the future" (22). Although for many writers the voicing of experience associated with coming to voice narratives is empowering, a writer like Ondaatje rejects the impositions of traditional sociological and experiential expectations of immigrant autobiography.³⁴ He makes use of the biotext which, because of its interrogation of generic expectations, forces literature and history into a complex dialogue and allows for an ongoing articulation of self.

³⁴ According to Enoch Padolsky, ethnic writing has historically been grouped under history or sociology rather than literature. Immigrant writing has been looked at primarily for its value as documentary source. As Joseph Pivato argues that, "some immigrant works are often criticized for being too autobiographical, too historical, too sociological, and not literary enough. But this is the very quality that makes these works interesting and enduring" (68). For Pivato, history and literature complement each other in ethnic literatures. However, in his introduction to *Writing Ethnicity*, Winfried Siemerling suggests that the desire to read ethnic literature as documentary has been problematized by recent theory which challenges "the concepts of identity and representation that would seem crucial to approaches to ethnicity in terms of determinism and authenticity" (18).

In his long poem Seed Catalogue, the poet Robert Kroetsch asks, “How do you grow a past / to live in / the absence of silkworms” (20) and he goes on to detail all the other absences that challenge the prairie writer’s ability to feel a sense of belonging in the Canadian west. The answer to Kroetsch’s questions become more obvious the more he writes. The poem itself becomes part of the process of growing a past allowing Kroetsch to actively write himself into place. The question in Ondaatje’s case seems to be: how do you tell the story of yourself to yourself when you have been cut off from the fragments of your past? The two questions are intimately connected. While Kroetsch is trying to fill up a previously “empty” space, Ondaatje too has to recreate and make meaningful a space that for him has been emptied. Ondaatje thus “grows his past” by blending his first-hand experiences of a real place in the present with dozens of stories of an imagined place that exists only in memories of the past. The result is a rendering of origins that acknowledges its own textual nature. Throughout Running in the Family Ondaatje strives to write himself into a “Ceylon” that exists in the past tense. And because he is not innocent of how the past is processed, he highlights the politics of representation throughout his account of his journey. Nonetheless, there is a constant striving to capture a sense of belonging in writing—a sense that even though the there and then is filtered through the here and now, the layers of the past are nonetheless palpable in the present.

Rather than offer conclusions about his self in Running in the Family—in terms of national or ethnic identification, familial connections, or cultural belonging—Ondaatje instead articulates a self that is unfinished, in process, and he makes the text the place where this self is most at home. His

experiments with the biotext, with its insistence on the scattered contents of his own life and the materiality of experience as well as on the socially constructed (the text, the writing process, the moment of inscription), complicated critical paradigms that either insist on celebrating an excess of belongings or advocate more grounded historical experiential narratives. Running in the Family thus necessitates a reader who can actively engage with the processes that are at work in the text: the cobbling together of the various stories, smells, sounds, and tastes that add up to a life and to the representation of a cross-cultural identity.

Ondaatje ends his book with the image of the body as a receptacle of the past, as a palimpsest of family members. "My body," he writes, "must remember everything" (173). And in this final section Ondaatje begins to make the connections that have seemed so tenuous throughout the entire text:

There is nothing in this view that could not be a hundred years old, that might not have been here when I left Ceylon at the age of eleven. My mother looks out of her Colombo window thinking of divorce, my father wakes after three days of alcohol, his body hardly able to move from the stiffness in muscles he cannot remember exerting. It is a morning scenery well known to my sister and her children.... I stood like this in the long mornings of my childhood.... All this was here before I dreamed of getting married, having children, wanting to write. (173-4)

On this "last morning," Ondaatje seems to collapse the distance of time and place and find connection in his own body. In the end, in spite of their

tenuous nature, tradition, story, and genealogy can offer some sense of continuity, heredity, and belonging.

Not all writers of the biotext can find this tenuous sense of connection through storytelling. In fact, for Daphne Marlatt, the subject of the next chapter, the power of inherited story can be an oppressive rather than a reconstitutive force. In Ghost Works Marlatt illustrates the heightened sensitivity to language as a site of difference that is evident in all her works. Like Ondaatje, Marlatt uses the trope of traveling home as the impulse for her self-representational poetics in Ghost Works. Like Ondaatje, Marlatt finds that the discovery of her past is made difficult by her own history of displacement. Her journeys to Mexico, Malaysia, and England, respectively, all force her to further come to terms with her own sense of otherness, both as a woman and as an immigrant. However, unlike Ondaatje, Marlatt uses the biotext to focus more on the constructedness of language rather than on its healing properties. She recognizes that to write herself into her text, she needs to refocus language altogether. Ghost Works is thus more about rejecting old stories and the need to create new ones than it is about the processes of recuperation and rewriting.

Chapter 3.
"A story of listening way back in the body":
Writing Selves in Ghost Works

I. Introduction

If Running in the Family demonstrates Ondaatje's success, however fragile, in writing himself into the landscape of the past by adding his voice to a chorus of voices that make up the "human pyramid" that is his family, Ghost Works documents Marlatt's ongoing struggle to overcome the gaps and silences that get in the way of her attempts to recover a past in the present. Although Marlatt's text shares with Ondaatje's an emphasis on the importance of traveling "home" and the process of writing in the discovery of one's multiple identifications, in many ways, Ghost Works is a more uncomfortable and difficult text than Ondaatje's because of Marlatt's mistrust of the structures of language that she sees as distancing her from her own childhood memories. Although there is some movement towards Marlatt's rearticulation of language and of story by the end of Ghost Works, it is clear that Marlatt finds no real comfort of positioning within this book. The process of "re-entry" into language is one that she is just beginning by the end of her journeys.

Ghost Works (1993) is made up of three texts that were originally published separately in 1977, 1979, and 1983. In Zócalo, "Month of Hungry Ghosts," and How Hug a Stone Marlatt travels to Mexico, Malaysia, and England respectively, and documents her journeys as a way of reflecting on the diverse strands of her own identity. Marlatt's history of movement and migration has been a shaping influence on all of her writing. She was born in Australia when her English-born parents were evacuated from Malaysia

before the Japanese occupation. She moved with her family to Penang when she was three, and then to Vancouver when she was nine. Marlatt has made these multiple movements and displacements the subject of much of her writing. Published separately the three parts of Ghost Works read like travel journals in which Marlatt traces her journeys through landscapes, both familiar and unfamiliar. Placed together, however, the works constitute a much larger journey.³⁵ For the book as a whole explores Marlatt's growing awareness of her own shifting self in response to the places she travels to. Like the other texts in this study, Ghost Works is a biotext about the challenge of writing the displaced subject into being.

As with Ondaatje, Kiyooka, and Wah, Marlatt disrupts generic boundaries in the process of her self-representational poetics. In fact it is almost impossible to limit the discussion of Marlatt and the notion of the biotext to a single one of her works because all of her writing—both creative and critical—is so preoccupied with the interconnections of autobiography, fiction, theory, the fictional nature of memory, and the fabrication of a textual life. These interconnections are the focus of her essay "Self-Representation and Fictionalysis" in which she argues that "It is exactly in the confluence of

³⁵ Bringing together the three texts that make up Ghost Works is similar to Marlatt's previous acts of "salvaging." Her text Salvage is made up of poems written at the time she was working on her Steveston project over the span of two decades. She says that her original focus was not on women and she cut out a number of poems relating specifically to women's experiences. Later, she went back to these poems and included them in a collection of their own. The cover leaf describes the text: "part poem, part fiction, part autobiography, the book re-reads and re-envisions Daphne Marlatt's earlier writings in light of her feminist experiences of the late '80s, and in so doing so salvages them" (n.p.). Marlatt herself says that the pieces in Salvage came when she looked back and recognized "places where I was blocked and couldn't see my way out because I didn't have the theory that would have helped me to do that" (interview, Line 47). Similarly, Wah argues that for Marlatt the book is a "very intentional form." He suggests that "The three different 'Stevestons' ... are interesting in this regard since each of the three texts she produced out of the same oral-history project is a base which evokes a different 'content' in her writing, what it is all about at a given point of time and at a given point in the writing" (20).

fiction (the self or selves we might be) and analysis (of the roles we have found ourselves in, defined in a complex socio-familial weave), it is in the confluence of these two that autobiography occurs, the writing self writing its way to life, whole life" (124). In an interview with George Bowering Marlatt describes autobiography as in itself a kind of fiction:

we have this funny thing when we say remembering is real, and inventing is not—inventing is purely imaginary or fictional. What interests me is where these two cross. I think that one can be still be autobiographical and in fact be quite imaginative. In some cases I don't even know where the seam between these two worlds is. ("Ana Historic" 96)

Perhaps more than any other writer in this study, Marlatt is self-conscious about her own processes and strategies of self-representation. Both the form and the content of many of her works reflect this heightened self-consciousness.

Marlatt's collection of essays Readings From the Labyrinth (1998) is an especially revealing example of how autobiographical concerns run through all her writing. Each of the essays in the collection is contextualized within a framework of letters, notes, and journal entries as a way of foregrounding her autobiographical approach to the critical project. The result is a "curious dance" between private and public selves, as Marlatt negotiates the complexities of feminist struggle in Canada over an almost twenty-year period and reflects on her own crucial involvement in that struggle. Her latest novel Taken (1996) also exemplifies her self-conscious blending of the autobiographical and the fictional because the story is based on the historical events that shaped her parents' early married life during the Second World

War. Similarly, Marlatt's "novel" Ana Historic (1988) takes license with many real events in Marlatt's own life, including her complex relationship with her mother, her mother's difficult adjustment to the pressures of a life in a new country (Canada), and Marlatt's own coming out as a lesbian—even though Marlatt insists that in the novel "Annie isn't me though she may be one of the selves i could be" ("Self-Representation" 125).

The boundaries between fact and fiction and private and public are also challenged throughout Ghost Works. Each of the three parts is generically difficult to define. All three works are based on Marlatt's experiences while traveling. Zócalo is Marlatt's first foray into prose writing and she mixes it with poetry and a focus on autobiographical details. She tells Bowering: "Zócalo was called a novel by some people, much to my surprise, because I hadn't thought of it as that when I was writing it—since it was true as far I was concerned. It was based on what had actually happened, as much as I could remember" ("On Ana Historic" 96). Similarly, "Month of Hungry Ghosts" introduces the kind of generic border crossing that characterizes much of Marlatt's subsequent writing: there are letters and poems and journal entries interspersed with more "straightforward" narrative movement. How Hug a Stone is also based on a journey made by Marlatt, but it is obviously fictionalized during the process of remembering. Each of the texts is also written in the moment of travel and, as the journey progresses, so that it shares aspects of the travel journey, diary or "utaniki."³⁶ In a letter to NeWest Press in 1992 Marlatt describes the generic complexity of all three works: "Zócalo can be called a novella but How Hug a Stone alternates journal entries with prose poems. Hungry Ghosts combines prose

³⁶ For more on the poetic diary, or "utaniki," as genre, see Ann Munton's article on the contemporary long poem.

poems, letters, journal entries, short-line poems, a prose narrative...in short it's a hybrid."³⁷

Given the focus on self-representation and cultural difference, Ghost Works has much in common with the other texts in this study. Like Ondaatje, Marlatt is an immigrant to Canada. Like Wah's, her entire oeuvre is primarily concerned with the specificities of place and the examination of the subject in and out of place. Ghost Works also shares with the other texts in this study an obsession with the exploration of a parental figure as an entry point into the past. Marlatt's mother is a crucial figure in each of the texts that make up Ghost Works. She is a ghostly presence that haunts Marlatt throughout her travels. Marlatt uses memories of her mother as touchstones into her own past. As a result, like Running in the Family, Mothertalk, and Diamond Grill, Ghost Works is more about the evocation of a life and the subject's shifting relationship to place and language than it is the actual description of a life. Marlatt's exploration of questions of belonging and not belonging takes precedence over a linear or developmental narrative of self. In Marlatt's work, the piecing together of a life is a cautious and fragile act. Consider how, in the novel Taken, Marlatt's narrator describes the curious process of remembering and recasting a life as

the tentative deciphering of what gets passed along in body tissue, without words. Not so much their history even, but the ambiance of their lives, what they took for granted, the smell, the feel of their time my own beginning intercepted. I'm reaching for another kind of story, a story of listening way back in the body. And is this memory? Or fiction? (25)

³⁷ Daphne Marlatt, letter to Shawn Peters, 14 December 1992, Daphne Marlatt Papers, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

The image of the body as a repository of memories recalls Ondaatje's notion, in the final section of Running in the Family, that the body "must remember everything" (173). However, unlike Ondaatje, who is able to recreate a fragile sense of belonging from his travels and from piecing together stories from friends and relatives, Marlatt has a more conflicted relationship to the stories that make up her past.

The missing parts of her past lead Marlatt to call the collection Ghost Works.³⁸ Like a ghost who returns hungry for recognition, in these texts Marlatt returns to reinvent and reinscribe parts of her own missing past. In this respect, her journeys mirror those of the other authors in this study. However, what distinguishes Marlatt's text most clearly from the other biotexts in this study, is the way her discovery of her cultural identity is complemented by the discovery of her gendered identity. In Ghost Works the representation of an autobiographical "I" is therefore filtered through Marlatt's negotiation of different geographical places and the question of cultural belonging, as well as through her growing awareness of and a preoccupation with her own gendered self.

The "ghost work" thus takes place on two separate but related levels: the personal and the collective. By beginning to listen "way back in the body," Marlatt becomes aware of her female body and its shifting relationship to language and place and discovers the profundity of her own

³⁸ The title of the collection also foregrounds the theme of liminality, or in-betweenness, that the collection represents. Marlatt has consistently situated herself within this liminal zone. For example, in a journal entry from 1984 she asks, "as a writer, where am i? somewhere in the gap between the social realism of most Anglo women's writing & the 'fiction-theory' of Québécoise feminists." Throughout Readings From the Labyrinth she locates herself (and her writing) somewhere in the in-between: between Anglo and Québécoise feminisms, between a masculine-oriented Tish poetics and a lesbian body-centred writing, between narrative and analysis, between truth and fiction, between a feminist "me" and "we," between history and utopia.

difference. In her poetic essay "Musing with Mothertongue," published at the end of Touch to my Tongue, she describes the femaleness of her body language which she calls "a language that returns us to the body, a woman's body and the largely unverballed, presyntactical field it knows" (48).³⁹ The more she travels, the more Marlatt recognizes the disjunction between language and meaning and the more she desires ownership over her own language in order to write from a subject position that is not the object of someone else's desire. As Marlatt suggests, "To write the body active in its own intelligence, writing its way of being in the world, and hence how it sees is to move suddenly inside what has been seen from the outside" ("Only a Body" 16). The discovery and articulation of this gendered identity becomes the focal point in Marlatt's work. Her travels also allow for the discovery of larger, more encompassing gaps and silences in the history of writing by and about women. Marlatt begins to acknowledge that with its many haunting silences history is full of ghosts. In Ghost Works she begins the paradoxical process of articulating such silences. So, while Marlatt's search for origins and self through place and language is similar to Ondaatje's, her journey has the added layer of a feminist rediscovery of self. In Ghost Works, cultural difference is intimately related to sexual difference, and both are connected to the articulation of a specifically female body.

³⁹ An earlier draft of the essay "Musing with Mothertongue," written during the fall of 1982 and published in the first issue of Tessera in 1984, is also included in Touch to My Tongue. For a full discussion of the relationship between the body and language and its representation in "Musing with Mothertongue," see Banting's essay "The Reorganization of the Body." Banting argues that Marlatt began "to map other areas with language and to translate the body literally into her texts" (227-8).

II. Body of Writing

An awareness of the body has always played a central role in Marlatt's writing. In fact, although Marlatt's works can arguably be divided into two phases, an emphasis on the body and breath connects the stages of her career. In the early 1960s, Marlatt was most preoccupied with carving out her own space as a second-wave Tish poet. She was discovering the New American poetics and was influenced by poets like Duncan, Olson, Creeley, Snyder, Ginsberg, Williams, and Pound. According to Marlatt, she aspired to "think like a man...to have a large 'take' on the world, a political edge combined with an historical-mythical, even spiritual breadth of vision" (in Carr 99). The Tish poets' preoccupation with proprioceptive verse allowed for an intense focus on the body and on breath. As Marlatt suggests, the Tish poetics are centered on "a connection with the body, & that avant-garde is simply writing as close as you can to what you're actually experiencing at any given point. That's where the new forms arise" ("Given this Body" 33). Marlatt's emphasis on the body as home is inherited from one of her teachers, Olson, who says the gain for proprioception is:

that movement or action

is "home." Neither of the Unconscious nor Projection (here used to remove the false opposition of "Conscious"; consciousness is self) have a home unless the DEPTH implicit is physical being—built-in space-time specifics, and moving (by movement of "its own")—is asserted, or found-out as such. Thus the advantage of the value "proprioception." As such. (qtd. in Net Work 15)

The very concept of proprioception is based on the idea of the physical fact of the body experiencing the world. As one of the second-generation Tish poets, Marlatt embraced the ideas behind proprioceptive verse even in her earliest poetry. Her body is reflected in the act of writing. In her poetry, the writing and the living come from within, not from a use of language as reference. Her early works such as Frames of a Story (1968), leaf leaf/s (1969), Vancouver Poems (1972), Steveston (1974), and here & there (1981) reflect the concerns of the poet as experiencing subject. In the prose poem Rings, first published in 1971 and reissued as part of What Matters in 1980, Marlatt blends the New American poetics with the female experience of giving birth. As Fred Ribkoff observes, this collection marks an important turning point for Marlatt: "Writing her way through 'Rings' enabled Marlatt to locate herself in her body, and in so doing account for the simultaneity of experience in the larger and more flexible rhythms of her unique, proprioceptive prose poetry" (246).

Just as the body has played a significant role in Marlatt's poetics, place (and the sense of a body in place) has also always been a central concern in Marlatt's writing. The intense focus on the local in her poetry is also inherited from the New American poets. From her study of Vancouver in Vancouver Poems to the various explorations of the small Japanese-Canadian fishing village in Steveston, Marlatt has explored what it means to be a subject "in

place.”⁴⁰ Indeed, much of the criticism focused on Marlatt’s preoccupation with an “eternal feminine principle” has failed to grapple adequately with her notion of “place” and her focus on the specifics of the local. In Marlatt’s poetry place does not exist outside of her, but rather simultaneously with her perception so that the border between outside and inside, object and subject, is broken down. Thus hers is a different approach to place from that of poets who use the external as a way of reflecting back upon the poet’s own self.

Place is never static in Marlatt’s poetry because the self that explores it is not static. Marlatt’s poetry is concerned with writing the experiencing subject into the text. In this sense both the subject and the landscape are constantly in process. Her works show a commitment to place, and, more specifically, to the local. This engagement derives not only from the poetry of her teachers and mentors (including Williams and Olson), but also from her strong attachment to the West Coast of Canada. Marlatt insists that her interest lies “in the interaction between the eternal & what’s time-bound, & what’s particularly local. And I think you can only articulate the eternal thru...the local & time-bound. And that’s what makes us most human” (qtd. in Net Work 12).⁴¹

⁴⁰ Although place has always been a preoccupation of Marlatt’s, it is not my intention to provide a survey of her long and complex writing career here. For such an overview, see Douglas Barbour’s monograph in the ECW series. Instead, my argument is that Marlatt’s ongoing experiments with different poetic forms have provided her with a set of tools with which to effectively address both a sense of locality and place, as well as, in her later writing, a history of displacement. For this point, I am grateful to conversations with Guy Beauregard about Fred Wah’s writing and Wah’s preoccupations with place and displacement throughout his oeuvre. Beauregard’s unpublished dissertation chapter on Wah’s Diamond Grill was particularly useful to my thinking here.

⁴¹ Marlatt’s comments find resonance with Wah’s remarks in Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek: “Writing has a lot to do with ‘place,’ the spiritual and spatial localities of the writer. I see things from where I am, my view point, and I measure and imagine a world from there. Oaxaca, Vancouver, the Kootenay River a thousand years ago or today, my father’s father’s birthplace, become ‘local’ to me and compound to make up a picture of a world I am a native of. Writing is sometimes remembering this image, and sometimes it has to make it up” (“From in Here” 126).

In her earlier poetry Marlatt is concerned with the mythology of place (specifically the city of Vancouver), and the need to engage its spirit. This sense of engagement with place is one of her preoccupations as an immigrant writer. She has said that in both Steveston and Vancouver Poems she was attempting to write herself into a world she wanted to be a part of and into the history of a city she wanted to belong in and didn't ("Entering In" 219). She tells Bowering that Vancouver "is the only place that I feel I really belong; this is the only city on the continent that feels like home" (32). She admits that the book Vancouver Poems

is based on my experiences as an immigrant to this city. Which is twofold: it has the strangeness that it has to an immigrant's eyes. The fact that I could never—it was like a dream city. I still feel that. I walk along Spanish Banks & I look back at it, & it's just incredible! But at the same time I have this also very strong feeling that it is my city because I have chosen to make it my place, to live my life here. So that the line itself is a walking down a street; it's a step-by-step, perception-by-perception thing. But as you continue to walk down it you get a sense of the character of that street. ("Given this Body" 69)

Similarly, in her essay "Entering In: The Immigrant Imagination," Marlatt suggests that "Looking back, i think that most of my writing has been a vehicle for entry into what was for me the new place, the new world" (219).

After 1980, Marlatt's writing clearly shifts as she begins to experiment with a feminist, lesbian, body-centred poetics, beginning with the powerful

Touch to my Tongue (1984).⁴² Although she continues her fascination with etymology and with how language works, she begins to explore the potential of an explicitly female gendered use of language. It is precisely the Tish poets' own suspicion of patriarchal language structures and their focus on the body that allow Marlatt to begin her own exploration of a feminist poetics. In "Musing with Mothertongue," which Marlatt calls her first attempt to illuminate poetics with feminist theory, she articulates the role of the woman writer:

inhabitant of language, not master, not even mistress, this new woman writer (Alma, say) in having is had, is held by it, what she is given to say. in giving it away is given herself, on that double edge where she has always lived, between the already spoke and the unspeakable, sense and non-sense. only now she writes it, risking nonsense, chaotic language leafings, unspeakable breaches of usage, intuitive leaps. inside language she leaps for joy, shoving out the walls of taboo and propriety, kicking syntax, discovering life in old roots. (48-9)

"Musing with Mothertongue" captures some of the transitional thinking that Marlatt was engaging in at the time. She says she was trying to "integrate my feminist reading with a largely male-mentored postmodernist poetic, at the same time coming out as a lesbian in my life as well as in my writing" (Readings 1). Because there is a whole range of women's (mothers', lesbians', daughters') experiences that cannot be articulated by the "patriarchally-loaded" idea of a mother tongue, Marlatt calls for a rewriting of the very idea

⁴² Janice Williamson suggests that although there may be continuity in Marlatt's poetics, there is "a rupture and transformation in the critical community which engages with her work" (172). She argues that "With Touch to My Tongue, feminists, young and old, lesbian and otherwise, became eager readers of Marlatt's innovative writing. Although there is no public record, one also imagines that devoted but homophobic readers, surprised at this poetic coming out, abandoned her writing" (173).

of a mothertongue “that might express [women’s] deeper instincts and feelings” (Readings 2). Her experimentation with language has led Marlatt to collaborate with other poets who share these sensibilities. She has translated Nicole Brossard’s poetry in MAUVE (1985) and collaborated with Betsy Warland in Double Negative (1988). Marlatt’s interest in writing back to an authoritative patriarchal language and culture in order to express alternative female bodies and subjectivities culminated in 1988 with the publication of Ana Historic and has continued in texts like Two Women in a Birth (with Betsy Warland, 1994). The ending of Ana Historic is in fact a beginning for lesbian desire and self-expression: “we give place, giving words, giving birth, to / each other —she and me. you. hot skin writing / skin. fluid edge, wick, wick, she draws me / out. you she breathes, is where we meet. / ...it isn’t dark but the luxury of being / has woken you, the reach of your desire, reading / us into the page ahead” (n.p.).

If, in Marlatt’s earlier writing, there is an emphasis on being “in place” or writing herself into place, in Ghost Works there is a focus on being out of place. This growing sense of displacement is evident in all of her writing that focuses on a lesbian immigrant identity. In such texts she experiences her lack of belonging most directly through language. She discovers her alienation from language, both as a tourist-traveler and as a woman. Thus “linguistic laws” are a central concern in Ghost Works. Throughout her travels Marlatt discovers the differences between her dictionary Spanish and the Spanish of the Mexicans. In both Malaysia and England she confronts the gap between her mother’s sing-song “Anglo-English” and the proper British English and the difference between her son’s Canadian English and her grandmother’s English. In “Entering In” she describes her growing realization that language

was not transparent, that there was an opacity to language that she discovered could not always easily be translated.⁴³ Commenting on the slippage between a Canadian and a British English, she says:

When you are told, for instance, that what you call earth is really dirt, or what you have always called the wood (with English streams) is in fact bush (with its creeks), you experience the first split between name and thing, signifier and signified, and you take that first step into a linguistic world that lies adjacent to but is not the same as the world of things, and indeed operates on its own linguistic laws. (“Entering In” 222)

These discoveries about language echo Marlatt’s theorizing in “Musing with Mothertongue” and her attempts to find a language to articulate specifically female experiences and female pleasure. Just as language for the immigrant is “duplicitous,” Marlatt insists on the gendered specificity of language and writing: “if we are women poets, writers, speakers, we also take issue with the given, hearing the discrepancy between what our patriarchally-loaded language bears (can bear) of our experience and the difference from it our experience bears out—how it misrepresents, even miscarries, and so leaves unsaid what we actually experience” (47). Marlatt’s experiences of “otherness” lead to her suspicion about referentiality in language more generally.

What makes Ghost Works such a fascinating text is the fact that it occupies a transitional zone in Marlatt’s textual politics and poetics. Zócalo,

⁴³ It is interesting to compare Marlatt’s comments on language with Smaro Kamboureli’s very similar views about the opacity of words for the immigrant writer. In her autobiographical travel narrative in the second person, Kamboureli describes what happens to language when it is translated: “the borderline that marks the conflict between the first and second language marks as well the stage of language where words are beings in themselves prior to becoming the proper names of things” (10).

"Month of Hungry Ghosts," and How Hug a Stone all foreground the concerns that mark both stages of Marlatt's writing. Each of the texts is concerned with the local and with being "in place" or with what Robert Lecker describes as the "correlation between perception and articulation" (57). However, the more she travels, the more aware she is of the defamiliarization, alienation, and displacement that comes as a result of her own immigrant history. Referring to her own writing in her two journeys "home" (to Penang and to England), Marlatt admits that, although both returns were an attempt to capture a voice and an ethos from childhood, "both returns were incomplete, intercut always with my Canadian consciousness" (221). The feeling of being out of place allows Marlatt to recognize the variety of roles that she performs in her daily life. In her preface to Ghost Works she writes, "heterogeneous, this place here, so overlaid with other places; self sieved through with other selves" (n.p.). Marlatt explains that, although autobiography tends to seek a truth, there can never actually be a sense of "this is how it is." She suggests that "there is a regression of selves in writing about the self so that self-representation is in itself a process." The act of writing "forces the writer to question who is this self constructing this portrait of a self?"⁴⁴ Marlatt's attempts to write herself into the various places that she travels to end up being complicated by the diverse threads of her own complex identity that she discovers in the process.

Marlatt's version of herself necessarily shifts depending on the different contexts that she finds herself in. She admits in her "Preface" that the writing in Ghost Works "probes the house of the self, haunting its narrow construction, breaking down its oh-so-edified walls" (viii). In a journal entry

⁴⁴ Daphne Marlatt. Notebook, ts. Daphne Marlatt Papers, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

in 1983, Marlatt's thinking about Ana Historic finds resonance with her project in Ghost Works: "yes, that's what i want to work with, these cross-cuttings or intersections (colonialism, feminism, otherness, isolation & eccentricity (madness), Ina's struggle, & Annie's not to repeat it—the public/private split—Annie's feelings of 'belonging' (to this place, Vancouver—as well as being 'Canadian,' what might that mean?) cross-cut with her displacement as a woman" (Readings 15). In the sense that Marlatt is actively seeking to renegotiate and rearticulate the various dimensions of her self and her past through her journeys "home," Ghost Works foregrounds both the process of cultural recovery or the negotiation of the past in the present as well as a feminist exploration of sexual difference as it is played out in the body.⁴⁵

III. Staging Selves

Marlatt's concerns in Ghost Works with questions of belonging and identity are in dialogue with a range of feminist ideas that explore the dynamics of women's autobiographical travel writings. Both autobiography and travel writing allow writers to work through the various aspects that compose the self and to study the self in relation to different places and different contexts. Feminist theories of travel writing suggest that "Feminist writing in this expanded sense of 'minor' acts against the romanticization of solitude and the suppression of differences. It points towards a rewriting of the connections between different parts of the self in order to make a world of possibilities out of the experience of displacement" (Kaplan,

⁴⁵ The body is at the centre of the vast terrain of writings on feminist theory. As the editors of Writing on the Body suggest: "there is a tension between women's lived experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body that always mediate those experiences" (1). Marlatt's own work interestingly plays out those tensions in a number of ways.

“Deterritorializations” 368).⁴⁶ Of course displacement will have different meanings for people who experience it in varying degrees. For example, it is impossible to compare the tourist with the refugee. Kaplan argues that, for first world feminists to avoid making the totalizing discourses they claim to protest, they must see the fissures in their identities, unravel the seams of their totalities. Feminist criticism is one way of exploring these disruptions:

We must leave home, as it were, since our homes are often sites of racism, sexism, and other damaging social practices. Where we come to locate ourselves in terms of our own specific histories and differences must be a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new. What we gain is a reterritorialization; we reinhabit a world of our own making (here “our” is expanded to a coalition of identities—neither universal nor particular). (365)

In *Ghost Works* Marlatt’s travels help her to shift the focus from the universal to the particular, but also from the singular subject to the potential of multiple subject positionings as she actively writes her way through space and through her various roles as tourist, stranger, lover, daughter, sister, and mother. Given these multiple roles, in *Ghost Works* the self—like the landscape—is never static, but rather performative, in flux.

Because Marlatt is so conscious of the different layers of self that interrogate one another in her journeys, identity in these works comes under scrutiny and becomes a shifting, alterable thing while still being something

⁴⁶ Here Kaplan is following Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of a “minor literature,” which they call literature that is not a literature of masters or masterpieces. In “What is a Minor Literature?” they assert: “We might as well say that minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature” (18).

that is undeniably tied to and shaped by social and historical forces. She continually locates herself in relationship to the specific contexts she finds herself within. For example, in Zócalo she explains where she comes from to the hammock seller, but realizes it doesn't make sense to him except in relation to where he situates himself:

From where you come? he asks, setting his bundle of hammocks on the stone beside their bench & sitting on it next to her. Canada. So glib, the answer to that question, but what might make sense across the divide he is trying to bridge—up north? beyond the United States? how far north does his sense of north extend? (69).

This heightened consciousness of being “placed” inevitably leads her to reject universals in her writing; for example, she resists the notion that the subject of the poem is male. Throughout Zócalo she distinguishes herself from her male companion, pointing out the different ways they experience place:

when i was in San Miguel i spent nine months on the public square, he is saying, every day i sat on the same bench, just sitting until i was part of it. she saw him sitting, she saw the old men & shoeshine boys, the orange vendor, each in their appointed places, each carrying on their subtle & silent conversation—but that isn't her way, she is running back to the island in the dark of the sea, to the sea running yes to a limitless horizon. (34)

Marlatt has said that “the voice in my work is subjective and individual rather than universal. It's marked by my gender as well as my history, class, national identity, race, all those things....A universal voice can't admit this kind of fracturing, or these kinds of differences. The universal voice wants to pretend difference doesn't exist” (in Carr 103). A consciousness of her own

material body, because mutable, will not allow for the acceptance of sameness. Each of her experiences in each of the places she journeys to is thus filtered through the particularities of her own body.

The three texts in Ghost Works are most obviously joined by the narrative of the signator of the collection, Daphne Marlatt. She self-consciously signs and dates her "Preface," thus establishing a connection between herself and the narrator in the texts. Frank Davey suggests that such an introduction marks the texts as "autobiography, that is, as a construction of its signator rather than of a 'persona' or 'character'" ("Words and Stones" 40). All three texts share a number of other features as well, including the marks of journal and autobiography that echo the signature of the author in the "Preface." Marlatt also refers intertextually to the events that occur in the other texts. There are claims to verisimilitude, marked by the maps, the journal entries, and the letters in each of the texts, so that "beyond the claim of 'real' events is another irony, that there is no significant distance of 'disagreement' between the signator of the text and its first-person 'i-narrator'" (Davey, "Words and Stones" 40). The reader is encouraged in each of the texts to identify the narrative viewpoint with Marlatt herself.

However, as we have already seen in so much of her other writing Marlatt also problematizes the first-person narrative in Ghost Works. Although all three parts are based on Marlatt's own travels, it is often difficult to tell who or what the "I" of the texts refers to. For example, in Zócalo she plays with the notion of the "I" by calling the narrator "She" and her companion "yo" (Spanish for "I"), thus unsettling the "I" of the first-person narrator. In "Month of Hungry Ghosts," Marlatt switches back and forth between an "I" and an "i." One possible way to think about Marlatt's

approach to the notion of the authorial “I” in these texts is to consider the importance of performance, or performativity. In her essay “Perform[ing] on the Stage of Her Text,” Marlatt explains that the production of a female self is a better description of her project than an honest rendering of past events. She argues that Zócalo marks her first move toward this kind of “theatricality”:

i hadn't known what to call it. It couldn't be memoir, i thought, because it was written in the third person. On the other hand it was fictional only to the extent that i invented some of the dialogue in the wake of failed memory. Although much of it is written in the present tense, it was all composed in a sustained effort to remember a trip to Mexico months after it was over. (“Perform[ing]” 201)

The journey through Ghost Works charts a growing awareness, and an acceptance of, the contradictions that make up the autobiographical narrator's fractured self. In other words, the narrator in Ghost Works is not on a journey towards wholeness and closure; instead, she gains a growing suspicion of closure and finds a sense of self-knowledge in indeterminacy. By traveling “home” the narrator does not seek a facile explanation for who she is. Instead, she is looking for pieces of a puzzle that may or may not add up. Her journeys are ones of disassembling, not the reverse. As the companion “Yo” tells the unnamed narrator “she” in Zócalo, “you seem more yourself today than you have ever been, & contradicts, thinking of all that surrounds them that has entered in, no no, it's less, less. He laughs, yes, he says, that is the same” (15).⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Interestingly, Marlatt names her companion “Yo,” which is the Spanish word for the pronoun “I.” The play with pronouns—the split between I and she—is similar to Ondaatje's shifting back and forth with he and I in Running in the Family.

Seeing her self in relation to the different places she travels to gives the narrator more perspective on who she is. And yet this is not to suggest that Marlatt allows herself to become ungrounded or unfixed from the materiality of the countries she journeys through. For Marlatt,

Feminist writing reaches for something beyond the notion of conquest, romantic or not. It undoes oppositions in a multivalent desire for relationship, whether with women or men, children, cats, trees, the particular slant of light in a street or a breaking wave, a certain luminosity of being (as Virginia Woolf would put it) we participate in. ("Old Scripts" 65-6)

In Ghost Works, she is constantly evoking the smells, sights, and tastes of the places she is in. In Mexico she is particularly interested in the sensory images of the place. She is also highly conscious of her relationship to people and her status as outsider, as intruder in other people's space: "& she remembers the two old men sitting in the shade of the coconut palms, perfectly at ease, perfectly located in their own spot. On all that stretch of sand, she had chosen to undress in front of them, she had interrupted their beach" (14). Mexico, Malaysia, and England respectively refocus and reorient her in terms of the specificity of history, class, gender, race and ethnicity. In Mexico she is troubled by the idea of being a tourist and by her separation from the people, the land, and the language. Similarly, in Malaysia, she is highly conscious of her complicity in the ruling colonial class, and in England she is aware of the distinctions between her British family, her immigrant self and her Canadian-born son.

Like Running in the Family, Zócalo begins with a dream. The narrative starts with a sense of confusion, a blurring between the real and

imagined. In the dream there is a feeling of being lost, a feeling of disorientation. The narrator needs to ask directions; she no longer trusts her own sense of direction. Her movement “unwinds, backward, they are flying backward outside time in open country, across fields, across terrain that slips under them as they fly back in the slippage of their own coming” (7). The dream introduces the sense not only of being lost but of making a backward journey through time and space. When the narrator awakens she is firmly back in the present place and time (“Progreso, New Year’s Day”). The titles of each section of text record the names of the places she is in. Some sections are further differentiated by “night” and “day” as well. The text itself constitutes an attempt to name or give voice to the experience of time and place, an emphasis on a “politics of location” that is important to all three texts in Ghost Works.

The opening dream that begins the narrative sets the mood of disorientation and separation that haunts this text. Throughout Zócalo the narrator “must experience the place and her essential apartness from it” (Barbour, “Daphne Marlatt” 235). Although the narrator seems to be seeking a kind of objective imprint of the place, a coming together of experience, perception and articulation, there is a growing recognition of the gap that exists in translation, of the difficulty of capturing objectively that which is outside the narrator’s own body. Marlatt has said that writing involves the same kind of slippage that translation does: “sensing one’s way through a sentence, through (by means of) a medium (language) that has its own slippage of meaning, its own drift. So that what one ends up saying in the poem is never simply one with, but slipping, in a subtle displacement of, authorial intention” (“Translating” 70). In Mexico she feels a growing

frustration with the tourist gaze: “they from their wellkept seats could only look at, look at & transform their views. We’ll never escape ourselves, she thinks, & anger rises in her like a tide, she can feel it, filling her head” (53). She is firmly rooted in her own body and it is her body that labels her as different, both from the local people and from the tourists from whom she disassociates herself.

The sense of separation is evident from the beginning of the narrative. Not only is the autobiographical narrator introduced as “she,” but her companion is not initially given a name; he is simply “he” until about halfway through the narrative. In fact, he is first introduced in the narrative as one of “several intervening backs” (10):

The young man on the seawall knows she is aiming at him though she pretends to follow the wavering movement of the orange vendor, & she focuses, carefully, his dark glance which is both for her & at her, a not knowing he can’t quite tear himself away from but continues to sit staring suspiciously from around & behind several intervening backs, the closest of which, so close despite their mutual silence, turns finally & says, you’re snooping, that’s what you like about the lens isn’t it, that’s what it allows you to do. (10)

This idea of gaps—of being out of one’s element—persists even though the narrator attempts to make connections, to reach a point where “all boundaries dissolve” (15). She realizes that ultimately she and her companion are “lost in their mutual seeing of all that is out there” and she cannot grasp his experiencing of the same place. She cannot know “how it was for him” (15).

This separation is also evident in the narrator's interactions with the Mexican people. They are always apprehended from a distance. The camera and its lens act as a barrier to real communication, to really seeing. The narrator tends to hide behind the telephoto lens, using it to bring people at a distance closer without them knowing it. It is "an eye that is an extension & even an impertinent accessory to the act of her seeing" (10). It breaks people down into "elements of a visual image" (11). Unlike her companion who insists that "in the eye of the camera nothing is foreign you know" (24), the narrator cannot feel truly close or at ease with any of the people or sights that she encounters. She is constantly made aware of her own self in relation to others. For example, when she tries to remember the image of the tamale vendor, she admits "it's no good, she can't imagine herself bodily into that woman squatting on the step, she can't imagine her day, its ease (or un-ease)" (37). Here Marlatt reinforces the idea that one's experiences of the world are firmly grounded in the body. Just as she realized her separation from the tamale vendor, she recognizes her distance from "Yo": "What can she tell him? to relax? that the body will look after itself, that she's long since given up trying to control its vagaries...& moreover how does she know what his must feel like, to him, what its importunities might be?" (37).

Language itself acts to further the sense of separation within the narrative. Although she has attempted to learn bits of the language, her dictionary mediates between her own English and the Spanish she reads and hears around her. Language itself takes on a certain opacity as she attempts to translate. In this text there is a lot of miscommunication and a number of barriers to understanding. For example, the narrator and her companion pass a series of "unreadable signs" (16). She meets a fisherman on the beach

from whom she asks directions but she cannot understand his response: "He continued to talk but she gave up trying to follow him" (12). She misreads various signals and other people's actions. She is forced constantly to grapple with new words which she in turn offers up to her companion "translating, or mistranslating" (18). She also resists translations like the waiter's when he calls the birds she sees "gulls": "but they weren't, as she looked it up in the dictionary, anything like the gulls she knew" (33).

These various acts of mistranslating mean that words don't seem to fit the objects they are assigned to and language is destabilized. The boy in the square asks for the meaning of "reyl," a word he says that two Americans gave him to copy in his notebook. The narrator scrambles for meanings for this word and comes up with a multiplicity of meanings: rail as is railroad; rail as in railing; rail as in ranting and railing. Finally she and the boy realize that the word they search for is "real," as in true, authentic: "Real means actual, means, here (she slaps the bench), a thing, here" (72). Having searched for the word and offered so many alternative readings, the narrator is forced to confront the irony of the definition she eventually offers to the boy.

Just as language gets (mis)translated throughout the text, the Mexican landscape is filtered through a sense of the narrator's home in Canada: "there were roots, pulled them back through earth to people they knew, north, particularly north where the cold light of the stars sputtered & flared, that was home, where her child was & the trees, trees she recognized grew in the rain" (20). Marlatt refers to herself and her companion as "migratory birds, strange plumage from somewhere up north" (24). This sense of apartness reinforces the sense of being a tourist; Yo calls them "the ultimate tourists" because their role is to gawk at the locals (33). On the tourist bus, the distance

between them and the land and its people further widens. The narrator calls the bus “a sealed capsule on its way to a past it cannot understand” (52). Both the narrator and Yo use tools to translate the place into a version of the “real.” Yo uses his camera, whereas the narrator depends on her guidebook. Each explains what he or she sees through these tools. She experiences a sense of unease when she realizes that the guidebook only offers a “linear map she can’t square with the actual ground they stand on” (53). Finally at the ruins at Uxmal she acknowledges, because of her reliance on her maps and guidebooks, that she might “miss what we came for” (41). Tour guides further serve as a filter to the sights. At the ruins, the guide’s explanations do not correspond to her own readings of the place and she feels slightly disoriented. She eventually recognizes that there are cultural gaps that can never be easily understood or translated. Almost in spite of herself she concludes that these gaps are “something you can’t translate, not even the words are right” (57).

“Month of Hungry Ghosts” picks up and expands on many of the preoccupations in Zócalo. If in Zócalo the narrator is forced to confront her own awareness of how difference is embodied, “Month of Hungry Ghosts” “revolves around the question of identity and how that can be read differently in a different yet strangely familiar context. There is also the paradox of the absent (dead) mother intensely present.”⁴⁸ Marlatt is traveling again, but this time there is more of a basis for connection. Malaysia is the childhood home of the narrator, and hers is a journey of return. In this sense, “Month of Hungry Ghosts” has most in common with Ondaatje’s Running in the Family; it is a journey “home” to rediscover a family history

⁴⁸ Daphne Marlatt, letter to Shawn Peters, Dec. 14, 1992. Daphne Marlatt Papers, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

that has become interconnected with the place. In the special issue of The Capilano Review that published “Month of Hungry Ghosts” alongside excerpts from Ondaatje’s Running in the Family, Sharon Thesen says that such writings

are not memoirs, nor are they autobiography. They are, rather accounts of the recovering of language and self in a context saturated with memory. This process of recovery (“re-entry”) is more explicit in Marlatt’s work, where the prose registers the shocks of consciousness itself and retraces the growth of some present awareness. (3)

Like Ondaatje’s strategy in Running in the Family, in “Month of Hungry Ghosts” Marlatt seeks to foreground both the specific history and place that shaped her as a child as well as her own complex processes of negotiating that past. Like Zócalo (and Running in the Family) “Month of Hungry Ghosts” begins with a dream, and the dream-like quality that characterizes much of the narrator’s experience in Penang suggests the vagueness and obscurity of memory. There is an unsureness about the nature of past experiences and memory. Dreams also imply a temporary escape from the physicality of the body—a sense of immateriality that is impossible in waking life.

Because of its dream-like quality “Month of Hungry Ghosts” foregrounds indeterminacy. As in Mexico, in Malaysia Marlatt is highly conscious of the multiple separations—of race, of class, of gender—that constitute the history of the place: “how long, how many generations these Chinese and Indian families have lived here, feel they belong, & then are separated off on the basis of race. All the separations” (94). However, the dislocation and sense of not belonging that haunted Marlatt in the previous text come much closer to the surface in this one. If in Mexico she ultimately

accepted her tourist stance, in Malaysia she feels more implicated in the gaps and separations between and among people. As she tells "Roy" (Kiyooka) in a letter, her situation is that of "the tourist experience compounded with colonial history. Europeans don't live here: they camp out in a kind of defensive splendour that's corrosive to the soul" (100). In an early journal entry she recognizes her tentative positioning in relation to a place she is both of and no longer of: "O the disparities—how can I ever relate the two parts of myself? This life would have killed me—purdah, a woman in—the restrictions on movement, the confined reality. I can't stand it. I feel imprisoned in my class—my? This is what I came out of. & how else can I be here?" (79) As she attempts to balance her roles as good daughter, proper lady, and "mem sahib," she is forced to acknowledge that her privilege has always produced a distance from the place and the people around her, and that this distance has now increased dramatically because of her age and her foreignness. The longer she stays in Malaysia, the more painfully aware she becomes of her own complicity with the colonial structure.

Marlatt calls the ruling class in Penang "ghosts" because they are unreal—living between two places, and yet she acknowledges, to some extent, her identification with these people: "these are the ghosts, they offer ghost food, & if i stayed here & partook of it long enough i'd become a ghost too" (107). Unlike Ondaatje who strives to connect to the people and places of his past, Marlatt is more uneasy about making connections with her childhood home. There is a constant threat that her experiences in Malaysia will become more real, will threaten to overcome her reality back home in Canada. Marlatt thus introduces the notion of the layering of experience: "What is strange, even precarious, is how this is also real, this that i wake up

to every morning, & as the day progresses becomes so voraciously real it eats up all the other real where you are & Kit & Jan are, so that even its strangeness has disappeared" (104). Marlatt consciously fights against losing this perspective on the "real." She feels that to lose one's sense of difference would be to become ghost-like and to lose her independence and sense of self. Her sense of identity comes from her ability to separate herself from the place rather than from a sense of connection. Belonging is thus destabilized as Marlatt begins to define herself more and more as being not of Penang. In one journal entry she asserts that "everything tells me this is not where i belong" (100).

The question of language is central in "Month of Hungry Ghosts." It gets played out primarily in the journals and the letters home. Marlatt feels torn between her "current" language (Canadian-English) and the "stilted proper English" (98) that she was made to learn as a child and that is shared by the remnants of the ruling class in Malaysia. Language thus becomes closely associated with both race and class for Marlatt during her visit. It is only in her letters and in her journal entries that she is allowed to write in her "current language." These journal entries are a kind of re-grouping or return to her present self. They acknowledge her experiences but they allow her to filter them through a self tied to the present and to a "home" that is elsewhere. In a letter to her sister Cille she writes: "It's not so much a holiday as a curious psychic re-dipping in the old font, & most of the time I'm kicking against it. Because it's so insidious, the English habits of speech & perception, English patterns of behaviour" (92). Language is linked to larger roles, patterns of behaviour, thought processes. Later she writes that she has "recovered my own language & unusually today my own thought" (104).

Interspersed with the journal entries are poems (usually separating the entries) that constitute another kind of language for the narrator. The poems cover similar material as the prose, but they serve to distill Marlatt's experiences and thoughts, seemingly as she is having them. The poems are more stilted than the prose because there are fewer connecting words as the words follow one another like a list. The content of the poems thus appears less distilled, more immediate. In "Street Opera" she writes, "satay / buah / mee goreng / these populous / night stalls / "already existing / web" / action / acts into" / street / play" (101). As in her earlier, Tish-inspired writing, there is an immediacy to these poems that is grounded in the perceiving moment. Like the poems in Ondaatje's Running in the Family, they are moments of crystallization. They also help to foreground the tension in the text between public and private, mediated and unmediated experience, and they draw attention to the textual nature of the narrator's experiences. Their very positioning on the page demands that the reader take notice of the process of writing that is at work.⁴⁹

Recalling Ondaatje's father as a shaping force in Running in the Family, Marlatt's mother haunts this text, a similarly missing piece from the past. At the end of Ondaatje's text, the author addresses his father directly, asking him questions. The pronoun in the final section of his text changes to second-person: "In the end all your children move among the scattered acts and

⁴⁹Marlatt's structural strategies here and elsewhere in Ghost Works resemble what James Clifford calls "the mechanism of collage." Clifford explains that with collage, "Moments are produced in which distinct cultural realities are cut from their contexts and forced into jarring proximity" so that "the cuts and sutures of the research process are left visible; there is no smoothing over or blending of the work's raw data into a homogeneous representation" (146). In "Entering In" Marlatt describes how cultural difference or disjunction can be articulated by "using montage, using juxtaposition, knitting disparate and specific images from both places. Seeing the world as multidimensional as possible and ourselves present within it" (223).

memories with no more clues. Not that we ever thought we would be able to fully understand you" (172). Just as Ondaatje is there still seeking a sense of connection with his father and his birthplace at the end of the text, Marlatt also seeks some kind of understanding. She realizes her connection to her mother lies in their shared duties, their responses to carved out roles and societal expectations. Marlatt also uses the second-person pronoun at the close of her text:

you knew the dark, conspiracy, how they keep power in their hands, unnamed (you forgot, we give ourselves up to). you taught me fear but not how to fight, you, misspelled, gave yourself to the dark of some other light, leaving me here with the words, with fear, love, & a need to keep speaking. (128)

Her address to her mother foregrounds her realization of the prescribed roles in which women are trapped because of their gender. Marlatt inherits a mistrust and a fear of language from her mother, but also a realization of the need to keep speaking and writing. She acknowledges that, although she was able to rebel against her mother, her mother had never been allowed to rebel. Marlatt has broken a cycle by refusing to carry out her role. The result is that she is left with a feeling of uncertainty, an unknowing, an indeterminacy, and yet a strong urge to "keep speaking" (128).

The focus on the narrator's mother at the end of "Month of Hungry Ghosts" leads directly into the concerns of How Hug a Stone, a text dedicated to her mother. As in other biotexts in this study, a parental figure helps the narrator in her continuing negotiation of the fragments of her past. A number of critics have focused on the search for the ghostly mother in Ghost Works, and indeed the ghost of the mother haunts all three texts. In Zócalo

the narrator dreams of her mother welcoming her into a “dark house”: “i am running, running, it runs behind me, that horror (it will touch) get home, get home, through, the door & into, humming, house (no house i recognize) is full of relations—mother!—& the place is dark” (64). In her personal notes, Marlatt says that, in her writing in the early 1970s, men were her muses, but that after 1975 her mother became her muse and she has been her muse ever since. She goes on to say that there was “no mention, nothing of her death in my journal—it’s incredible how i couldn’t look at what was most important to me head on, wouldn’t ‘face’ it.”⁵⁰ As in the works by Wah, Ondaatje, and Kiyooka, however, Marlatt’s mother allows for an entry into the vast and unexplored terrain of personal history. Rather than representing what Godard identifies as a “feminine archetype,” “a kind of ancient, idealized mother” (qtd. in Gunderson 80), the mother in Ghost Works acts as a guide for the narrator’s examination of her multiple connections and multiple pivots of belonging (and not belonging).

How Hug a Stone is the final stage in the narrator’s search for some kind of usable past within the context of Ghost Works. In this text as she travels to England with her son to visit her mother’s side of the family, she is again in search of details of her mother’s life. However, rather than feeling whole from this gathering of different meanings, the narrator feels more and more lost. She admits: “i feel lost. layer on layer of place, person. dramatis personae. the nameless creature i am at the heart of this many-chambered shell is getting overlaid, buried under. coming down with a cold?” (174). The roles she performs in the text are multiple and varied and she recognizes the repetition of various patterns. Discovering that she is able to further

⁵⁰ Marlatt, Daphne. Notebook, ts. Daphne Marlatt Papers. National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

understand how her mother was constructed through her own role as a mother to her son, she explains how she came to understand her mother better only after she became a mother herself: “my understanding comes from empathizing with her experience as a mother, having had my own experience as a mother. And recognizing in myself the difficulties I had as an immigrant, and seeing how those were magnified for her” (in Williamson 49).

Marlatt continually asks questions about her multiple roles: “what is parent material? how long do we need it? feet on the red dirt of Devon bedrock we go back to the familiar: my mother’s trace, these family pathways to negotiate, these still-standing walls of home” (141). She is very much both mother and daughter, performing both functions. At other moments the narrator becomes her own mother as she nurtures Kit and takes care of him through an illness. When he gets a cinder in his eye, and the narrator recalls a similar event in her own childhood and recalls her mother’s angry reaction, memories become layered so that the funicular in Lynmouth evokes the cablecar up Penang Hill and Kit’s actions and reactions are layered on her own at age nine (164). At moments she realizes how her story is connected to Kit’s as the past and the present merge: “& at the heart of this, Kit’s rapture at feeding the pigeons. as i photograph him i am the photo of me with my sisters, the same fear & joy, hands outstretched, three of us in velvet coats, mother hovering, en route to Canada, feeding the pigeons in Trafalgar Square” (185). Marlatt both connects with and distances herself from her mother’s ghostly presence. She negotiates her roles as both mother and daughter, as she becomes more conscious of the different versions of “self” that she occupies. Thus, Marlatt’s mother and son both contribute to the shaping of the autobiographical “i” in this text.

However, from the beginning of her trip “back,” Marlatt is acutely aware of her own necessity to invent, to make up parts of her past and her past roles: “we feed ourselves stories to dull our sense of the absurd. fed a line so as not to imagine the end—linear version of our lives unraveling in a look, back. mystery appeals to our belief that things do make sense, this plot we’re in, wrapped up like knife fork & spoon” (131). This sense of performance—of making it up—and scripting narrative to make sense of the past is central in all of the texts in this study, particularly Diamond Grill in which Wah says that “when you’re not pure you just make it up.” The need for new scripts and challenging old stories is what all these authors have in common, as well as the recognition that we tell ourselves the stories of our past in order to make sense of them. In How Hug a Stone the narrator reflects on this sense of invention: “be unnamed, walk unwritten, de-scripted, un-described. or else compose, make it say itself, make it up” (35). In the section called “narrative continuity,” she goes on to ask herself, “without narrative how can we see where we’ve been? or, unable to leave it altogether, what we come from?” (135).

In “Month of Hungry Ghosts” Marlatt searches for the kind of connections that she was unable (and unwilling) to find in the previous texts. Calling her uncle the “minotaur at the heart of the family maze” (137), she relies on family members to help put the missing pieces together.⁵¹ Her aunt shares photographs and nursery rhymes with her, all of which become clues to her own understanding of where she comes from and how it affects who she is. The layered narrative makes it ambiguous whether the narrative is in

⁵¹ Similarly, in Running in the Family, Ondaatje refers to his aunt Phyliss as “the minotaur of this long journey back” (18). Both Ondaatje and Marlatt use the metaphor of the maze to represent their complex and displaced family histories.

the present (the trip now with Kit) or the past (the waiting with her mother before traveling to Canada), and allows for a kind of reaching outward, an acknowledgment that women's stories are, at some level, shared stories. The intense private voice in Zócalo is thus replaced by a more inclusive public voice.

Near the end of How Hug a Stone Marlatt has a moment of epiphany or revelation at Avebury as a reaction to the eternal feminine principal found in the rocks. However, this realization is countered by Marlatt's discovery of her own mother's multiple roles and versions of her/self. Essentialism is balanced by multiplicity. Although the narrator had always considered her mother the quintessential proper English lady, her grandmother describes her mother as reticent to accept her role as colonial beauty and debutante. Her mother's best friend describes her as "'anti-' nature, that puzzle. the register, antagonizer, the one who never 'fitted in.' how she 'seemed to enjoy setting people against her'—a noncompliance Jean admired, being the dutiful daughter, easily guilty" (175). The narrator's discovery of these various versions of her mother serves further to remind her (and the reader) of the constructedness of selves and of the performative nature of being.

In "Feminism and the Politics of Irreducible Differences," Sneja Gunew describes how in in the second person, Kamboureli fashions a new self as she acquires a new language. Linking these selves to versions of the feminine, she argues that "the new selves also function as new inflections of the feminine. In other words, femaleness itself acquires different forms in the new language, new ways of performing the spectacles of femininity—and at the most intimate levels" (12). The same can be said for the various versions of female selves in Ghost Works. For example, the narrator's own younger

self, a self who champions Canadian English and wants to wear blue jeans, is a reaction to what her mother represents with her correct and staid English accent: "her dream, the one my mother inherited, her dress, my mother lending her body to it. as i refused, on a new continent suffocated in changing rooms think with resentment: you don't understand, everybody wears jeans here & i want a job" (29). The cycle of expectation and disappointment continues.

The competing versions of her mother complicate any reading of Marlatt's search for origins as final or definitive. Tostevin argues that Marlatt's search for her mother in How Hug a Stone serves to close her off from an excess of meanings:

This genealogy, the filiation of a direct line leading back to a fundamental original signification, parallels the search for the lost mother on which traditional Western philosophy and literature are based and contradicts the open-endedness and new beginnings of l'écriture féminine which attempts to displace and exceed authority, truth, and the illusionary essence of origins. (35)

However, Marlatt's search for origins and explanations on her journey to her mother's home is complicated by her discovery that the woman she thought her mother was was more multidimensional than she had previously acknowledged. She realizes that any notion of "home" or of origins is necessarily problematized by the lack of closure provided by her journey. Marlatt explains her visit to England and its representation in How Hug a Stone: "I'm there as a woman in a foreign country which is not a foreign country...I'm claiming it, and at the same time, feeling very alienated from it" (103). Ambivalence towards "home" haunts this text, so that there is more

than a little irony in Kit's desire, near the end of their stay in England, to "go home, he says, where it's nice and boring" (187).

IV. "this being here"

In her essay "Old Scripts and New Narrative Strategies," Marlatt suggests that "the selfhood that women's texts narrate is not a heroic selfhood that overcomes, so much as a multi-faceted one (if indeed it can be called one) that stands in relation to all that composes it" ("Old Scripts" 65). Although Ghost Works is not the story of Marlatt's life, grouped together the three texts that compose Ghost Works foreground the complexities of writing a woman's life: journeys "home" and her shifting relationship to different places enable Marlatt to explore her multifaceted self. In Ghost Works, Marlatt performs the act of sifting and of recovering and renegotiating the various selves that are linked to or associated with strange yet familiar places. The narrator needs to travel there in an attempt to grasp where it is she is coming from and what these places (and the gap between them) have to do with her own shifting sense of self. Marlatt's three diverse but related journeys show just how many layers make up the displaced self and demonstrate how a recognition of her female self provides a heightened sensitivity to her immigrant consciousness.

Each of the narrator's journeys in Ghost Works is framed by a sense not only of doubleness, of hereness and thereeness, but of multiplicity, of a number of different nodes or networks of belonging. If, in Ghost Works, Zócalo represents the kind of ultimate displacement from language and place with its focus on difference and detachment, and "Month of Hungry Ghosts" traces the narrator's attempts to reconcile fragmented and partial memory with the present moment, then How Hug a Stone constitutes a kind of

homecoming, an attempt to come to terms with a mothertongue, and “a reversal of the original displacement, so that in fact Marlatt is writing herself into identity, or consciousness” (Munton 215). In Mexico, in spite of her various attempts to connect with the people and the places she encounters, she ultimately still feels like a tourist. Thinking about her home in the north and about her child, she filters her experience through the lens of an admittedly precarious sense of “home.” The recognition of her “essential apartness” foregrounds important questions about language and representation. In Malaysia the letters that she writes to people at home give the doubleness an even more tangible feel and dramatize her filtering of experience. As a woman in her childhood home she feels alien and strange because she no longer fits the roles assigned to her. The construction of the text—juxtapositions of journal entries and letters with poems—evokes this sense of fragmentation. Similarly, in England, she recognizes how her roles are constantly shifting as she discovers her mother’s childhood home with the help of her own son who is the same age as she was when she last was there with her mother.

The various movements—the journeys that she embarks on—are necessary stages in the narrator’s self-realization. However, there is no endpoint to the narrator’s journey. Home is decidedly not “nice and boring” because it is so undercut with traces of elsewhere, and, perhaps even more importantly, with different aspects of self. Like Ondaatje, Wah, and Kiyooka, Marlatt’s definition of self—in terms of cultural and ethnic identification—is not stable. If her “Canadianess” is challenged by the layering of other places, it is also challenged by the realizations the narrator makes about how cultural roles are inextricably connected with one’s class and in Marlatt’s case with

one's gender. The notion of belonging anywhere completely is interrogated by these texts.

As Munton has observed, writers like Marlatt (and the others in this study) who use the poetic diary as a way of maintaining a sense of writing oneself into a given place are all

explorers, often attempting to understand themselves and their place through travel, mapping their consciousnesses. They share a renewed sense of their roots, and their travel often takes them back in their own and their ancestors' pasts.... Relationship to a parent is often crucial, and several poets identify strongly with a parent, switching personas, recognizing themselves in the other.... Valuing synchronicity, writers now assume the fictive nature of reality. Experimentation is key, with the relationship of all questions to language perhaps the most common bond between these writers. (Munton 96-7)

In Running in the Family Ondaatje travels to Sri Lanka in an attempt to recover memories of his father and his childhood home; in Breathin' My Name With a Sigh, Waiting for Saskatchewan, and Diamond Grill Wah evokes the numerous movements of his grandfather and his father from China to Canada and back, and from small town to small town throughout the Canadian prairies; in Wheels, Kyoto Airs, and Mothertalk Roy Kiyooka travels to Japan in the company of his father, visits his sister in Kyoto in Kyoto Airs, and evokes his mother's immigration to Canada. In each text these displacements—be they homecomings, multiple migrations, or forced relocation—serve as entry points into discussions about belonging, identity and cultural difference. Roy Miki explains that

the trope of “migrancy” suggests a malleable holding position in a cultural immediacy where “centrist” terms such as nation-states, identity politics, multiculturalism and even cross-culturalism can no longer frame—which is to say name—the zones of the “marginal.” The application of the term to cultural production, I would hope, in no way diminishes the suffering caused by violent global displacements—but rather emphasizes the pervasive effects the movement beyond and across national boundaries has had in the nooks and crannies of our everyday lives. (214)⁵²

The travel and exploration that is so central to Ghost Works can be seen as a kind of metaphor for the exploration of new languages/discourses that challenge the accepted norm. As Michèle Gunderson suggests, “home” takes on a variety of meanings in each of the texts: “In these texts, home is the safe place, the protected space, the womb, the place the narrator wants to run

⁵² Here Miki’s comments are in dialogue with a range of cultural theorists of diaspora who seek to articulate the subject’s positioning within an ever-shifting global economy. See, for instance, James Clifford’s provocative (and controversial) essay, “Traveling Cultures,” in which he outlines his theory of a “comparative cultural studies approach to specific histories, tactics, everyday practices of dwelling and traveling: traveling-in-dwelling, dwelling-in-traveling” (36).

back to for safety; it is also a word with an oppressive history, one she wants to run away from, or change, or reinvent" (76).⁵³

In Marlatt's work, as we have seen, cultural difference is intimately related to sexual difference and her journeys help her to negotiate these differences. Just as cultural difference is never fixed or static in any of the texts in this study, in Ghost Works sexual difference is mutable, shifting. Marlatt grapples with her positioning—as lover, mother, daughter, sister and friend—in relation to her shifting contexts. The various places that she travels through help to foreground the different roles she performs.

The three texts in Ghost Works help exemplify a turning point in Marlatt's oeuvre. While the emphasis on travel and displacement in all three works serves to reinforce Marlatt's preoccupation with language, there is a shift in these texts from a focus on the self "in place" to a self that has multiple placements. The discovery of how the self is constituted through various discourses leads to a greater recognition of difference. Through the process of recovery, or "re-entry," Marlatt recognizes the juxtaposition of selves (that coincide with cultural, class, and gender difference) that are a response to

⁵³ Gunderson's take on Marlatt's rewriting of home is a welcome contrast to the number of articles about Marlatt's preoccupation with an "archetypal feminine principal" in her writing. For discussions of Marlatt's writing within the context of feminine essentialism, see Godard; Moyes; Davey; Tostevin. For example, in his article "Words and Stones in How Hug a Stone," Davey argues that How Hug a Stone "groups men under the sign of the phallus—the inscribing pen, the targeting gun, the assertion of a single meaning—and women under that of the 'wave-breaking womb'—sensuous, dancing, imagining, between the worlds of men" (46). Davey's article has been taken up by Julie Beddoes in her essay, "Mastering the Mother Tongue: Reading Frank Davey Reading Daphne Marlatt's How Hug a Stone." Similarly, Tostevin's attack on what she sees as Marlatt's nostalgic desire for origins has also been objected to by Pamela Banting in her Body Inc. Gunderson self-consciously places Marlatt's work within a context of postcolonial issues about home and belonging, drawing on critics like Marangoly George and Mohanty. It is because of her destabilization and reworking of the definition of home in her article that I place the term in quotation marks in my own writing.

specific historical and cultural pressures. In Ghost Works she writes these juxtapositions into being.

In the following chapter, such juxtapositions become even more visible when we look at Roy Kiyooka's biotext Mothertalk. Edited by Marlatt, this text reinforces the different ways that the past and memory can function as the raw material for one's own process of cultural recovery. Kiyooka uses his mother's stories of her own displacement in order to help construct a past for his own life. Mary Kiyooka's memories of Japan and the lilt of her Japanese dialect offer an entry into what is for him a little known territory. Kiyooka attempts to make up for his own feelings of otherness and alienation as a Japanese-Canadian by exploring the "facts" of his mother's own life and recreating a rich cultural background of his own. In this sense, his biotext shares elements of both Ondaatje and Marlatt's texts. He engages with his mother's stories while actively rewriting them in his own order and his own voice according to his own poetic agenda. His mother's stories are restorative only insofar as he re-engages with them and makes them his own. Mothertalk illustrates how the same stories can function differently to produce conflicting results.

Chapter 4. Ghost Selves: the (Auto)biographical Voices of Mothertalk

I. Introduction

As we have already seen with the examples of both Ondaatje and Marlatt, there is a tension in the biotext between the impulse to document a life in a straightforward manner (with a linear, chronological narrative) and the desire to explore variations in form and to disrupt aesthetic norms as a way of examining the complexities of a displaced subjectivity. I have demonstrated how both Running in the Family and Ghost Works illustrate this tension in different ways. Ondaatje manages to complicate both constructivist and postmodern critiques of his work with his insistence throughout his text on the process of positioning and Marlatt focuses on her estrangement from structures of language as she negotiates both her immigrant and her gendered identifications. Now I want to turn my attention to the fascinating biotext written by Roy Kiyooka entitled Mothertalk: Life Stories of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka, which, because of the ways the same life stories get filtered through different sets of lenses, exemplifies, from another angle, the complexities of writing cultural memory and exploring self representation.

Mothertalk depicts the life of Kiyooka's mother, Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka, a first-generation Japanese-Canadian woman. The first-person narrative recounts her struggles both as a woman, and as an immigrant. It describes the difficulties of her impoverished childhood in Japan, her relationship with her Samurai father, her arranged marriage, her immigration to Canada, her family's forced relocation during WWII, and the intense love she has for her children as well as the generational, linguistic, and cultural

gaps that separate them. Her narrative is told in sections, each of which is introduced by a poem. A short preface at the beginning of the text that describes the project and the various appendices help to contextualize her life. In the middle of the book there are a number of family photographs taken both in Japan and in Canada, and spanning a number of generations. The text defies categorization by blurring the boundaries between autobiography, biography, history, fiction, and theory, and mixing the prose segments in with poetry, letters, essays, and photographs.

Although Mary's name appears on the cover as part of the sub-title, "Life Stories of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka," the author of the book is Roy Kiyooka, which, considering the first-person narrative is surprising and unsettling. The fact that Daphne Marlatt is named as the editor of the book, raises further questions as to the nature and function of the editorial interventions in the text. Thus the cover of the book already serves to distance the reader from Mary Kiyoshi's authorial power by introducing the possibility of a shared autobiographical voice and multiple layers of mediation. This distancing effect is confirmed by the text's introduction and various appendices.

Marlatt's introduction describes the text's complex history of production. Mary's stories were told in Japanese to a translator (Matsuki Masutani) who later transcribed the interviews and translated them into English for Kiyooka. Kiyooka then rewrote and reordered the transcriptions according to his own poetic project, adding and changing material as he saw fit. After his death in 1994, Kiyooka's family asked Marlatt to act as the editor of the manuscript and bring the text to publication. Marlatt in turn rearranged Kiyooka's material and included a number of additions to the

manuscript.⁵⁴ The final version of Mothertalk was published in Canada by Newest Press in 1997.

By rewriting his mother's stories Kiyooka creates his own voice and narrative pattern in his manuscripts. His choices evoke his preoccupations about identity, belonging, and inheritance. The raw material of Mary's stories provides her son with the basis for his process of what Hall calls "cultural recovery" ("Ethnicity" 19), a process of discovering the past, of making use of the past in the present, and of giving it literary life. The stories enable Kiyooka to move between personal and public history, imaginative and physical geography, and the local and the national, as a way of exploring the complexities of his displaced self. In her editing of Kiyooka's text, Marlatt keeps his unique and extraordinary voice but reshapes the material into a chronological narrative in an attempt to stress the historical scope of Mary's stories. For Marlatt, Mary's stories are an important documentary source of a whole generation of Issei women's experiences that are most effectively expressed in a linear narrative.

Because of the different layers of narration within the same text, it is often unclear as to whose story or voice is at the centre of Mothertalk. Whereas Marlatt takes on the biographical responsibility of representing Mary's life and giving her voice, Kiyooka blends his own voice with his mother's and weaves her stories into his own narrative of self-identification. Throughout the manuscript, as we will see, the working on, working through, translating, and transmuting of his mother's life story become a

⁵⁴ The transcripts of the tapes of Mothertalk are among the Roy Kiyooka Papers in Vancouver, B.C. They include the translator Matsuki Masutani's written transliterations of Mary Kiyooka's stories as well as Roy Kiyooka's own rewritings of them. I want to thank Fumiko Kiyooka and Susanna Egan for graciously allowing me to look at these papers. Marlatt's papers relating to Mothertalk are at the National Archives in Ottawa.

vector of Kiyooka's own process of self-discovery and self-naming. The two projects emphasize the difference between, on the one hand, the necessity to respond to and document the social and historical contexts that shape the minority subject, and, on the other, the desire to challenge the generic and narrative forms traditionally associated with immigrant autobiography (i.e. linearity, chronology, unity, development, assimilation) through aesthetic innovation and formal experimentation. The expanded text of Mothertalk is the site where these distinct, albeit related, projects meet.

II. Collaboration and the Expanded Text

Because Mothertalk began as a series of taped interviews that were later transcribed, it shares a number of attributes of the collaborative life story. Such texts, consisting of life stories orally narrated and transferred to print, involve more than one author. In the process of collaboration, the single, "stable," unified author traditionally associated with autobiography is undermined. Carole Boyce Davies argues that "because of the collaborative process involved, the autobiographical 'I,' with its authority, is replaced by a less stable 'we'" (3). The various stages of narrative lead to a mingling of orality and literacy in the final product. Philippe Lejeune describes this effect:

Writing in collaboration suggests the possibility of a kind of spectral analysis of the production of the text, of the different authorities and phases of the work. In the particular case of autobiography, the exercise of memory and the exercise of writing are ensured by different people, in the midst of a process of dialogue that is likely to leave oral and written traces. (188)

Davies, recognizing the challenges posed by the multiple authors of collaborative autobiography, suggests that "the primary theoretical question

posed in identifying life stories, orally narrated and transferred into print, is the problem of authority and control over the text" (3). Who speaks for whom in a multiply-authored text like Mothertalk and what are the various authors attempting to communicate?⁵⁵

Although not a collaborative text per se (Mary Kiyooka did not know that the final ordering imperative of the text would eventually fall to Marlatt), the project did begin as a joint effort between mother and son. However, even this pairing was complicated by the fact that Roy Kiyooka needed a translator to understand his mother's stories and to get them into print. As a result, Mary's voice is first mediated through the translator's, Masutani's. Although ostensibly a text about Mary's life (including her childhood in Japan, her immigration to Canada, the forced relocation of the Japanese during World War II), the various stages of translation, transcription and rewriting serve to filter her story and distance the reader from her original version. These filters stress the textualized nature of her life stories. So much so that the context of their production—the depiction of the rewriting, the ordering—threaten to overwhelm the actual events of her life. As Lejeune suggests, "autobiography by people who do not write throws light on autobiography written by those who do: the imitation reveals the secret of fabrication and functioning of the natural product" (186). He also maintains that collaborative autobiography "reveals the multiplicity of authorities

⁵⁵ Even those theorists of collaboration who acknowledge the problems of agency in a shared story are only looking at two people involved in the collaboration. Few theorists consider the complications that can arise with a multiply-authored text like Mothertalk in which there is a succession of "authors" who are not necessarily communicating with one another about the process. Susanna Egan and Gabi Helms' thorough and evocative paper, "The Many Tongues of Mothertalk: Life Stories of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka" goes a long way in remedying this lack. In their paper they carefully unweave the many layers that make up Mothertalk and demonstrate the "multiple slippages" that occur in a text that has been so thoroughly revised. They argue that a "serial collaboration" is at work in the text (50).

implied in the work of autobiographical writing, as in all writing" (188). The complex division of labor in Mothertalk certainly demonstrates these concerns.

Because collaborative life-writing consists of a teller as well as a listener and recorder, it necessarily raises a number of the same questions that any ethnographic text concerned with the representation of an "other" raises. Mary's tapes describe the experiences of an Issei woman to her Nisei son. The gap between them is generational, gendered, and cultural. The gap between Mary and Masutani, a first generation Japanese immigrant, is different. In the transcripts Mary occasionally points to their shared language and suggests that Masutani might understand her stories about Japan better than her own children.⁵⁶ When Marlatt takes over the project after Roy Kiyooka's death, the cultural divide between original author and writer deepens. Marlatt acknowledges the shifts in these various stages of authorship in the final version of Mothertalk.

The published version of Mothertalk consists of, but is not limited to, Mary's narrative, Marlatt's introduction, her addition of Roy Kiyooka's own poems that serve as epigraphs to each chapter, the footnotes that allow for various family members to disagree or talk back to Mary's version of events, and the various appendices which include "Papa's version," and Roy Kiyooka's two highly politicized pieces, "Letter to Lucy Fumi", and the short essay "We Asian North Americanos." These fragments, all of which are chosen by Marlatt, coupled with the transcripts of the tapes themselves, help to emphasize the constructed nature of the text.

⁵⁶ Egan and Helms point out that in the original translation Mary's asides to Masutani such as, "Japanese only understand this. My children laugh at this, but you understand, don't you. You come from Japan, you have heard these things from your parents," (MM's Transcript 2) are crossed out with double lines in ink (7, #12).

Given the multiple parts that make up the whole, it is helpful to think of Mothertalk as an “expanded text.” The term is used by James Clifford in his book Writing Culture to refer to a text that foregrounds the nature of its own production—a text that interrogates notions of authority and originality by providing material that documents its own construction. Clifford uses as an example of an expanded text the 1982 and 1983 editions of James Walker’s The Sun Dance and Other Ceremonies of the Oglala Division of the Teton Sioux (1917). In the editions by Raymond DeMallie and Elaine Jahner, Walker’s original text is supplemented by a “collage of notes, interview, texts, and essay fragments” in which “Walker’s own descriptions and glosses are fragments among fragments” (15). As Clifford suggests, “the question of who writes (performs? transcribes? translates? edits?) cultural statements is inescapable in an expanded text” (16) because the nature of authority is interrogated in such texts. Like self-conscious ethnographic texts that examine their own constructedness, the final published text of Mothertalk is one that has a very conscious layering of voices. According to Clifford,

Once “informants” begin to be considered as co-authors, and the ethnographer as scribe and archivist as well as interpreting observer, we can ask new, critical questions of all ethnographies. However monological, dialogical, or polyphonic their form, they are hierarchical arrangements of discourses. (17)

If collaborative autobiography “reveals the secret of fabrication and functioning of the ‘natural’ product” (Lejeune 186), the expanded text of Mothertalk takes this impulse even further.

By adding extra material to Mothertalk, Marlatt opens up the text by making Mary’s stories “fragments among fragments.” For example, Marlatt

adds Kiyooka's voice to the text by prefacing each section of the narrative with one of his poems.⁵⁷ These poems serve to remind the reader of Kiyooka's involvement in the project as well as his preoccupations with Japan in his previous poetry. The fragment from "Pacific Windows" that describes Mary Kiyooka frames the text as a whole by describing its purpose: "and when she felt like talking she invariably talked about all the family ties they had on both sides of the Pacific, and though she never mentioned it, they both knew she was the last link to the sad and glad tidings of the floating world" (11). Poems like "Burning Leaves" serve to emphasize Kiyooka's double-voicedness and the connections between a "here" and a "there" as well as his tenuous attachment to his older sister Mariko in Japan: "I know where I am / my feet stretched out in front of me / still, a part of me is over there" (35). In Mothertalk the poem introduces the section "No Notion of What Was in Store for Me" in which Mary describes her arranged marriage and her own journey to Canada. The focus in Kiyooka's poem on the working out of his dual identity and the push-pull of the here-there enters into dialogue with Mary's own memories of the actual physical and psychic upheaval of immigration.

While Kiyooka's poetic fragments help to foreground his relationship with his mother and to Japan and their role in his work as a source of creative energy, his appendices to the book perform a different, albeit related, function. They serve to highlight the impact the Japanese language has on his own identity formation and they are a powerful illustration of the devastating effects of displacement and thus an indictment of the Canadian government's

⁵⁷ In her introduction Marlatt says it was Fumiko Kiyooka's idea to add the poems by Roy Kiyooka. Without reading the introduction, however, it is not clear whose poems they are; unless familiar with Kiyooka's oeuvre, the reader needs to guess at the poems' authorship.

systemic racism. "We Asian North Americanos," subtitled "An unhistorical 'take' on growing up yellow in a white world," is a treatise on displacement and the loss of language. Throughout the essay he stresses how his "Japanese self" is at the centre of everything he does (and writes), and how this self is deeply connected to his mother and her language:

I've been talking of how my mother gave me my first language, a language I began to acquire even as I suckled on her breast, and what a motley mode of speaking it's all become in time....Thus it is that I always speak Japanese when I go home to visit her. More than that I can, for the time being, become almost Japanese. I realize that it's one of the deepest "ties" I have in my whole life. (184)

Similarly, in "Dear Lucy Fumi," which is a letter to the Japanese Canadian Redress Secretariat, Kiyooka illustrates the undeniable and inescapable effects of social and historical movements on people. The addition of these two pieces provides a politicized context for the project as a whole.

The expanded text also consists of a short piece called "Papa's Version." Papa is Mary's husband to whom she frequently refers in her own narrative. The inclusion of Papa's brief story reinforces the image she presents of him as a withdrawn and silent man. This short version of events from his point of view demonstrates how, in autobiography, the past is often constructed in a subjective light.⁵⁸ A number of Papa's "facts" are actually amended in footnotes; Marlatt adds these notes as "corrections" to Papa's story. Similarly, Marlatt adds footnotes to the end of Mary's story that allow

⁵⁸ We have already seen how different family members can have very different versions of events when we looked at Michael and Christopher Ondaatje's different versions of their childhoods (see *Running in the Family* vs. *The Man-Eater of Punanai*). The difference here is that conflicting versions of the stories are included within the same text, thus demanding that the reader compare and contrast the stories in process.

other members of the family to talk back to, or offer corrections to, Mary's point of view. Footnotes provide insight into Frank Kiyooka's (Roy's brother) point of view, offering his own remembrances and helping to emphasize the tenuous nature of autobiographical truth. These footnotes are a reminder that Mary's own memories cannot deliver the "true" story or the only story in any objective way.

The structure of an expanded text demands that we view the text as in process, open-ended. The various textual fragments serve to interrogate the construction of the whole. Although the final version of a book is ultimately in the control of the editor and publisher, the various voices in Mothertalk challenge the idea of a finished version of the text and will not allow for a sense of complete closure. As a result, Mothertalk raises many more questions than it answers. Its gaps are even more evident when one considers the manuscripts of the text in conjunction with the published version. Kiyooka's manuscripts clearly demonstrate a different kind of project in process than even Marlatt's expanded text ultimately allows for. In the next sections I turn to the different dimensions of the story that result from Marlatt and Kiyooka's distinct renderings of Mary's recollections.

III. Kiyooka's Version, or, the Spirit of Inheritance

At one level the content of Mothertalk is self-evident. The text is clearly based on the stories of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka, an Issei woman who arrived in Canada from Japan in 1917. As Roy Kiyooka himself explains in his grant application to the Japanese-Canadian Redress Foundation, "My mandate is certainly clear as the self appointed editor my task is to simply get

my Mother's Life into print."⁵⁹ He emphasizes the importance of bringing to light his mother's silenced story:

Mary Kiyo Kiyooka belongs to the first generation of Asians who came to Canada at the beginning of the now dwindling 20th century. What befell her in the New World and how she coped with penury and a large family while keeping in touch with her Meiji childhood is the substance of a summer's worth of cassette tape conversations with Matsuki Masutani. Now given the scarcity of Issei biographies, let alone Nisei or Sansei ones, it'll surely be a poignant testament.⁶⁰

This description shows how both the biographical and the documentary impulse at the heart of Mothertalk. And yet it is not the primary impulse that Kiyooka adheres to when he rewrites his mother's stories over and over again in his Mothertalk manuscripts.

While Mothertalk is the story of an Issei woman's life, it is also a narrative about the "Bushido" spirit, about a warrior father, about longing, and about home and homelessness. In this sense, it is very much a narrative about inheritance; it is concerned with a passing on of values, of language, and of stories. These are the aspects of the text that are particularly resonant in Roy Kiyooka's manuscripts. Kiyooka has admitted that all of his writing

⁵⁹ I would like to thank Tony Tamayose, Executive Director of the Japanese-Canadian Redress Foundation of British Columbia, for sharing with me Roy's original grant application for his Mothertalk project.

⁶⁰ Kiyooka's use of the term "testament" evokes the whole sub-genre of "testimonio" or testimony that has recently been at the centre of discussions of life-writing. "Testimonios" are written by subjects who, as John Beverley argues, have been "excluded from authorized representation when it was a question of speaking and writing for themselves rather than being spoken for" (93). Beverley links the idea of "testimonio" to what Barbara Harlow has called "resistance literature." Beverley suggests that in testimonio there is an urgency to the narration and a sense of bearing witness. Chamberlain and Thompson define testimonio as "a secular spiritual testimony telling a life as a left-wing moral with the overt intention of raising consciousness" (6). Although Mothertalk cannot be classified as a "testimonio," the idea of "bearing witness" is one that is taken up (although not overtly) by Marlatt in her editorial choices.

somehow takes root in Japan. Collections such as Kyoto Airs, Wheels, Gotenyama, and the poem “Pacific Windows” most explicitly explore this terrain. He says that, “Kyoto Airs is about Japan; the first long piece in Transcanada Letters is about Japan, and it’s prefaced by the photograph of my grandfather with my mother. So all my texts have started in Japan. I don’t know why that is so but that’s true” (“Inter-Face” 66). Much of Kiyooka’s writing is, in some way, linked to his own process of cultural memory, the mythologizing of his mother and of Japan, as well as his thinking about the question of language. In an application for a Canada Council grant found among his papers, Kiyooka proposed a multidimensional art project around his ancestral home in Kochi. He describes wanting to “get in touch with the pulse of the place,” and he admits to “a barely inscribed Pacific Rim Dialogue—one borne of the time immemorial impact of Asians of N.A. that ‘i’ go on lending my voice to til all the racial epithets disappear into the flux of our multi-national discourse” (Pacific Windows 316). For Kiyooka, the Mothertalk project is part of this “Pacific Rim Dialogue.”

According to Marlatt, Kiyooka had almost finished his final manuscript of Mothertalk when he died; he had already given a number of public readings from it (Interview).⁶¹ However, the order of the various typescripts in his papers is often confusing and difficult to follow. There are at least two different “Mothertalk Series” that are differentiated by letters and numbers (i.e. “:Mother 2,” “B: Mother 3,” etc.). Often different series contain similar information, although ordered differently. The “B:Mothertalk Series”

⁶¹ This is from an unpublished interview that took place with Marlatt in Victoria on Thursday, July 8, 1999. I would like to thank Susanna Egan, Gabriele Helms and Daphne Marlatt for allowing me to participate in the interview from a distance.

appears to be a later version of the “:Mothers Series.” However, “B: Mother 6” is the same as “:Mother 6.” Even within the “B:Mothers Series,” there are two very different drafts of both “B: Mother” and “B: Mother 1.” What is clear from the various drafts that make up the Mothers manuscripts is the extent to which Kiyooka rewrote his mother’s stories. Using the material from Masutani’s transcripts as a basis for his rewriting, Kiyooka changes it considerably both at the level of language and voice, and at the level of narrative structure.

The fact that Kiyooka relies on a translator to understand his mother’s stories makes language a central preoccupation of his Mothers project. The loss of language—the sense of being cut off from his mother tongue—is the subject of many of Kiyooka’s early poems, as is the idea of a “pre-language” or a “body language.” He uses the word “tongue” in almost every collection, particularly in compound words like “tongue-tied,” “tongue-twisted,” “cleft-tongue,” “flying-tongue,” and “mother-tongue.” In Pear Tree Pomes he calls Japanese “a lost childhood language,” and he asks, “how many languages have i lost losing my childhood pear tree... / and is that loss that makes me the tongue-tied love i be?” (32). In Three Nippon Weathervanes, he says, “a small ‘i’ wants to sing but / will it be in ‘inglish’ or shitamichi ‘kochi-ben’” (in Pacific Windows 273), and in October’s Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae he says that “we all speak in our mother tongue” (in Pacific Windows 283). This emphasis on language, particularly on the loss of language, is explained in part in an interview in Inalienable Rice in which Kiyooka says, “the Japanese thing was really aborted because there seemed at that time in my life, to my parents, literally no cause to have any truck with

the Japanese culture because it was such a remove" (59). Kiyooka explores his displacement from language throughout the Mothertalk manuscript.

His mother is similarly cut off from the English language. In "We Asian North Americanos," Kiyooka calls his mother's English "rudimentary" (182). In Mothertalk, "Mary" laments that "My kids will never know all that befell their Mom because she never learned to speak English well and they didn't learn enough Nihongo" (14-15).⁶² She explains that she cannot adequately communicate with her own children, let alone her grandchildren. In the transcripts she says, "my grandchildren grow up in a country without even learning Japanese. Like fools" (Tale #6). However, in the manuscripts Roy suggests—in his mother's voice—that there is another, deeper, level of understanding:

I can't say what I really want in English and my kids can't tell me much about themselves in their broken Japanese. When they say, Mom...? I ask, what-you-want in broken English. My English is simple-minded to them but that's okay because most of the time we don't even know we're mixing broken English and simple-minded Japanese. Things get muddled up but we don't stop talking. (152)

Because his mother's language and her birthplace are clearly linked to Kiyooka's own self-identification, and because he clearly feels cut off from this language, in his rewriting Kiyooka attempts to inhabit the voice of his mother, to create a language that mimics a joining of their own.

Originally the Mothertalk project was supposed to be a bilingual one. Kiyooka's grant application refers to both an "accurate 'kanji' and 'english'

⁶² Although I do not put Mary's names in quotation marks throughout, I do at this juncture in order to foreground the textualized nature of her voice in the published version of the text. As I have argued, the voice of "Mary" is actually very much a blend of her own and Kiyooka's voices.

translation made of all the extant tapes."⁶³ However, in the process of rewriting Mary's stories and, in effect, taking ownership of them, a synthesis occurs. Mothertalk can be read, at least in part, as his attempt to formulate a new mother tongue—a language that blends, yet ultimately transcends, his own rudimentary Japanese and his mother's "broken English" in order to capture a sense of the recreative quality of their shared communication. Roy Miki explains that Kiyooka used language from childhood on to explore the complexities of his multiple belongings and the effects of his parents' migration on him: "'inglish' stands for the transformation of english into a language that could articulate the networks of subjectivity nurtured in another mother tongue, in his case the vernacular Japanese which he absorbed through his mother" (55). Writing for Kiyooka was an attempt "to claim some kind of articulation for himself" (66).⁶⁴

In the first instance, as Egan and Helms point out, Kiyooka tidies up the language of the transcripts for more public consumption. Because they are written in broken English, Kiyooka rewrites the transcripts "to provide formal English diction and syntax equivalent to the nature of his mother's Japanese" (55). The shift in language is clear in a comparison of two passages that describe Mary's meeting with an old school friend from Japan. The first is Mary's version in the transcripts:

⁶³ In his grant application Kiyooka says that he plans on approaching a Japanese-English publisher with the manuscripts. Masutani confirms this intention and says that he himself has the Japanese language version in his possession. It has not been published (personal e-mail).

⁶⁴ Throughout Marlatt's notes and letters about Kiyooka's manuscripts, she wonders whether or not to use his word "inglish" which she calls one of his "politically-informed spellings...via Pound and Olson, but informed by Contemporary Redress Movement" (Marlatt papers). In the manuscript itself she has gone through and changed "inglish" to "English" throughout. In the final version Marlatt opts for "English."

Oh Boy Boy, I was shocked to death. He was full of white hairs and bald. We were so happy, though, to meet childhood friend. I was with him for four years in Jinjou [elementary] school days, fighting with him every days. I was a tomboy, and strong, so I was afraid of boys, and fighting with them all the time. I've often beaten up boys to tears. Yea I was a real tomboy when I was small. (Mrs. Kiyooka No. 2, 16)

Kiyooka changes the language in his manuscripts by crossing out the original lines and rewriting them in pencil:

Boy, I was shocked. He was whitehaired and bald. We were so happy to meet each other again. I was with him for four years in Jinjou school days, fighting with him every day. I was a tomboy and strong, I wasn't afraid of boys. I've often beaten them up. Yea I was a real tomboy when I was small.⁶⁵

Very often, Kiyooka makes even more extensive changes to the language in the transcripts. Not only does he change the diction to allow for more fluidity, but he also alters the tone and style of the voice in the transcripts. The matter-of-factness in the transcripts is altered to express a more lyrical, less prosaic, voice.

The lyrical voice of the manuscripts is much more Kiyooka's than his mother's. In a letter to Marlatt, Kiyooka's daughter Mariko writes that her father "seemed pretty clear on what he was doing—the changes aren't huge from one to the other, except every once in a while his voice comes booming in over Gramma's, but I think he was working on editing himself out—at

⁶⁵ Again, I would like to thank Egan and Helms for providing this comparison in their paper "The Many Tongues of *Mothertalk*." Being at a distance from the transcripts often made it a challenge for me to provide concrete textual evidence. Their work on specific passages from the transcripts and manuscripts enabled me to do so.

least his obvious self.”⁶⁶ Throughout his manuscripts, Kiyooka articulates his mother’s thoughts but infuses them with his own poetic style. The following excerpts from his text show how his voice can “boom” over his mother’s, infusing the stilted, “rudimentary” English of the transcripts with a poetic exuberance: “Tosa has orange groves, palms, exotic birds and snakes plus the mid-summer typhoons. And because the Pacific laves Tosa’s shore the air is clean”; “I kept my depression hidden from the family an unbidden part of me withered away” (n.p.).

In her own notes on Kiyooka’s manuscript, Marlatt is clear about differentiating between Roy’s voice and a more fused mother/son voice. For example, lines like “Afterall Papa and I were among those who came here to begin a new life and to bear witness to each other’s foibles” are underlined and Marlatt has penciled in “too RK?” Similarly, she writes, “Roy Roy Roy” beside the line “Some people can only see the tragedy in their lives while others can’t see anything but how simple deeds and things shine radiantly in the everyday world” (Marlatt Papers). In these sections (and others) Kiyooka’s voice threatens to take over the narrative. Marlatt contends that, in the manuscript, “[Roy’s] voice was so present. It was so much his voice,” and “his voice was really coming in there.” She also suggests that, despite being made up of Mary’s stories, ultimately “this is Roy’s book” (Interview).

Kiyooka’s lyrical style makes the nostalgia in the manuscripts more romantic and more poignant than the tone expressed in the transcripts. For example, in the transcripts Mary says, “I miss Japan, my country. I love Japan. I miss Japan terribly. I miss Kochi my home town, my sweet home” (“Mrs. Kiyooka’s Tales” #3). However, both in the manuscripts and in the

⁶⁶ Kiyooka, Mariko, letter to Daphne Marlatt, May 11, 1994, Daphne Marlatt Papers, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

published version, similar emotions are expressed rather differently.

Kiyooka writes, “Who is it who goes on living in the house of memory but a once-immigrant mother” (99). He also refers to the image of the bamboo groves at several points in the narrative, thus making it a kind of refrain: “I want my kids to keep going back. How else will they know there’s a landscape etched on their hearts which got sown in a bamboo grove? There’s a landscape-of-the-heart you won’t locate in any geography book and I’m not about to let them forget it, not while I’m still alive” (160). Perhaps not surprisingly, the image of the bamboo grove is one he used as early as 1964 in Kyoto Airs, an early book that describes his visit to Japan to see his sister Mariko. In the poem “Departure” he writes, “I was going to say to you / that it is / raining, again / but remembered / saying it / before / that / the scraps of paper / on the grey concrete / remind me / of yellow leaves / fallen / in the bamboo grove / —back in Umagi / that / if it keeps coming down / you may as well leave... / but I / had already left” (n.p.). Similarly, in the manuscript Kiyooka writes, “as for me I’m nothing if not my father’s only beloved daughter. And that’s how come Tosa lies dormant in side of me like an unborn child and I can’t help it” (“B: Mother 5”). Again this turn of phrase can be traced back to an earlier collection of poetry, October Piebald Skies & Other Lacunae: “I am nothing if not my Kochi Mother’s beloved son.” (in Pacific Windows 283). This repetition not only shows the importance Kiyooka puts on origins and connections; it also connects the poetic style and voice of Mothertalk to much of his previous poetry.

There are moments in the manuscripts when it appears as though Kiyooka’s preoccupations subsume Mary’s own stories. For example, certain passages focus explicitly on the sense of doubleness—a hereness and a

thereness—at the root of the immigrant’s consciousness. A number of these additions are kept in the published version of the text. In the manuscripts and in Mothertalk, “Mary” says that Papa forgot his English on his death bed: “In his dreams his tongue was wagging in a bamboo grove in Umagi” (151). However, although she does refer to her husband’s death and his shouting in his Tosa dialect, there is no self-consciousness about what this might mean. In Kiyooka’s various rewritings, however, there are layers of meaning added to the original statement. For example, in “Mother 4” he adds “it was like a distant but familiar echo out of our Meiji past. Strange to think that on his death-bed Papa had all but forgotten his hard-earned English.” Similarly, in the manuscripts, “Mary” describes her friend Mr. Inagaki’s death in Tosa and how he had “passed away peacefully with the word ‘Boston’ on his lips” (169). In the transcripts, she simply states, “He is passed away now” (“Tale #9”). At one point, in a self-reflexive moment, “Mary” is made to comment on her own displacement: “We Issei women who have straddled the Pacific all our lives: we who will die anonymously in neither culture” (“:mother 2”). There is no such statement anywhere in the transcripts. All of these examples serve to foreground Kiyooka’s own preoccupations with the immigrant double-consciousness, which, although present in Mary’s stories, are nowhere as explicit as Kiyooka makes them in his own version. Whereas she offers concrete examples of loss—“Time has changed. There is no other way but to accept. Too bad.” (“Tale #4”)—he extrapolates from her descriptions in order to generalize about the broader immigrant experience of displacement.

Ironically, as much as the Mothertalk project is Kiyooka’s attempt to bridge the linguistic gap between mother and son, Mary could not have read the final version of Mothertalk. This is one of the effects of the kind of

“sequential collaboration” at work in this project. As Lejeune suggests, “pure memory or authentic collected speech is thus found to have two ‘subjects’ who support it: he who, fleetingly, at the time of the questioning, remembers and speaks, and he who listens, constructs the memory, and integrates it into the universe of the writing” (210). In this sense, then, Kiyooka “authors” his mother’s story. He takes her stories and transforms them through language to make them his own. Kiyooka acknowledges the irony of his position in all of his writing about his family and his relationship to Japan: “I found myself writing in a language my mother cannot read. So here I have written all these things, and a lot of it is about her” (“Inter-Face” 69).

If Kiyooka’s experiments with voice are one attempt to articulate his own sense of distance from his cultural inheritance, his lack of a clear narrative structure is another. He continually reorders his mother’s version of events so that there is no chronological order to his rewritings of the transcripts. He jumps around from event to event and shifts between different time periods so that past, present and future are interconnected. There is, as Marlatt explains in her introduction, “an obsessive return to certain motifs,” including Mary’s father’s samurai status, the picture brides that came to Canada from Japan, prostitution both in Japan and Canada, and the details of Mary’s own arranged marriage. However, within any given section, the narrative can jump from a description of Mary’s nephew Sumio’s wedding, to a memory of the prostitute district in Kochi, to Roy’s grasp of the Japanese language, to a nostalgia for Kochi-ben, to a description of the Tosa revolt, to Mariko’s gold teeth, to Mary’s arranged marriage, to the importance of “giri-ningou,” to a memory of her grandparents (“:Mother 2”). This jumpiness characterizes all the sections in the manuscripts.

The sense of repetition and circularity that is played up in Roy's manuscripts is also evident in Mary's own stories. Although Marlatt suggests that Mary's stories were originally chronological and told in sequence, Masutani's transcripts are, in fact, very repetitive. Mary returns over and over to certain major themes in her storytelling. For example, there is an almost obsessive return to her samurai father throughout the transcripts.⁶⁷ As she continually stresses the importance of her samurai background, her distinctive origins become the basis of her self-identification: "I'm not talking big. But my dad was something" ("Tale #6"); "a man of olden days was a real man" ("Tale #6"); "women from Tosa are different" ("Tale #7"); "Maybe this has something to do with my up-bringing, I was raised in a family of Shizoku. I was raised differently, although we were poor"; "Even in Edmonton, the man from Kishu told me, 'You looked a ordinary Japanese but something different about you.'" Mary also plays up the connection between her father and Roy in her tales: "[Roy's] a kind soul. He helps others in trouble, even he himself in trouble. I guess he inherited my dad disposition. He's like my dad....He was a real Samurai" ("Tale #8"). Kiyooka picks up on this focus and repetition in his own rewritings so that the hereditary line between his grandfather and himself takes on mythic significance.

This obsessive return and emphasis on circularity in the manuscripts clearly demonstrate Kiyooka's commitment to a process-poetics. The seriality of Kiyooka's version evokes both an openendedness and a connectedness that are lost in the final version of Mothertalk. The circularity implies that there is no beginning and end, that there is no finished version,

⁶⁷ Matsuki Masutani recalls Mary's concentrated focus on her father throughout the taped conversations. He suggests that this was because she was in the midst of dealings with his students about the resurrection of the monument in his honour. It was a topic very much on her mind (personal e-mail).

no discreet tale. Events and actions affect each other in a multitude of ways. Nicole Markotic explains that “seriality, not limited to prose writing, is engaged in narrative cosmology. It resists the causal, linear structure of most narratives, yet suggests the possibility of a system which links and reorganizes disparate pieces” (187). Kiyooka has said, “I’ve always been a serial artist. My books are always whole entities. They’re not made up of discrete things” (“Inter-Face” 74). Kiyooka is evidently working through the material as he goes along. In the process of rewriting the stories, his own memory is merging with what his mother said so that his narrative becomes a recreation of something he has no first-hand knowledge of. In the sections that outline the years of his own childhood in Calgary, he adds many more details than his mother provides in the transcripts.

In this respect, Kiyooka’s Mothertalk manuscript resembles Fred Wah’s reworking of material in so much of his own writing (including parts of Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh, Waiting for Saskatchewan, and Diamond Grill). The focus on rewriting foregrounds the process of self-discovery and emphasizes the notion that the poem is never finished. In Kiyooka’s manuscripts it is difficult to tell what drafts are more finished than others. In the “Afterword” to Pacific Windows Miki describes how Kiyooka was constantly rewriting his poems, constantly working through the material and his voice. Even after deciding not to rewrite the poems collected in Pacific Windows, he returns to them, editing them, over and over.⁶⁸ The circularity,

⁶⁸ Although not new at the time, the notion of seriality in poetry was best formulated by poets like Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser. Spicer maintained that “there is really no single poem” (61). For a discussion of the poets of the Berkeley Renaissance and their definitions of seriality, see Donald Allen and Warren Tallman’s The Poetics of the New American Poetry, Blaser’s The Collected Books of Jack Spicer, Peter Gizzi’s The House that Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer, and Joseph Conte’s Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry. The Tish poets that Kiyooka was associated with in Vancouver were influenced by Black Mountain poets like Spicer and Blaser.

repetition, and seriality of Kiyooka's manuscripts are related to his process of cultural recovery. The life-writing material is important for him to get down, yet the subject at the centre of each of the projects is obviously "unfinished." Just as Ondaatje writes his way through Sri Lanka (in the journal entries that interrupt the flow of Running in the Family), Marlatt weaves in diary and journal entries as well as letters throughout the narratives collected in Ghost Works, and Wah writes the process into his various "utaniki," Kiyooka maintains the activity of writing throughout the manuscripts and the sense of flux that inevitably accompanies it.

Kiyooka's emphasis on circularity also illustrates the oral nature of Mary's taped interviews. Because her tales are originally oral stories, they rely on different kinds of structures from written narratives. The transcripts that Kiyooka was working from contain various conversational markers and asides. For example, Mary tells Masutani, "I am jumping around a lot here," and later on the same tape, "I am jumping around a little bit" ("Tale #6"). The repetitive nature of Kiyooka's manuscripts echo his mother's own storytelling style. Walter Ong argues that oral stories rely more on "clusters" of events and themes in order to recall and reorganize memory, whereas literary thought places concepts and events in relative association thus implying a kind of developmental sequence or progression of events. One such "cluster" that reoccurs throughout the transcripts revolves around the connections between prostitution, picture brides, and Mary's own marriage arranged through a marriage broker (B: Mother 4). An oral performance is more fluid than a written text: each performance is a revision of a previous one; each tailors the telling to the specific situation and audience (Ong 60). Siemerling describes an oral performance as a repetition with displacement in

order to attain a particular effect (63). In one section of the transcripts Masutani has added a “translator’s note” explaining that “this is the story which appeared in other part of taped conversation, however the angle she talked about it is quite different” (“Mrs. Kiyooka’s Tales’ #3”). Kiyooka’s various attempts to rewrite the transcripts of his mother’s tapes and to capture the movement of her stories help to deconstruct a clear opposition between orality and literacy.

Kiyooka’s search for a mother tongue that blends his own voice with his mother’s, coupled with the seemingly endless detours and repetitions in his manuscripts, are intimately related to his negotiation of his own cross-cultural identifications. Miki suggests that for Kiyooka “the opening of the expansive cultural space [Japan], in turn, led to a more comprehensive awareness of his own hybrid cultural formation. Coming to maturity in that interstitial space between language and place, he began to understand his “i” in the wily figure of the ‘Japanese/Canadian’” (Pacific Windows 310). The exploration of his family roots and the negotiation of thereness and hereness in Mothertalk and the bridging of places and languages allow Kiyooka fertile ground for his own self reflection. In the final poem in the collection Kyoto Airs, Kiyooka explains his role as cross-cultural poet: “I am a Canadian painter / come home to pay homage / to ancestors, samurais among them: / whose honour was the slit abdomen, / whose women hoarded famine rice to / stuff into their children’s mouth, / whose children’s children gad about/in red high heels, twisting to Ray Charles” (n.p.). The curiosity about heredity and connection as well as with difference and alienation that infuses so much of Kiyooka’s poetry is filtered into his Mothertalk project. He mines the “Japanese material” as a way of expressing dimensions of his self. Miki

argues that for Kiyooka “writing also became the most effective mode of articulating the personal, familial, and communal conditions of being Japanese Canadian” (“Inter-Face” 57-8). In writing, Kiyooka confronts the manifestations of conflicts and confluence between his Canadian-born mind and his Japanese ancestry.⁶⁹

Like both Ondaatje and Marlatt in Running in the Family and Ghost Works, in the manuscripts of Mothertalk Kiyooka attempts to evoke and explore his links to a parental figure as a way of investigating his own complex identity as a second generation Japanese-Canadian. Kiyooka is distanced both from his parents’ homeland and from Canada. As Miki suggests, the Nisei are “a generation formed on the consciousness of doubleness: growing up between the ethnocultural and linguistic enclave of the issei (first generation immigrants from Japan) and the Anglo-Saxon ‘westernized’ democratic values of the Canadian majority” (“Asiancy” 111). Mary’s stories about being forced out of her job and home during WWII, moving from Calgary to Opal, Alberta, and being declared enemy aliens to the Canadian state, provide Kiyooka with a context for his “Letter to Lucy Fumi,” in which he addresses the sense of loss tied up with his own experience of displacement:

I was but a few months into Grade 10 when Pearl Harbour happened. Needless to say it abruptly ended my education and our plain city life. I had the obscure feeling that something formless dark and stealthy had fallen upon me during my sleep but when I awoke nothing outward seemed to have changed, even though my childhood friends

⁶⁹ In the 1960s Kiyooka abandoned the abstract painting that he considered removed from his “real” self in favour of photography and poetry that, he said, allowed him to “plum the depths of [my] unplummed self.” He never went back to painting.

began to fall away from me. I might add that it's a loss I've never fully recovered from. (187)

He continues, "To this day I would swear that I was more an innocent victim than any 'yellowperil'" (190). This sense of enforced displacement and the shifting sense of an "I" negotiating both the "Japanese" and the "Canadian" aspect of a Japanese-Canadian identity complicate any straightforward sense of belonging or the voicing of experience.

Mary's stories provide her son with something intangible: a context for exploring his multiple belongings and his cultural inheritance, including his own Bushido spirit. In her article "The Sacredness of Bridges," Janice Kulyk Keefer describes the difference between actual and conceptual immigrants whom she defines respectively as "those who can still feel the weight of the suitcases in their hands, and those who reflect on what that weight must have been like, or who hear, and perhaps write down the stories that describe that weight so it becomes palpably real to others" (100). The process of writing down—the making public—of these stories also makes the weight real, not only to others, but to the self, the artist. Kulyk Keefer argues that "to undergo physical and cultural displacement and to image or conceptualize this displacement are both experiential activities, but they are different. It's not that the former is always more authentic, more real and significant than the latter, but that it cannot be articulated and communicated without the latter" (100). Kiyooka's additions to and rewritings of the transcripts stress his own preoccupations with language and an ever-shifting image of a

“Japan” that comes alive primarily through the memories of his mother.⁷⁰ In his manuscripts Kiyooka acts as much more than a transcriber or even filter for his mother’s stories; he is an active producer of them.

IV. The “Arc of a Life”

The fact that Daphne Marlatt is a poet, novelist, autobiographer, and oral historian, as well as Kiyooka’s ex-partner and good friend, made her a logical choice as the editor of Mothertalk. Faced with the complexities of Kiyooka’s manuscript, she is forced to bring the preoccupations of all of her roles to bear on her editorial choices. As we have seen, she is a writer who is profoundly interested in history, specifically in the rewriting of traditional history. She is preoccupied with who has the power to write history and how that history is written. An important part of her rewriting of alternate “herstories” is focused on different ways of telling, weaving, doubling back, and her rejection of plot, linearity, and chronology.⁷¹ In Readings from the Labyrinth, she quotes Rachel Blau DuPlessis who argues “syntax in poetry is like narrative in novels—the place where ideology and values are found” (141). Much of her writing explores the tension between the need for the teleological “coming to voice” narrative in order to challenge or resist the dominant narrative of power and her own need to question the language and

⁷⁰ There are a number of very private stories that Kiyooka leaves out of his manuscripts for obvious reasons. There are also several examples of Mary’s own prejudices that get deleted from the text. The version Kiyooka creates of his mother is one that is obviously filtered through his own nostalgic longings for a place and a past that he does not (cannot) know first-hand.

⁷¹ For example, both the form and content of Marlatt’s novel Ana Historic foreground the idea of fragmentation and anti-linearity. The protagonist Ana rejects her husband’s documentary approach to his research in favor of a more fragmented approach—a kind of piecing together. The epigraph to Ana Historic reads, “The assemblage of facts in a tangle of hair.” And the narrator insists that “a book of interruptions is not a novel.”

form of that narrative. It is this tension that she draws out in the expanded text of Mothertalk.

It is interesting to examine briefly how this same tension gets played out in Marlatt's earlier work, particularly in her writing about the small fishing village of Steveston, British Columbia. Steveston Recollected: A Japanese-Canadian History was published in 1975. It is part of the Aural History series of the Provincial Archives of British Columbia.⁷² Marlatt is credited for "editing and secondary translation." Like Mothertalk, the text is based on a series of transcriptions from tapes of interviews with Japanese-Canadian fishermen and their families in Steveston. The introduction claims that the text "is not a history of Steveston in the conventional sense. Rather, it is an attempt to understand the role of the Japanese-Canadians in this community through the words and thoughts of the Japanese-Canadians themselves" (xiii). The emphasis is on offering a history that "expands the limits of historical documentation" (xiii) and on rescuing—or salvaging—silenced voices. Although the reader does inevitably get some of Marlatt's subjective response to the place and its people, it is clear that the purpose of the book is to provide its readers with "an intimate view of Steveston through the real voices of the Japanese-Canadians" (xiii). In other words, the purpose of the project is to allow the people of Steveston to voice their own stories.

In contrast to the chronological shape of her oral history, in her poetic project Steveston (1974, 1985), Marlatt makes use of the information gathered in Steveston but reframes the idea of local history so that the text becomes a

⁷² Marlatt also wrote another book for the B.C. Provincial Archives, Opening Doors: Vancouver's East End. Her work with the archives demonstrates her intense commitment to alternate forms of history and to the voicing of previously silenced stories.

kind of archaeological project.⁷³ In this long poem, Marlatt is drawn both to the local place but also to how that space is mapped or constructed textually. There is a shift in conception and content from the earlier text. In Steveston the focus is less on other people's stories (the fishermen and cannery workers) and more on her own impressions of the people and the place. She admits that her poems express both her observations of the place as well as the fact of being "taken" by the place. She realizes that she cannot extricate her self from the subject of the poems:

But the poem exists in continuing time - in the time it takes to read it, we recreate the forward-streaming of its sentences, its thought, all that it touches upon. In its associations spilling over linebreaks, in its rhythms that breathe the writer's coming to 'see' (understand), the sentence (and the reader-listener following the sentence) spills out of separateness as one sentence spills into the next and a river spills into the sea: the erotic flow of issuance, arrival in the connected here-and-now, is re-enacted in each reading. (94)

Although the poet goes to Steveston "seeking to perceive it as it stands,"⁷⁴ she perceives instead a layered reality in which the past and present blend.

Throughout the poem the desire to document the place becomes overshadowed by an increasing self-consciousness about the documentary project. The more she gets involved with the place, the less she can actually say about it without also writing herself into the landscape. In her diaries

⁷³ I am using the term "archaeological" in the sense that the Canadian writer-critic Robert Kroetsch uses it to describe the kind of reframing of local history that he tackles in his own writing, particularly in his long poems. His sense of archaeology is related to his idea of "unhiding the hidden," or stripping away layers of ideology (both British and American) to uncover something distinctly "Canadian." In Marlatt's poetry, archaeology also evokes a kind of layered reality—the idea that the past inheres in the presently seen.

⁷⁴ This line from James Agee serves as the epigraph to the collection.

from the time, she writes that she has to “get at the otherness of the place, on its own terms—which involves not objectivity (scientific method) but subjectivity—one’s own connecting with that other subjectivity.” She calls her poems “a collaboration”: “the poems encounter—my speech encountering theirs, my reality colliding with theirs (my view with theirs).”⁷⁵ As Frank Davey observes, “history in these poems becomes both personal and contemporary; the ‘political’ implications of the facts Marlatt discovers reach into both her life and the reader’s” (“From There” 195). She acknowledges that the place is constantly shifting, so that the project becomes a kind of story of the writing of the story. Her preoccupation is with the language—the “how”—as opposed to merely the “what.”⁷⁶

The distinction between these two Steveston projects sheds interesting light on Marlatt’s editorial choices for Mothertalk. The two texts demonstrate the complex relationship between, on the one hand, an oral history project and, on the other, a poetic project, a relationship that is at the heart of the expanded text of Mothertalk.⁷⁷ Although Marlatt’s final version of Mothertalk acknowledges Kiyooka’s voice by keeping his language intact, she decides against his experimentation with narrative form in favour of a more traditional, linear account of Mary Kiyooka’s life story. These are

⁷⁵ Marlatt, Daphne. Notebook, ts. Daphne Marlatt Papers. National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

⁷⁶ An examination of the expanded text of Mothertalk must, necessarily, take into consideration the “how” as well as the “what.” This focus is contrasted to what Boyce Davies argues is Albert Stone’s main preoccupation in his study of collaboration in recent black autobiography where he argues that “what has happened in this life is more immediately compelling that how it is being communicated and by whom” (in Davies 4). Marlatt’s concerns in her poetic project Steveston and her documentary project Steveston seem to be in tension with one another.

⁷⁷ This is not to suggest that oral history and literature don’t have things in common. As we have seen, the idea of narrative—of the ordering imperative—is important in both. However, I think it is possible to see a distinction in purpose, focus and expectation in Marlatt’s two projects.

difficult choices for Marlatt. Much of Marlatt's correspondence about Mothertalk, with Masutani, family members, and publishers, focuses on the shape or order of the manuscripts and how best to present Mary's stories. Her final decision to reorganize the stories in a chronological order was, according to Marlatt "a very difficult dilemma" (Interview). In a letter to Michael Ondaatje, Marlatt writes, "My intro. talks about what i've done with the ms. as it stood when Roy died, but basically i un-wove and re-wove the stories into a more narrative progression keeping his words & adding some more details from the original transcripts. i'm pleased with it, it seems to be a very moving story of a life with an astonishing historical sweep to it" [emphasis added].⁷⁸

Ultimately, Marlatt chooses to emphasize the historical impulse behind Mary's story. Although she admits that she is not a "disinterested editor," her main purpose is to get Mary's story told. Her project is to give a shape to Mary's story that allows for a platform or a context from which to explore an Issei woman's life. Her task is to rescue a previously marginalized voice from silence and to see what it has to say about Canada, community, family. In her introduction Marlatt emphasizes her own role in the project as being very minimal; her main objective is to write herself out of the narrative. Marlatt admits, "I also wanted the stories to retain their oral feel in the way they spin off one another, much as Mary's conversation did....As a result, there are only a handful of my own linking words within the narrative itself" (6). For Marlatt the project is most clearly about the responsibility of voicing a silenced herstory.

⁷⁸ Daphne Marlatt, letter to Michael Ondaatje, 16 May 1997, Daphne Marlatt Papers, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa.

While maintaining Kiyooka's lyrical style and blend of voices, Marlatt therefore makes chronology the central focus of the final version of Mothertalk. She admits to changing significantly the order of the manuscripts as she found them because Kiyooka's final version "had abandoned the chronologically specific nature of the original interviews for a free-floating succession of stories that jumped around in time and place" and states that she "opted for a more conservative approach and carefully unwove the stories that he had rewoven, establishing when each occurred and what it stood in relation to" (5-6). Her aim as final editor, she says was to provide readers with a "sense of the overall arc of Mary's life" (5). By unweaving Kiyooka's narrative and giving a sequential order to Mary's story, Marlatt attempts to restore to Mary's story the sense that events in her life occurred for a reason, that one thing inevitably leads to another, and that there is a causal relationship between the separate events that constitute a life. As Marlatt tells Egan and Helms, "To understand the depth of an immigrant experience you have to know what the immigrant has come from" (Interview).

Marlatt's decisions about structuring and organizing the material inevitably set up certain reader expectations. As the editors of Interpreting Women's Lives affirm, "the narrative form a writer gives to a life necessarily involves her sense of the purpose for which her or another's story is told and is responsive to her notions of audience" (99). Certain kinds of narratives legitimate and authorize more than others. The teleological narrative of development is such a narrative. In her analysis of historical accounts of national literatures, Linda Hutcheon suggests that literary histories and national self-imaginings take on a distinct shape in order to confer a level of

cultural authority. These narratives work to create a “sense of continuity between past and present, usually with an eye to promoting cultural consensus” (4). According to Hutcheon, even in more recent interventionist literary histories, teleological narrative “stubbornly persists” (5) despite the move away from the framework of nineteenth-century romantic nationalism. Just as many previously marginalized groups are coming to voice, argues Hutcheon, the underlying assumptions behind historical models (narratives of development) are being challenged. In spite of this “bad timing” (9), Hutcheon suggests that marginalized groups, although fully aware of the ideological limits of such a model of literary history, “may still want to tell that once powerful story of progress, to get it on the record once and for all” (9). Previously disenfranchised groups are drawn by the “potent combination of the nostalgic impact of origins (the founding moment) and the linear utopian projection (into the future) that informs the narrative model of continuity and evolution” (11).

This sense of empowerment has traditionally been associated with immigrant autobiographical narratives, so that attempts to deconstruct these narratives are often met with suspicion. As Craig Tapping suggests, many North American ethnic minority writers are motivated by “an autobiographical impulse—the desire to name experience and to create identity, to emerge from the dominant language and gaze of ‘non-ethnic’ America” (286). Joseph Pivato expresses his distrust of postmodern or deconstructivist readings of ethnic minority writings. Just as the developmental and teleological narrative is a self-conscious choice for a number of marginalized groups, Pivato argues that the realist, experiential immigrant narrative constitutes an ideological practice for many writers and

that the reluctance to abandon the conventions of classic realism is as much a political position as a literary tendency. According to Pivato, questions of authority and authenticity are crucial to a study of ethnic minority literature:

As immigrants and the children of immigrants these authors were speaking for the first time about their communities; in many cases they were the only speakers from these groups and so, willing or not, they have become the authority voices for these immigrant communities.

(153)

Pivato recognizes that, in the past, ethnic minority writing has been dismissed as too sociological but argues that “the biographical dimension increases rather than diminishes the literary value of their work” (158). He states that, despite critical attempts to describe ethnic texts as postmodern or fractured or split, “the conventions of literary realism are the ones that lend themselves most easily to the storytelling of ethnic minority groups. Conventional narrative permits the minority writer to tell the story in the most direct manner and to develop characters who exercise some form of agency. It is this agency that allows writers to critique the social values of both the old and the new country” (159).

Although Pivato is referring to fictional works by ethnic minority writers, his point is also illuminating when considering life-writing; the choice of a linear narrative is a deliberate one.⁷⁹ Lisa Lowe describes how, traditionally, immigrant narratives were linear and developmental in shape ending or culminating in a sense of belonging within the new nation. Jinqi

⁷⁹ John Paul Eakin says that it is possible to underestimate the significance of chronology as a structure of reference in autobiographical narrative in general. He points to writings by Paul Ricoeur, Avrom Fleishman and Janet Varner Gunn that posit a “phenomenological correlation between the temporal structure of autobiography and what they take to be the essential narrativity of human experience” (xii).

Ling adds that these narratives undoubtedly served an important purpose. He suggests that any attack on developmental narratives is an attack on a crucial stage in subject formation: “the critique of developmentalism casts in doubt almost all forms of identity formation, of the pursuit of objectivity, or of the struggle of social progress” (4).⁸⁰ Legitimation and authorization are embedded in experiential narratives and in the recuperation of the author and the exercise of his or her authority as a voice in and for the community (160). Voicing this experience can be seen as an exercise in agency.⁸¹

The responsibility inherent in experiential or “coming to voice” narratives helps to account for Marlatt’s decision to “unweave” Kiyooka’s more circular and repetitive narrative. She tells Egan and Helms: “I finally decided, well, it wasn’t just Roy’s story, it was preeminently Mary’s story. This was the project he had taken on, was to record her life story, and that it wasn’t doing her life story a service to publish it in the form it was in” (Interview). Marlatt is intensely aware of the danger of losing Mary’s voice. Perhaps because of Mary Kiyooka’s positioning as a woman from a marginalized group, Marlatt takes very seriously the responsibility of getting

⁸⁰ As Hutcheon concludes about interventionist literary histories, “if the historical narratives of some of today’s minoritized literatures do indeed look similar to those nineteenth-century narratives of nationhood, therefore, it may be because the respective groups’ political as well as scholarly needs may not be so very different” (25). She argues that the goal is more utopian than nostalgic.

⁸¹ This position put forward so forcefully by Pivato is challenged not only by the authors in this study but also by a wide range of critics of “ethnic minority writing.” For example, in her article “Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?” Sau-Ling Wong rejects a number of the assumptions that Pivato’s arguments are based on. She celebrates the accomplishments of a text like *The Woman Warrior* and argues that “the most fundamental freedom of all that *The Woman Warrior* has wrested from a priori generic categories and cultural prescriptions is the freedom to create in literature a sui generis Chinese-American reality” (272). For Wong, the kind of cultural authenticity that Pivato seems to be calling for is not a valid possibility. Immigrant experiences are too varied to be so handedly categorized. In her article “Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definitions and Approach,” Wong suggests that “immigrant autobiography can no longer be conceived of as an unalterably demarcated segment of reality with a single set of inherent features” (308).

her story out. Her decisions are undoubtedly founded on her own immigrant consciousness and her large body of work, creative and critical, that focuses on the workings of the immigrant imagination.

In Mothertalk Marlatt maps out Mary's life beginning with her childhood in Kochi city and her strong ties to her childhood home. The "Table of Contents" charts the order of her life in a way that actually reinforces the idea of journey, and the notion of a "hereness" and a "thereness" implicit in an immigrant's story. The first section, which Marlatt entitles "My Heart's True Country," records Mary's nostalgic celebration of Japan. Her story thus begins with the idea of return, the idea of "going back." In the first paragraph she writes, "O I live well enough and I do whatever my old bod lets me do but my true wish is to go back to Tosa one last time" (13). Similarly, the final section, entitled "Landscape-of-the-Heart," is an evocation of her "true" home. The story in-between is one of adjustment in spite of the difficulties and the various hardships she endures (two world wars, the depression, forced relocation). The overall narrative traces her childhood and early adulthood in Tosa, the boat journey to Canada, her visits back to Japan, her many moves within Canada, and includes her description of the members of her large and varied family.

Tied up with the narrative pattern that Marlatt adopts are what Tapping calls the traditional expectations of ethnic literatures in North America: "personal and communal identity, recollection of the homeland, and response to this 'new' world" (285). In her introduction Marlatt suggests that the text is Kiyooka's great gift to his mother because of its impulse to document a generation's struggle:

The interplay of the accidental and the chosen, the purely personal and the massively historical, moving through a life delicately balanced with hope and regret, is his tribute, not only to her individual will to survive the depersonalizing effects of racism....It is also his tribute to the collective will within the Issei community to survive on just those terms the shattering events and prolonged after-effects of World War Two in Canada. (8)

All these things are true to Mary's stories. They describe the life of an immigrant woman who overcomes tremendous hardships to raise a family of seven children through the depression and two world wars. As such, the narrative can be read as a valuable commentary on a bitter segment of Canadian history and it is a testament to the survival strategies of a strong and powerful woman. It raises questions about the role of class, race, ethnicity, and gender in the construction of the immigrant woman's "Canadian" identity and it speaks volumes about the racist assumptions governing Canadian immigration policy. It offers the story of an immigrant woman who, "straddles both sides of the Pacific anonymous in both" ("mother 2")—and it is a useful and powerful testament to her life struggles.

Marlatt also adds a more public dimension to Mary's stories by dedicating the book to "the Issei women of Mary Kiyooka's generation," and, in her introduction she describes Mary's link to a generation of Japanese-Canadian women:

And yet this is not just the story of an extraordinary woman. As Mary keeps reminding us, she is an Issei, a first-generation Japanese immigrant to Canada. She is keenly aware of belonging to a scattered and now passing community, one that felt the brunt of hostilities

against them as “Enemy Aliens.” They are a generation of survivors, and she is proud of them, even as she elegizes the hardships they experienced. (2)

This dedication reinforces the shared nature of the story and contextualizes (and naturalizes) Mary’s voice within a community of like voices. However, after reading the manuscripts, including the transcripts of Mary’s taped interviews, I see the dedication to the Issei women of Mary’s generation and the emphasis on her as a voice for the Japanese-Canadian community as Marlatt’s attempt to give Mary’s story a particular shape. In fact, throughout the manuscript, Mary distances herself from the larger Japanese-Canadian community. In the transcripts of the interviews she says, “No, no, I don’t have anything to do with it” (“Mrs. Kiyooka—Pearl Harbour”). She admits that, because of her family’s location on the prairies as opposed to the coastal areas, she and her husband never really forged deep ties to the larger Japanese-Canadian community. Kiyooka picks up on and reinforces these sentiments when he rewrites the transcripts in his manuscript: “when Papa and I left the West Coast in the early 20’s we were never again past of the larger JC community” (“:mother 2”). He also clarifies his mother’s distinction between the “Flat land” and the West Coast, suggesting that Mary and Papa were “outsiders in a community we didn’t belong to in the first place” (“:mother 2”). Masutani says that part of Roy’s larger project was to give a “more balanced documentation of Japanese Canadian (JC) experience” (personal e-mail).

Marlatt’s decision to highlight the notion of a collective voice and common experience is one shared by a number of editors of Issei women’s life stories. The “arc” of Mary’s particular story can be traced in a range of

collections of Issei oral history. For example, in the introduction to The Issei: Portrait of a Pioneer, Eileen Sarasohn describes the scope of her text which echoes Marlatt's project:

This is an oral history that documents the collective experience of the Issei from early life in Japan and the formulation of their dream of coming to America to the reality of facing discrimination, finding work, weathering the Depression and the shock of World War II, coping with life in relocation camp, and finally, returning to pick up the pieces of their lives with the perseverance and dignity with which they began. (5)

The "Table of Contents" for the book Japanese Americans: The Formation and Transformations of an Ethnic Group is similarly ordered, beginning with chapters entitled "Japanese Americans and Ethnicity" and "The Japan they Left," tracing the development of the Issei within America through the war, and ending with a chapter on "Since World War II." The section on Issei women in Japanese American Women is also structured on the developmental model beginning with "Immigration" and ending with "The War Years and Beyond." In each of these texts there are photographs documenting each of the segments of a life. Emphasis is put on the voices of Issei women and on the idea that the purpose of their stories is to break a silence in a profound and more general way.

V. Mothertalk as Biotext

As Mothertalk makes clear, the shape or form of an autobiographical narrative clearly sets up reader expectations. Mark Sanders argues that narrative form itself operates as an independent signifier; as a product of long-standing literary conventions—the naturalized impulse toward

linearity, the demand for continuity from moment to moment, the drive toward formal resolution, and so on—it necessarily encodes, perhaps embodies, and ultimately transmits cultural presuppositions and ideological biases capable of creating or redirecting meaning for the text as a whole. (446)

In collaborative life stories, or autobiographical stories that have a number of different authors, particular attention must be paid to the ruptures between form and content. The expanded text of Mothertalk allows for such a consideration. The shifts in focus and perspective that mark each stage of its production are what make Mothertalk such a fascinating example of a biotext.

Grouped together with Kiyooka's "Mothertalk" Series in his papers in Vancouver is an unpublished manuscript called "Autograph '91" which provides an important intertext to the manuscripts. Written about the same time that he was rewriting the Mothertalk material, this short collection of poems shares a number of the same preoccupations as his Mothertalk series and it gives clues to the concerns that shaped it. It too is written in a circular and repetitive pattern; it is constantly in flux, always changing, never settling. Most of the poems have the same content, approached from different angles; it is reshuffled and reintegrated in different ways. Kiyooka appeals to the workings of memory throughout the collection: "o / memory how the mind turns / back on itself to see where it must go." He also focuses on continuity—on the idea of heredity and generations as links. As in the Mothertalk series, he makes connections, both between himself and his mother and between different generations: "It was / his mother come home / from work / who could take his pain / into her arms / & there it would lie / as if it were hers." He also addresses his daughter, "o marike, you walk as

your grandfather does!" There is also an emphasis on dislocation and displacement, on uprootedness caused by systemic racism. He refers to Pearl Harbour as "the end of my youth and the beginning of a world i did not know how to put together again for nearly twenty years" (n.p.). In the midst of upheaval however, Kiyooka insists on the importance of finding or creating a sense of home from within rather than claiming one that is external. Personal memories, stories, and family all offer a sense of connection and belonging that can be woven into a sense of self and given literary expression.

It is this insistence on voicing experience while interrogating his own positioning that permeates Kiyooka's writing. If we define a biotext as a performative text of life-writing that is in process—a text that insists on representing a subject position as well as challenging the very tools of that representation—Kiyooka's Mothertalk manuscript constitutes an important example. Like Running in the Family and Ghost Works it is a text in which the biographical impulse is intimately related to a sense of self-discovery. Through their complex processes of cultural recovery, through their negotiation of a there in a here, these authors attempt to illuminate their own lives through the reconstruction of a parental figure's life-story. Marlatt refers to this writer as a "lost self or ghost self" who is "tied to a language that is not the language of her intellect" (Readings 36). In his manuscripts Kiyooka attempts to write into language his lost self or ghost self. And although this self is intimately connected to his mother's language and her stories, ultimately the self he explores is his own.

What is clearly more fully articulated in the final version of Mothertalk is the story of an Issei woman. Marlatt shifts the emphasis from Kiyooka's

ghost self to the arc of Mary's life and gives it its historical scope. The result is that, though it is an evocative story and an illuminating portrait, Mothertalk cannot capture the process of cultural recovery at work in Kiyooka's manuscripts. And yet Marlatt is highly conscious of the editorial decisions she makes. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the complexities involved in weaving a life story are everywhere present in her own writing. In her essay "Representation and Fictionalysis" Marlatt suggests that "to write a whole autobiography, i mean autobiography in its largest sense of self writing life, not the life of a unified self but the life a writing self writes its way to, is to reach for what is almost unwritable" (126). This is the struggle Kiyooka confronts in his manuscript. As an editor, however, Marlatt made it her responsibility to foreground the more historical, more tangible aspects of Mary's life. Nonetheless, it is her acute sensitivity to the interconnections of autobiography, fiction and theory that explain the gaps and fissures that erupt even in the final version of Mothertalk. Marlatt allows the expanded text to become a merging of voices. Kiyooka's ghost writing is in tension with Marlatt's emphasis on Mary's story. The result is that binaries—of self and other, biography and autobiography, literature and ethnography, theory and fiction, public and private—are both illuminated and complicated.

Like Running in the Family and Ghost Works, Mothertalk demands new, more active, reading strategies and critical frameworks that recognize the multiple ghost stories that haunt it. The need for new critical perspectives is perhaps even more crucial for the text that is the subject of the next chapter, Fred Wah's Diamond Grill. Diamond Grill illustrates how the biotext has evolved in the last decade and a half. The subject in this text is performative, polyvocal, and constantly shifting. Although Wah explores his father's

identity as a Chinese-Canadian and traces his movements from Canada to China and back to Canada, this “Chineseness” does not offer him the kind of belonging (however ambivalent) that Ondaatje, Marlatt, and Kiyooka explore in different ways in their narratives. In fact, because of his mixed background, Wah finds movement and fluidity an antidote to the kind of “fixing” that the notion of cultural belonging necessarily implies. Instead of claiming any one set of stories, in Diamond Grill, Wah confronts the challenge of writing the self as a subject in flux.

Chapter 5.
The Politics and Poetics of Identity:
"Faking it" in Diamond Grill

I. Introduction

Like the other works we have looked at in this study, Diamond Grill is an almost impossible text to define generically. It is, at least in part, the story of Fred Wah as a teenager in the 1950s in Nelson, British Columbia. It shares the autobiographical impulse of Running in the Family, Ghost Works, and Mothertalk, in the sense that it attempts to represent the fragments of a life being lived. It also traces the various branches of Wah's family tree, with a particular emphasis on his father. And, as with Ondaatje, Marlatt, and Kiyooka, for Wah, the process of self-representation is complicated by the fact that the subject will not stay still. Wah's family's history of multiple displacements, the interweaving of different places in their lives, and their criss-crossings of the Canadian prairies emphasize the fact that they are very much subjects in motion. The racial mix of his parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and children also resists any attempt at categorization.

A third generation Canadian, Wah's experience of displacement is derived partly from the stories of his parents and grandparents' experiences as immigrants and migrants and from his own mixed blood background and movements across the Canadian west. His father, who was raised in China, was of Chinese-Scots-Irish descent. His mother, who was born in Sweden, was raised in Swift Current, Saskatchewan. Unlike first generation immigrant writers such as Ondaatje and Marlatt who are compelled to travel "home," and who journey back in the search for a sense of belonging and community, and whose texts mediate between a "here" and a "there" ("I was running to

Asia and everything would change" [Ondaatje 16]), Wah makes tangible a long (albeit fractured and disrupted) history that is grounded in the prairies and the interior of British Columbia.⁸² Unlike Kiyooka who uses an idea of "Japan" as the source for his imaginative recreation of a sense of belonging, in Diamond Grill Wah questions the possibility of forging such connections by exploring the varying degrees of the legacy of displacement through the lives of his grandfather and father and its effects on him as both a child and an adult. Thus although Diamond Grill is like Running in the Family, Ghost Works, and Mothertalk, which all involve the writing of a life in relation to a parent's life, in that it traces Wah's complex relationship with his father, throughout this process, Wah however recognizes that their relationship—and, in fact, all the relationships he explores—are marked by difference as well as sameness. Like those other texts, Diamond Grill is about the evocation of a childhood past and an exploration of family roots and origins; however, it is mostly a text about questioning connections and about Wah's own ambivalence about belonging.⁸³

Wah's primary interest in the construction of identity is from the perspective of a person of mixed race or, as he says, "from a blood quantum point of view" ("Half-Bred" 60). He is also aware that identity is always in

⁸² In his poetic diary Grasp the Sparrow's Tail (which was later reprinted in Waiting for Saskatchewan) Wah does "return" to China and the text is a charting of his trip there. Throughout his visit to China he catches glimpses of his father doing tai-chi in a park, riding a bicycle, on a train. This text is certainly about making connections and, as Charlene Diehl-Jones suggests, "extend[ing] his notion of home" (408). In his latest book Faking It, Wah also includes diary entries about a trip to China that he took to learn more about contemporary Chinese poetry.

⁸³ The level of self-conscious theorizing in this text distinguishes it from the other texts in this study. Although Wah's critical, theoretical and creative work certainly blend together in much of his writing, it is impossible to underestimate the extent of his theoretical and critical activity in a Canadian literary context. His six "Poetics" essays are all expressions of his theories on language, race, cultural difference, and ethnicity and, as such, they constitute an extremely important body of critical writings. His latest book Faking It is part of Newest Press' "Writer as Critic" series.

process, always shifting. Thus the act of articulating Wah's family's relationship to the past necessitates an awareness of the self as neither whole nor unified, but rather performative, in flux. In his "Acknowledgments," Wah calls Diamond Grill a series of "poses" or "postures" that result from the act of "faking it" (n.p.). "When you're not pure," says Wah in his poetic diary "Grasp the Sparrow's Tale," "you just make it up" (Waiting 43). In Running in the Family, Ghost Works, and Mothertalk, there is a sense that one's identity is articulated, at least in part, by performing a series of roles depending on where one comes from or where one is (Canada, England, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Japan). These texts are based on the stories these authors tell themselves of their pasts in order to make sense of who they are and there is a recognition of the constructedness of representations in all three texts. Marlatt acknowledges how gender is, in some ways, constructed by language and she explores how both she and her mother have to perform certain roles that are expected of them. Kiyooka too writes about being labeled "Japanese" during WW II without himself really identifying with that aspect of himself. Part of his purpose in Mothertalk is arguably to inhabit his "Japanese" self and to change English into "inglish" to better reflect his stages of maneuvering through language. However, in Diamond Grill the emphasis on performance is brought to the surface of the text in an even more self-conscious way and the process of role-playing is presented not only as a strategy for self-understanding, but as a political necessity, a crucial act of survival.

The politics of "faking it" are crucial to an understanding of Wah's writing because he resists being fixed or categorized as "other" in any stable way. Resistance for Wah comes from not being pure anything, from eluding

other people's categories altogether, and challenging the motives behind their construction. He brings to the surface of his work the contestation over the construction of identities and draws attention to the social nature of this project. The subject is located within the specificities of his or her social relations and these contexts have to be carefully and critically maneuvered through. Hence, an individual's relationship to the local becomes crucially important as a way of resisting becoming absorbed into the status quo. Wah explains the context that shapes his individual "performance":

My hybridity obliges me to locate by difference, not sameness. My sense of place has become informed by distinctive features, particulars, sometimes minute particulars. In fact, the landscape of this large and hypothetical country seems to me best known and valorized by the singular....Place therefore seems specific and particular. Where one is, here, is who one is, albeit contaminated at times by the sledgehammer tactics of the Wasp hive. ("Strangle Two" 47)

For Wah the process of faking it is the only way to truly live the ambivalence that his mixed-race background demands. It allows him to articulate both his sometimes-complicity with a system that "others" him as well as his sometimes-resistance to that same system. By focusing on performance, Wah shows how he is more than a sum of his parts; he performs all of his parts at different times and in different places.

In Diamond Grill Wah is able to capture in writing this tension between the fluidity of subjectivity and the particulars of the local. The text offers an intensely evocative account of a small town and, more specifically, the Chinese-Canadian diner owned by Wah's father in Nelson, B.C., the Diamond Grill. By depicting aspects of his life in minute detail and by contextualizing it

all within the extremely personal and singular site of the cafe, Wah attempts to tease out the various layers of the “stain of memory” and capture “a kind of heterocellular recovery” that “reverberates through the busy body” (1). Throughout Diamond Grill he examines different, sometimes competing, aspects of his own identity, including his relationship to his family (his parents, grandparents, and children), to his “Chineseness,” (including his relationship to language and to food), to the prairies and the interior of British Columbia, and to the Canadian state.

At the same time, Wah tells Ashok Mathur that he doesn't want his text to settle anything (97). Textually, Wah explores the shifting and often conflicting elements of his mixed race background by weaving a number of narrative threads that necessarily overlap and intersect and recur throughout the text making patterns of repetition and resisting narrative closure. The seemingly haphazard piecing together of the text reflects the complex processes involved in the reconstruction of the past. Throughout Diamond Grill Wah moves through the voices of different characters, exploring their thoughts and emotions, so that the past is filtered through the present in a self-conscious way. Although Wah rejects a narrative based on the past alone, he also rejects the notion of a pure present because the past is always influencing the present. By stressing fluidity, he allows for a play of language throughout his text. As a result, the narrative threads that run through the text, the different voices that interrupt one another, and the juxtaposition of historical documents and excerpts from magazines and history books all serve to undermine the authority of a single account of the past. The biotext, with its dual focus on the details that make up a life and on the complexities of writing a life, allows Wah to examine the various determinants of his own

identity, while simultaneously foregrounding the discursive elements of subject formation (by emphasizing the role of language in competing constructions of history).

Diamond Grill thus allows for a more flexible account of subject formation and representation. Wah calls texts like Diamond Grill “krinopoeic,” because they “animate the boundary condition of writing as exploration and discernment, a liminal picking out for oneself” (“Strang(I)ed Poetics” 21). The biotext is not just a vehicle for representation; it is inextricably a part of Wah’s project. For Wah, representation itself gets interrogated in the course of asserting new ways to name himself. “Writing,” says Wah, “always seems to encounter the necessary torsion to twist or move across the mass of assumed or inherited condition” (“Strang(I)ed Poetics” 21). By contextualizing his family’s multiple movements and the various roles they play within the very specific, very localized time and space of the Diamond Grill cafe, Nelson, B.C. 1951, Wah explores the instability of the subject, the individual’s shifting relationship to community, personal, ethnic and national, and the appropriate narrative form to represent these concerns. His emphasis on language as event and his confounding of the borders between poetry and prose, between fiction, theory, and autobiography are all part of the process of this exploration.

II. Breathin’ His Name with a Sigh

To date, Wah has published sixteen volumes of poetry and prose poetry. As one of the founders of the Tish group (with George Bowering, Frank Davey, David Dawson, and Jamie Reid), his earlier collections, which include Lardeau (1965), Mountain (1967), Among (1972), and Tree (1972) show the influence of Black Mountain poets like Olson, Creeley, and Duncan. Not

only did Wah attend the 1963 Vancouver Poetry conference, at which he was introduced to the poetry of Olson, but he later went to study with Olson at the State University of New York. Although most often associated with projective verse theory and its practitioners, Wah's poetry can also be associated with the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry that emerged in the mid 1970s. This poetry endorsed Victor Shlovsky's notion of ostranenie or "making strange," "by which the instrumental function of language is diminished and the objective character of words foregrounded" (Princeton 675). In "Strang(l)ed Poetics" Wah cites Shlovsky's "oft-quoted" statement about the function of a work of art:

And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. (24)

Most important, in terms of its influence on Wah's work, is the relationship that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry attempts to set up with the reader: "one based less on the recuperation of a generically or stylistically encoded work and more on the reader's participation in a relatively open text" (Princeton 676). In other words, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets confound readers' expectations of a text by focusing attention on the language itself rather than on language as a vehicle for meaning. For Wah, as Bowering suggests, "Language is not a vehicle on which to ride into the mossy backwoods";

instead “home is where the story is” (Loki 11). Throughout Wah’s poetry language is not used to describe a reality “out there.” Language and reality are closely entwined.

Wah’s is a spare, imagistic poetry largely concerned with nature (specifically the mountains, trees, rivers, and stones of the interior of British Columbia) and the body and breath as it moves in and through the natural world.⁸⁴ For example, in the poem “Note” in the collection Among, Wah writes “And I pivot, Mike / At the turn of winter / I try to be the place, / Tilt my gaze as tree-face / Cedar-head, sun-shine” (11). Similarly, in the first poem in Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh Wah admits, “I like the purity of all things seen / through the accumulation of thrust / forward especially the vehicle / container maybe / or ‘thing’ called body” (n.p.). As with Marlatt’s early Tish-inspired poetry, Wah’s poems are preoccupied with the specificity of place and the importance of the local. He grounds his poetry and his theorizing within a specifically western Canadian context. He has said, “I live in the ‘interior’ of British Columbia and such a qualification affects my particular sense of what the world looks like. All of it, out there is measured from in here. In the particularity of a place the writer finds revealed the correspondences of a whole world” (Loki 10). Western Canada is where Wah is most at home and where he situates himself in his poetry.

Although there may be a certain “situatedness” in Wah’s poetry, there is paradoxically never a sense of fixedness. The repetition, circularity, and flux that are found in Kiyooka’s poems and the Mothertalk manuscripts are also clearly evident throughout Wah’s work. Poems from his earlier collections

⁸⁴ For a discussion of Wah’s earlier poetry, see George Bowering’s Introduction to Wah’s Selected Poems (1980), Pamela Banting’s Body Inc.: A Theory of Translation Poetics, and Charlene Diehl-Jones’ essay on Wah in Canadian Writers and their Works, Vol. 12.

show up again and again throughout his oeuvre, revised and rewritten so that similar content is filtered and reworked from different angles within different contexts.⁸⁵ This rewriting reflects a process of working through material by a subject who is itself in the process of shifting or changing depending on its context. This sense of process or movement that characterizes Wah's earlier poetry is also evident in later works like Breathin' My Name with a Sigh (1981), Waiting for Saskatchewan (1985), and Diamond Grill. In fact, because of their shared focus and the repeated images and fragments in all three, it is tempting to read these three texts as part of one larger whole.

Like Marlatt, whose poetic preoccupations developed as she began to explore the implications of her gendered self in the early 1980s, Wah also introduces a new focus to his work in the 1980s that, while drawing on his earlier preoccupations including his focus on language as a tool for transformation, alters his orientation. It is in texts like Breathin' My Name with a Sigh, Grasp the Sparrow's Tale, and Waiting for Saskatchewan that Wah begins to self-consciously explore the origins of his mixed-race background. While maintaining his interest in proprioceptive verse and the rhythms of the breath and the body in place, Wah introduces a sense of the particularities of his own raced and ethnicized body into his poetry. Like Marlatt who used the proprioceptive recognition of the connection between language and body as a jumping off point for her own feminist poetics, Wah makes use of his grounding in proprioceptive verse and its distrust of inherited poetic structures in order to carry out the kinds of questioning he

⁸⁵ For example, as Guy Beauregard points out, the same passage from the poem "from MOUNTAIN" appears in Lardeau (1965), Mountain (1967), Among (1972), and Loki is Buried at Smoky Creek (1980).

does in his later poetry. Throughout his career, the different stages of his poetry are linked by an awareness of difference, of what he calls “estrangement,” or “the compositional tactic of nonclosure (particularly the sentence and the cadence) in both short and long poems” (“Strang(l)ed Poetics” 25).

For Wah, pushing the limits of inherited literary forms has always been an explicitly political act. In his series of “Poetics” essays Wah argues that race disrupts genre so that politics and poetics are closely entwined. In his essays “A Poetics of Ethnicity” and “Alienethnic Poetics,” Wah explores the necessity for a poetics of difference and argues how a tactics of refusal and reterritorialization can “enable a particular residue (genetic, cultural, biographical) to become kinetic and valorised” (“Poetics of Ethnicity” 99). In “Speak My Language: Racing the Lyric Poetic,” he says, “I’m interested in how the colouring of the negotiations, with whatever thread of the inherited lyric, has consequence for a socially informed poetic (not a politics of identity but a praxis in language)” (72). As Jeff Derksen explains in his article “Making Race Opaque,” Wah’s poetry is a challenge to mainstream writing, both poetically and politically: “The disunity of alienethnic poetics resists normative narrative strategies. This distrust of literary structures parallels a distrust of larger social structures as these structures have rendered writers of colour invisible through assimilation. In this way, narrative is also read as a social structure” (74). Derksen explores how critical attention to Wah’s avant-garde poetics has meant that his work has never been read as reflecting his working-class Chinese-Canadian background. The splitting of form and content has, in the past, set up a binary that separated his racial identity from

his poetry. He argues that Wah's racialized identity has always been so deeply embedded within his poetics that the two cannot be separated.

Wah's distrust of the conventions of literary genre is evidenced in part in his exploration of the prose poem, an exploration that begins as early as Breathin' My Name with a Sigh. Because Wah associates prose with talk, he chose the prose poem as a strategy to communicate with his father:

The prose poem became more necessary as, through the eighties, my father's visage pursued my writing into a layering of race and identity previously unacknowledged. It has something to do with the stupid notion that prose is talk; for some cathartic reason, nearly fifteen years after his death, I finally gave myself permission to talk to my father, to talk through thinking and memory and the imagination into sentences, sayings, story, picture, anecdote. ("Interview with Ashok Mathur" 98)

In Breathin' My Name with a Sigh the prose poem becomes his way of directly addressing his father after his death:

Father, when you died you left me
with my own death. Until then I thought
nothing of it. Now I see its clear cut
both genetic "bag" as well as choice. I know now
I'd better find that double edge between you
and your father so that the synchronous axe
keeps splitting whatever this is the weight of
I'm left holding (n.p.).

This strategy of direct address is common in Wah's writing. In Running in the Family and Ghost Works, Ondaatje and Marlatt also use the direct address when conversing with their deceased family members. They construct the

“you” of the parent as a tool for further uncovering layers of the past. In Beyond Silence Lien Chao discusses the use of “dialogue” as a rhetorical strategy for a number of Chinese-Canadian poets. She argues that dialogue (with dead railway workers, deceased community ancestors, family members and the reader) allows poets to engage “in a continuous process of rereading the community history, relocating the collective values, and redefining the Chinese Canadian identity” (124). However, in Wah’s writing any sense of direct engagement with the past is problematized by the use of formal experimentation. By rejecting linearity and chronology, Wah continually draws attention to his own difficulties in representing an unmediated past. Chao suggests that Wah’s strategies of repetition and his mixing of poetry and prose can be read as a reflection of his own mixed-blood identity. She argues that “[b]y mixing the boundaries of prose and poetry to create prose poetry, Wah finds a metonymic form which helps him explore the duality of his Eurasian identity” (133). Throughout all his writing, formal and thematic concerns are inextricably related.

The prose poem, a “controversially hybrid and (aesthetically and even politically) revolutionary genre” (Princeton 977), allows for a wider range of expression than either poetry or prose alone. The principal characteristics of the prose poem “are those that would ensure unity even in brevity and poetic quality even without the line breaks of free verse: high patterning, rhythmic and figural repetition, sustained intensity, and compactness” (977). In her study A Tradition of Subversion, Marguerite Murphy calls the prose poem “a genre formed in violation of a genre, a seeming hybrid, in name a contradiction in terms” (1) and suggests that it “may be seen as a battlefield where conventional prose of some sort appears and is defeated by the text’s

drive to innovate and to differentiate itself, to construct a self-defining 'poeticity'" (3). Wah says that the prose poem "has become the device of choice for writers who wish to complicate the authority that marginalizes voice" (Faking 116). In Wah's writing, the linear and chronological expectations of the prosaic (of fiction, autobiography and biography) are juxtaposed with an attention to language, repetition and various other "denaturalizing" poetic devices. For example, in Breathin' My Name with a Sigh there is a sense throughout the text that parts of the poem are about to spill over into prose, and, in certain places, they do. Proper syntax cannot adequately contain the rapid flow of words that Wah lists to describe his mixed-race background:

waiting for saskatchewan
 and the origins grandparents countries places converged
 europe asia railroads carpenters nailed grain elevators
 Swift Current my grandmother in her house he built on the street
 and him his cafes namely the "Elite" on Center
 looked straight ahead Saskatchewan points to it....(n.p.)

Words flow into one another and begin to pile up on top of one another. The various factors of Wah's genealogy flood back in the same way that memory does, without a given hierarchical ordering. In his radical decontextualizing of the autobiographical impulse, there is no simple forward and backward: there is only a tangle of present and past, eruptions of memory and conjecture and wishing stitched into the fabric of the moment (Diehl-Jones 402). In Wah's writing, both the story and the language in which it is told are equally important.

Waiting for Saskatchewan (1985) consists of four groups of prose poems: “Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh,” “Grasp the Sparrow’s Tail,” “Elite,” and “This Dendrite Map: Father/Mother Haibun.” In this collection Wah picks up on and adds to the direct address to his father that he began in Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh. In his prefatory note to Waiting for Saskatchewan Wah explains that poems from his earlier collection are included “to give some shape to the range of forms a particular content (‘father’) from that long poem has generated” (n.p.). To foreground this sense of continuity, Wah writes the opening poem in Waiting for Saskatchewan as an echo of the same poem in Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh. He goes on to explore his preoccupation with the prose poem throughout the collection. For example, “Grasp the Sparrow’s Tale” is a utaniki, a poetic diary of mixed prose and poetry; the “Elite” series experiments with mixing poetry and prose; and the haibun is a short prose piece written with a haiku sensibility. The addition of the prosaic in these collections foregrounds the element of the mimetic and the narrative that characterizes most of Wah’s writing that focuses on his genealogy. This narrative drive (the insistence on sorting through the narrative strands that make up his life) distinguishes these texts from his earlier poetry.⁸⁶ And yet, throughout these texts, Wah is still preoccupied with language and the effects of formal innovation. Diehl-Jones argues that “the book is ‘about’ a father, an ancestry, but it is also ‘about’ its own formal concerns. The balance between these elements is exquisite, and opens, over and over, emotionally charged writing spaces” (409).

⁸⁶ It could be argued that the strong narrative drive in Waiting for Saskatchewan added to its general critical esteem. It was awarded the Governor General’s Award for poetry in 1985. Wah’s earlier poetry has not had the same critical approbation.

The construction of Wah Sr. as a second person “you” that began in Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh continues in both Waiting for Saskatchewan and Diamond Grill. In fact, much of the material from Waiting for Saskatchewan later shows up in Diamond Grill. The idea of repetition is central; it is clear that this text is an extension of the direct kind of epistolary address already begun in earlier collections.⁸⁷ As we have seen with Kiyooka’s rewriting of his mother’s stories in Mothertalk, the filtering and recontextualizing of content is part of the process of making sense of and taking ownership of it. In the “Elite” series in Waiting for Saskatchewan Wah begins to explore the Chinese-Canadian cafe community of the west and his family’s relationship to it. In “This Dendrite Map: Father/Mother Haibun,” Wah explores his relationship to both his mother and his father and their very different backgrounds. “Grasp the Sparrow’s Tail” begins with a kind of invocation of Wah Sr.: “You never did the ‘horse’ like I do now but walked/straight down the aisle of the Diamond Grill / and kicked the kitchen door with such a slap / all the way up to the soda fountain / I know it’s you” (31). The rest of this section is written in diary entry format, with each entry having two parts. The italicized part is prose, and the normal font section is more poetic. By blending genres and by using strategies of repetition he also explores the dialogue between poetry and prose as well as the conversation that goes on between Breathin’ My Name with a Sigh and Waiting for Saskatchewan (and later Diamond Grill).

⁸⁷ Wah talks about the evolution of the “you” in his prose poems in an unpublished interview with Susan Rudy. He tells her “And I was writing this piece that used the second person ‘you’ and I had started writing it and I was kind of getting tired of talking to my father as ‘you,’ it was a kind of epistolary address. I just turned it and started using it as a reflective ‘you’ and kind of mixing it up....So it was the second-person that really opened up prose for me. I kind of got interested in the fact that, looking back on it now, that one could interpolate, one could call oneself” (n.p.).

Diamond Grill picks up on many of the preoccupations of Wah's earlier collections. Some of the same content of Breathin' My Name with a Sigh and Waiting for Saskatchewan is reconfigured in this work. More specifically, it is an application of what Wah refers to as a "poetics of ethnicity" in which questions of formal innovation and racialization merge. "A text," says Wah, "is a place where a labyrinth of continually revealing meanings are available, a place that offers more possibility than we can be sure we know, sometimes more than we want to know. It isn't a container, static and apparent. Rather, it is noisy, frequently illegible" (Alley 5). A "journal journey," a "map" (1), Diamond Grill is a mix of poetry and prose, autobiography, biography and self-reflexive meditation, or what Donald Goellnicht refers to as "autobiographical theory or theoretical autobiography" (34). Goellnicht makes a compelling argument about four recent Asian-American texts that, he suggests, are theoretically informed and informing. He argues that such texts allow us to escape the binaries of dominant and minority cultures, masculine and feminine positions, truth and fiction, and Asian and American (342). Perhaps most importantly, these texts break down the division between creative writing and high theory. They force their readers to engage with theoretical issues at the level of narrative. Much like Wah's texts, such texts represent theory in practice. In his essay "Strang(l)ed Poetics," Wah also refers to the melding of theory and writing. He suggests that "the term theoms (theory poems) perhaps serves some poetry's interest to engage in the immense wave of postmodern philosophy and theory" (21). Because Wah structures Diamond Grill so that it feels and reads as if it is in process, like a performance, the reader is always actively deciphering and discovering the text. Neither the writing nor the subject of the text will stay still.

III. Poetics of the Hyphen: Diamond Grill

Diamond Grill is not a closed text; it is more of an event. It is made up of over one hundred sections of prose that range in length from half-a-page to three pages. Each section is separate but carefully integrated into the whole. These short fragments of text represent the various poses or postures that Wah inhabits throughout the text. Although obviously based on his own childhood and fragments of his father's life (he refers specifically to the Wahs and Ericksons and he traces their history of immigration and settlement on the Canadian prairies), Wah also makes a lot up. Thus a range of voices (although obviously filtered through the poet's own) punctuates the text so that various members of several generations add their stories to the whole. As in Running in the Family and Ghost Works when the pronouns and perspectives change, sometimes the narrative "I" is displaced altogether. In several sections the narrative point of view switches from Wah Jr. to Wah Sr. so that Wah's father is constructed as the experiencing subject. The juxtaposition of different narrative threads interrogates a linear, chronological unfolding of a life. There is no obvious hierarchy of importance to the various narrative strands; each adds to the process of sifting, of negotiation that is at work in the text.

"Maps don't have beginnings," says Wah, "just edges. Some frayed and hazy margin of possibility, absence, gap" (Diamond Grill 1). From the first page of the text, the reader is plunged immediately into the movements of the Diamond Grill. A sense of fluidity characterizes the cafe: "this is work. Rhythm. Don't love it but count on it, get into it. Some kind of dance; patterned yet yielding at the edges, room for subtle improv. Things touch and snap and flip and the shoulders and arms feel loose and precise,

measured" (37). Although there is a strong autobiographical impulse throughout *Diamond Grill*, the text does not seek to encompass or represent Wah's entire life. Wah attempts to capture the "subtle improv" of a life instead. When it does explore Wah's past, it focuses specifically on the years of his adolescence in the interior of British Columbia. Wah also traces his family's history as far back as 1892, the year his paternal grandfather immigrated from China. There is no chronological order that insists on a beginning, middle and end (which somehow reflects birth, adolescence, and maturity); in fact, the text begins and ends on the same day. The result is more circular than linear with its use of repetition and echo.

Wah uses these textual strategies to explore what he calls the "poetics of the hyphen." For Wah, the hyphen is a space that challenges both notions of sameness and difference in discussions of ethnic and national belonging and allows for the articulation of a hybrid or "impure" subject.⁸⁸ Wah describes the hyphen in his essay "Half-Bred Poetics":

Though it is in the middle, it is not in the centre. It is a property marker, a boundary post, a borderland, a bastard, a railroad, a last spike, a stain, a cypher, a rope, a know, a chain (link), a foreign word, a warning sign, a "head tax," a bridge, a noman's land, a nomadic floating magic carpet, now you see it now you don't. (60)

⁸⁸ In his theorization of the hyphen, Wah resists the concept of assimilation (which implies a kind of purity of belonging to the mainstream or status quo) and, at the same time, rejects the purity of difference that he argues any "master narrative of duality, multiculturalism and apartheid" insists upon. Wah calls the hyphen "a crucial location for working at the ambivalences of hybridity" ("Half-Bred" 60) and he describes it as a useful tool for his oppositional poetics: "The recent bag of re-poetics (recuperate, rewrite, transport, transform, and so forth) proffers the opportunity to confront many of the assumptions and confusions I feel compelled to "reconfigure." The site of this poetics for me, and many other multi-racial and multi-cultural writers, is the hyphen..., the operable tool that both compounds difference and underlines sameness" ("Half-Bred" 60).

The hyphen thus puts pressure on assumptions about identity. It resists the totality of systems like multiculturalism that want to collect differences under a banner of sameness. Wah tells Mathur that “many mixed-race writers feel compelled to reconfigure their own confusions about identity in a poetics of opposition that seeks to articulate the marked (or unmarked) space of the hyphen” (web site). He says that his project in Diamond Grill is to give the hyphen noise, to make audible and tangible the space of the hyphen (web site).

One way Wah manages to make the hyphen audible in Diamond Grill is through the banging and slamming of doors. Throughout the text, doors—the door to the cafe, the door that separates the front room from the kitchen which he describes as “the wooden slab that swings between Occident and Orient” (16)—are associated with the hyphen, a marker that both binds and divides. Diamond Grill begins with Wah moving through the kitchen doors which “can be kicked with such a slap they’re heard all the way up to the soda fountain” (1). It ends with the image of Wah Sr. opening the door of the cafe “with a slight body check”: “the door clangs and rattles a noisy hyphen between the muffled winter outside and the silence of the warm and waiting kitchen inside” (176). There are doors separating the main part of the kitchen from the walk-in freezer. There is also the door to the basement where Wing Bo, a paper son from China, works peeling potatoes. The wooden doors in the cafe separate the Chinese workers in the kitchen from the patrons out front. Wah, his father, Shu the cook, and the wait staff all inhabit the world of the diner and pass back and forth through its doors.

The various doors that Wah describes serve to enable or disable the kind of “pivot” that Wah associates with his father. The cook is confined to

the kitchen. For him, the shutting of doors represents his own powerlessness: "A simple door shutting in the running rhythm and rush of a cafe kitchen, but with the insulated mass of a concussive jolt, of a sonar synapse, for these old brown men at least, along some other wire of their lives. The discharge of a door, electric in the nodes of memory" (127). On the other hand, Wah and his father move with more ease between both rooms. Although he's often warned to keep the door silent because "it disturbs the customers" during rush hour, Wah explains, everyone "will let loose in the shape and cacophony of busy-ness, the kicker of desire hidden in the isochronous torso, a necessary dance, a vital percussion, a critical persuasion, a playful permission fast and loud, WhapBamBoom—feels so good" (21). Although the hyphen divides Occident from Orient, Fred Wah and his father are forced to move from one side to the other. And yet the differences between the two sides are never totally elided. In fact, Wah Jr. prefers to hover in the kitchen "within the meaningless but familiar hum of the Cantonese and away from all the angst of the arrogant white world up front" (63).

Unlike Wah, who cannot understand the language in the kitchen, his father can communicate with the people on both sides of the doors. Wah describes his father's ability in these terms:

his mouth can move with dexterity between these men-sounds, between these secret sounds we only hear in the kitchen of the Elite or in the silent smoke-filled Chinese store, between those dense vocables of nonsense, and English, which is everywhere, at the front of the cafe, on the street, and at home. And that he does this alone, that no one else can move between these two tongues like he does, that puts him

at the centre of our life, with more pivot to the world than anyone I know. (61)

And yet Wah Sr. gets tongue-tied too. When he arrives back in Canada from China he is “languageless”:

I guess he’s peeved enough at all the shit he’s going through back in Canada, the immigration jail, this so-called family, father mother brothers sisters most of whom he can hardly remember and some he’s never met, his older sister left behind in China, pretty much languageless except for the cooks in the cafe. (17)

Although Wah’s father learns English, he is still constantly aware that he is partly faking it. For example, during his speech to the all-white Lions Club he says “sloup” for soup and “looks out at the expected embarrassed and patronizing smiles from the crowd” (66). Although he stumbles over language, he recovers by laughing at himself and reinforcing the stereotypes expected of him by the “Baker street millionaires.” Wah learns from his father that cultural survival depends on this kind of careful balancing act: “I guess I pick up on that sense of faking it from him, that English can be faked. But I quickly learn that when you fake language you see, as well, how everything else is a fake” (66).

Wah uses his text to explore the constructedness of identity. Wah’s project is not about coming to terms with or accepting one side of his hyphenated identity at the expense of the other. He rejects the binary division implicit in such a project and recognizes instead that both definitions and representations of ethnicity are complicated, in process, shifting:

The problem was the blank after Racial Origin. I thought, well, this is Canada, I’ll put down Canadian. But the teacher said no Freddy,

you're Chinese, your racial origin is Chinese, that's what your father is. Canadian isn't a racial identity. That's turned out to be true. But I'm not really Chinese either. Nor were some of the other kids in my class real Italian, Doukhobor, or British. Quite a soup. Heinz 57 varieties. There's a whole bunch of us who've grown up as resident aliens, living in the hyphen. (53)

Definitions of "racial origin" are constructions that are context-driven. While Wah foregrounds the different factors that make up ethnic identity (for example, he convincingly illustrates how he is different from his father who is different from his sister who is different from his cousin and so on), he also focuses on the material specificities that forcibly construct a Chinese-Canadian subjectivity and help to build a sense of unity and community (the head tax on Chinese immigrants, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and voting rights for Chinese Canadians). Wah's careful historicizing of the ethnic subject challenges the cultural studies approach to ethnicity put forward by Michael M.J. Fischer's article "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory" which serves to normalize a wide range of distinct ethnic expressions. José David Saldívar suggests that "what is disturbing about Fischer's essay...is that his work takes on the traditional and normalizing anthropological form of culture-collecting; he presents the reader with an overwhelming catalogue of textual 'data' with far too little discussion of local knowledge and local history" (255). Although different ethnic groups may well have similar experiences in their relations with the mainstream so that cross-cultural discussions may be strategically useful, these discussions must first be grounded within the specifics of particular histories. Throughout Diamond

Grill Wah insists that the term “Chinese-Canadian” is shaped by material pressures, although the determinants of the term are constantly shifting.

Diamond Grill captures this tension between mapping and motion. The autobiographical “I” of the text is one that is shifting and fluid as Wah attempts to articulate his mixed-race identity. Wah does not ever allow ethnicity and race to be easily conflated in his text. In fact, he explores how race—the colour of one’s skin—dictates the limits of one’s freedom. Given the fact that he can “pass” for white, he doesn’t experience the same constraints that his father and grandfather had. He recognizes that his lack of purity is enabling: “I become as white as I can, which, considering I’m mostly Scandinavian, is pretty easy for me. Not for my dad and some of my cousins though. They’re stuck, I think, with how they look” (98). On the other hand, he is not unaware of other people’s powers to invent him (and therefore the limits to his own self-invention). Although, like his father, he has a certain amount of “pivot” within the world of the cafe, outside of the cafe he learns he has to play by certain rules. He needs to learn what he can and cannot get away with. For example, in Diamond Grill, there are number of instances when Wah gets labeled “Chinese” in spite of his skin colour: “I’m fairly blond in grade four and still she calls me a chink” (39); “he says I’ve got nothing against you or your family but I don’t want my daughter marrying a Chinaman” (39); “Until Mary McNutter calls me a chink I’m not one” (98). In school what he is told to be and what he feels he is are two different things: “the teacher telling us who we get to be, to write down what our fathers are. Race, race, race. English, German, Doukhobor, Italian. But not Canadian, there’s a difference between a race and a country” (36). These are all instances when Wah obviously has no power to name himself; others label

him on account of his assumed skin colour. Wah's text explores how even the idea of racial difference is used as an excuse for hatred and control. The legacy of systemic racism that Wah explores helps to explain the intense silence and anger that mark certain characters throughout the text.

Wah himself oscillates between his Chineseness and his built-in complicity with the racist culture he is immersed in. When he is called "chink" in elementary school (98), he is initially shocked to discover his own difference. He recovers himself by keeping a safe distance from the Chinamen whom his friends call "chinky, chinky" (98). On the basketball court, Wah self-identifies as white:

In a few years there are enough teenage Chinese kids around to not only form an association, the Nelson Chinese Youth Association, but also a basketball team. And they're good, too. Fast, smart. I play on the junior high school team and when the NCYA team comes to play us, I know a lot of the Chinese guys. But my buddies call them Chinks and geeks and I feel a little embarrassed and don't talk much with the Chinese kids. (136).

However, Wah identifies with his Chineseness when interacting with the other Chinese boys in the cafe. He describes how difference doesn't seem to matter when he works with Lawrence, the cook's son:

When Lawrence and I work together, him just over from China, he's a boss's son and I'm a boss's son. His pure Chineseness and my impure Chineseness don't make any difference to us in the cafe. But I've assumed a dull and ambiguous edge of difference in myself; the hyphen always seems to demand negotiation. (137)

This fragment illustrates how Wah's self-identification changes not only in terms of context, but also in terms of his own age. As an adult he is more self-conscious of how he is identifying himself and why. As he walks through Chinatown as an adult, he recognizes how his "camouflage" functions: "all my ambivalence gets covered over, camouflaged by a safety net of class and colourlessness—the racism within me that makes and consumes that neutral (white) version of myself, that allows me the sad privilege of being, in this white world, not the target but the gun" (138).

Wah uses his careful descriptions of the cafe culture to evoke a kind of microcosm of cultural difference in the wider community. In the sections devoted to the cafe, he describes the geography of the restaurant in minute detail and maps out the particulars of the soda fountain, the coffee urn and the milk pumps. These details allow for snapshots of a given time and place; they help to visualize the restaurant in the mind's eye:

Along that front wall of the cafe, to the right of the big front window, a landscape of stainless steel soda fountain, pastel green Beach milkshake carousel with its semi-circle of five beaters (ever only seen four going at once), Campbell's soup rack and heater, big double-can milk dispenser (the kind with the rubber tubing that spurts all over the counter when you cut it), coolers and pastry display cases, and, finally, before the booth begins, the large stainless coffee urns with glass tubes: three spigots, two coffee and one hot water. (63)

In these passages, Wah gives careful consideration to the local, the particular. Commenting on the importance of the local in his work, he suggests: "That's it, the local. What is meant in the west by the term regional. The immediate 'here,' the palpable, tangible 'here,' imprinted with whatever trailing cellular

memory, history, story. These are not 'our city streets,' these are my city streets, and you better not be out to 'capture' anything" ("Strangle Two" 48). In the diner, Wah sets the stage for his own personal and particularized history, not in a broader national framework, not even in terms of his immediate townscape, but specifically in the place that most clearly shaped his own movements and the movements of his father.⁸⁹

Perhaps most importantly, the cafe in Wah's text is made to evoke the kind of border culture or "contact zone" that Wah is trying to describe as part of western Canada more generally. The border culture is evoked by the number and range of people who inhabit the world of the cafe and their various relationships to one another. Wah borrows Mary Louise Pratt's definition of "contact zone" and inserts it into his own text, quoting her definition in a footnote:

By using the term "contact," I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily ignored or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A "contact" perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations among colonizers and colonized...not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power. (70)

⁸⁹ The careful description of the restaurant also evokes a history of similar cafes across the prairies and British Columbia. The description links up to the "Elite" series in Waiting for Saskatchewan in which Wah also describes the series of Chinese-Canadian restaurants dotting the prairies and connects them to a sense of family and a broader sense of community. Fred Wah's grandfather co-owned a cafe, as did his father. This connection reminds the reader of the Chinese-Canadians' role in the establishment of a service industry in Canada and enforces the notion of a strong Chinese-Canadian community in the west. The culture of the cafe offers a sense of community and belonging.

There is a sense of relative ease and belonging in the particularized environment of the cafe. People gather here: Chinese cooks, Japanese waitresses, partners, regulars, paper sons, and the “Baker Street Millionaires.” Wah explains: “They just want coffee and gossip, the weather and roads, hockey games this weekend, Smokies, Flyers, Dynamiters, Maple Leafs, some bets, some laughs” (29). The community that makes up the cafe is one that is mixed.⁹⁰

Wah also makes use of Pratt’s definition of “code-switching,” which is related to the idea of a language that disrupts monolithic constructions of language: “In the context of fiercely monolingual dominant cultures like that of the United States, code-switching lays claim to a form of cultural power: the power to own but not be owned by the dominant language” (68). Like the items in the “mixee grill,” language in the diner “has mutated into something quick and dirty” (2). Wah captures these mutations by showing how language is different on either side of the swinging doors. The cooks in the kitchen of the Diamond Grill, Wah’s grandfather and his mother all use words from the Chinook jargon, a native language that developed as a hybrid. Wah calls it “the talkee-talkee of the contact zone” (68). According to Wah, this kind of code switching is an integral aspect of a hyphenated poetics because it helps to locate a “synchronous foreignicity” (“Half-Bred” 62). This hybridized language is represented as an empowering alternative to the

⁹⁰ Wah’s description of the cafe as “contact zone” echoes descriptions of the border zone in Chicano/Chicana poetics. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldua evokes a similar sense of hybridity in her description of the “meztiza culture.” Alfred Arteaga refers to the importance of the border zone as a real, tangible space: “It removes the discussion of the styles of linguistic interplay from the realm of the aesthetic alone because the border is a space where English and Spanish compete for presence and authority” (11). Like Gloria Anzaldua, Arteaga is concerned with the hybridity that challenges the “purity” and monoliguism of the Anglo-American U.S. Like Wah, Arteaga focuses on the disruption implicit in Chicano poetry as it replaces monologue with dialogue or “dialogizes the authoritative discourse” (14).

“languagelessness” that pervades the book because it is a materialization of the hyphen; it insists on its presence (62).

The mapping of the interior of the restaurant is also important because of the way it contextualizes another narrative thread in the text—the day in the life of Wah’s father. This is one of the most prominent narrative strands of the book. Wah reconstructs his father’s movements from the moment his alarm goes off at four forty-five in the morning, through his daily duties at the restaurant, to his locking up, to his walk home at the end of the day. In these passages Wah works from his own memories, fictionalizing, or faking it, as he goes along. These sections allow Wah to imaginatively recreate his father’s day, his thought processes, his feelings, his reactions. In the poem “Elite 8” in Waiting for Saskatchewan Wah had addressed his father, saying: “I try to ‘place’ you and the hand or head can’t” (68). Wah’s careful description of the geography of the Diamond Grill seems to be his solution to this problem. He records his father’s conversations with himself: “Shit, those lazy guys on night shift again, didn’t fill the ketchup last night” (103) and he offers fragments of his father’s conversations with the people who filter in and through the restaurant. These sections allow Wah to connect with his father in a tangible way, to reconstruct his father and recognize the imprint of generations and the power of heredity:

I feel decanting through my body his ocean (I think I can even smell it), all he could ever comprehend in a single view; that this is, in me, part of some helical sentence we both occupy, the asynchronous grains of sand along a double-helix dream time track, the déjà vu of body, skin and fur and eyes, a brief intersection of animal coordinates. (12)

And yet Wah recognizes how different his relationship to the world is from his father's. For example, the portrayal of the relative ease (or "pivot") that his father experiences in the cafe is in direct contrast to the sections that outline the racism and discrimination that he is victim to within a broader framework. When Wah describes his father's various forced relocations, the portrait of Wah Sr. in the cafe is replaced by an angry and silenced displaced person. By shifting attention to this narrative thread, Wah is able to focus on the larger social, national, and historical processes at work and he shows how external pressures shape the construction of particular identities. Wah describes how his father was shipped off to China as a young boy to live with his own father's first wife, only to be returned eighteen years later as a young adult. He describes his father's incarceration in an immigration jail on Vancouver Island because he could not prove that he was born in Canada:

Both British Victorias, these new-world cities must have seemed to my ancestors two ends of the same rope. But many of the Chinamen, when they got to Canadian Victoria, were locked up in the Detention Hospital, a pigpen of iron screens and doors used for interrogation and the collection of head taxes. My father was held there. He told me that earlier Gold Mountain men had inked or scratched poems on the walls that expressed their sorrow and anguish at being held there. (22)

The descriptions of his childhood emphasize the fact that Wah Sr. did not belong in either Canada or China. He is homeless, dispossessed. As a Eurasian in China he is not considered suitably Chinese.⁹¹ Because he spends

⁹¹ There is an echo of his father's displacement in Wah's journal of his visit to China, "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail." Wah feels like an outsider in China. He has to try to convince his guides that he is, in part, Chinese: "You were part Chinese I tell them. / They look at me. I'm pulling their leg. / So I'm Chinese too and that's why my name is Wah. / They don't believe me. That's o.k. / When you're not 'pure' you just make it up" (43).

most of his childhood and adolescence away from his family and away from the prairie, Wah Sr. returns without the English language and without a knowledge of the customs or traditions of his family and the wider community. He experiences racism from whites for being Chinese and from Chinese for being white. This particular narrative thread dramatically illustrates the impact of social constructions of identity. Despite being born in Canada and being an integral member of the Nelson community, he is not really accepted as "Canadian." Wah begins to understand why his father continues to feel some attachment to China: "But no wonder my grandfather, my father, and their kin continue to look back at China. Canada couldn't be an investment for them. The 1923 Chinese Act of Exclusion isn't repealed until 1947. Even though my dad was born in Medicine Hat, he wasn't allowed to vote until 1948. Nor are any of the other orientals in Canada" (110).

As well as examining how different generations of Chinese-Canadians experience racism in different degrees and as well as studying the nature of their different loyalties, Wah explores other factors of identity formation. The discrimination that his father faced from the Canadian state is explored alongside the abuse that his aunt and grandmother faced from their fathers and husbands because they were women. In several sections, Wah takes on the voice of his mother or grandmother, thus adding the complexities of gender to the process of subject formation and transformation. His grandmother saves money to get her children back from China, while her husband gambles it away; his Aunt Ethel cannot return to Canada until a marriage is arranged for her. Ethel's past fills her with resentment and pain so that, years later, "her body shrugs against this perpetual masculine writing of her memory and her history" (89). The women are forced to be silent and

swallow their anger: "Yet languageless, mouth always a gauze, words locked behind tongue, stopped in and out, what's she saying, what's she want, why's she mad, this woman-silence stuck, struck, stopped" (5). At another point in the text the narrative voice shifts to Wah's grandmother Erikson whose own racist anger erupts:

Dirty heathens, Granny Erikson thinks of the Chinese, the whole bunch of them, in their filthy cafes downtown. Just because that boy dresses up and has a little money, she throws herself at him...well she can look out for herself, she's not going to get any more of my money, she can take her medicine, now that she's living with that Chinaman, nobody'll speak to her, the little hussy. (8)

Wah uses the shifting narrative voice in order to explore the variety of group identifications that are part of the process of subject formation. In these sections, racial identification is undermined by gendered difference. Although the narrative voice changes into Granny Erikson's in order for Wah to examine her racist assumptions, later in the text the narrative shifts to her own gendered subjectivity and feelings of intense disempowerment: "She complained, my mother says of Granny Erikson, that she had to stand on the street outside the beer parlour and, because she wasn't allowed in unescorted, tried to get one of the men to get [her husband] out for her" (35). Gender and race are forced to confront one another at several points in the text.

Another narrative thread in the text is the story of the family reunion. These sections provide a sense of the directness of community that the family offers. The family illustrates how difference and sameness can coalesce. Although distinct, the various members of the family come together and celebrate some sense of commonality. The reunion also offers an important

opportunity to introduce other voices and stories into the text that provide bits and scraps of family history. Although filtered through Wah's narrative, these sections further disrupt the sense of a unified narrative because it is Ray, Wah's oldest cousin, who fills in the missing bits of family history. In the process of constructing various different versions of his family history from different points of view, Wah further connects with the fragmented parts of his past.

The descriptions of the family reunion offer one context for Wah's descriptions of food. Food acts as a kind of marker of ethnic identity throughout Wah's text. For example, interspersed throughout the text are recipes for the kinds of food that he remembers tasting as a child. In spite of his distancing from any "pure" Chinese identity, smells and tastes provide him with certain connections. He describes his yearning for Chinese white turnip, or lo bok: "For years after leaving home I've had a craving for some Chinese food taste that gnaws at sensation and memory. An undefined taste, not in the mouth but down some blind alley of the mind" (67). Although he rejects certain foods as a child, he finds himself searching for tastes and smells as an adult. The repetition of recipes throughout the text mirrors Wah's own recurring memories of and craving for his father's foods. His shifting relationship to these recipes also emphasizes the differences between generations. For example the taste for burnt rice is "Going out of us. Gone now, from him, to him, to me" (74). Unlike the food that Wah's family prepares at home, the food at the Diamond Grill is of a hybrid nature. Although they serve "Chinese" food, the strong flavors are toned down and "Canadianized." Similarly, British staples are hybridized. The "Mixed Grill" is

a greasy, cheaper replica of the metropolitan standard, what Wah calls “your typical improvised imitation of Empire cuisine” (2).

Interspersed with these various narrative threads that question one another and challenge both a linear narrative line as well as a unified autobiographical subject is the voice of the narrator, the writer-critic, the “I” of the present tense who negotiates the various narrative strands as they are being told. These fragments disrupt the past-oriented tone of the book. They are more direct, more immediate, and very angry. As in Running in the Family, these direct appeals from the authorial “I” serve to complicate any sense of chronological ordering because the voice from the present breaks into the past and interrupts that narrative. These segments also very clearly articulate the sense of cultural recovery as continually in process, of authors working through issues as they go along. In these sections Wah filters the information, “placing” it as he goes along and actively theorizing his own place within the history of family, community, and nation. The focus on writing further emphasizes the idea of process that permeates the book. This is the writer of the “journal journey” (1) that has no beginning or end. He is self-conscious about family, ethnic and racial identification and national affiliation. These sections focus explicitly on the immigrant’s sense of belonging and the diasporic condition. This voice gets angry at centralist and nationalist dominance and the appropriation of the immigrant identity. “Can’t these people from central leave anything to itself,” he asks, and adds, “Why deny the immigrant his or her real world? Why be in such a rush to

dilute?" (125).⁹² In these sections the authorial voice directly asks the questions that the text implicitly poses throughout.

IV. Faking It

In Diamond Grill Wah manages to merge theoretical and poetic concerns within the space of the "two horseshoe-shaped counters" and the "chrome and Naugahyde stools that spin freely" (33). Mapping and motion, two seemingly contradictory strategies, are blended throughout the text in order to show how subjects actively negotiate the context in which they are framed. By constantly keeping his text in motion, Wah complicates what Goellnicht refers to as the binary between "history / ideology / politics," on the one hand, and "language / form / text," on the other, and helps to demonstrate his theory in praxis (352). By giving voice to the subject who is "othered" without allowing difference (ethnic, racial, gendered, classed) to be distilled, Wah demonstrates that his ethnicity is one element among others regulating his subjectivity (Kamboureli, "Canadian Ethnic" 38) and that the politics of race, class, and gender are all crucial elements in subject formation. In other words, according to Wah, the terms "Canadian" and "Chinese-Canadian" have a range of different meanings that complicate the sense of a

⁹² Wah's view of "central" is informed not only by his ethnic/racial background but also by his regional standpoint. As a founding member of the Tish school of poets out of the University of British Columbia, Wah has always defined his writing in contradistinction to Ontario writers. Tish poets were very concerned with writing about their specific locality as opposed to a broader national project.

true and authentic identity.⁹³ Wah recognizes that even though various determinants of identity may be constant, their forms are constantly changing, so that “identity is never pure, never sure” (“Interview with Ashok Mathur” 101). Wah’s text shares with the others in this study a self-consciousness about the politics of positioning, but it is explicit in its articulation of difference. Wah shows how new, more experimental, forms of representation are needed in order to incorporate the many levels of discourse at work in his writing. His process of cultural recovery consists of sifting through his parents’ and grandparents’ stories, contemporary postcolonial and diasporic theory, recipes, newspaper articles, and academic discourse. The biotext is the representative tool that allows Wah to ground this seemingly free-floating subject in the specifics of geography and history because, by resisting generic closure, it enables Wah to move freely between public and personal histories and the local and the national.

Wah’s creative responses to questions of identity and difference find resonance in the work of a range of contemporary theorists who make such issues central to their projects. Not only is his work in dialogue with writings by postcolonial theorists who focus on hybridity and transculturation, but it also engages with a number of cultural theorists who problematize definitions of both diasporic and ethnic identification that are based on binary

⁹³ In her article “Chop Suey Writing,” Maria N. Ng critiques the representations of Chinese-Canadians in the work of Sui Sin Far, Wayson Choy, and Judy Fong Bates on the grounds that they are outdated and nostalgic. She suggests that these fictional representations do not have any basis in a social reality and that, in fact, by focusing on Chinatowns and laundries, these authors reinforce negative stereotypes. Ng recommends that writers begin to focus on hybridity in cultural identity as a more “accurate” depiction of a present day Chinese-Canadian reality. While Ng’s take is a rather prescriptive one, given that these authors are exploring a given historical period, I would suggest that Wah’s text offers the kind of response to essentialism that she seems to desire.

divisions of self and other or present and past.⁹⁴ For example, Wah's theorizing of the hyphenated space of the cafe and the prairie town makes use of one of the most commonly employed concepts in postcolonial theory, hybridity. The notion of hybridity is associated with Homi Bhabha's theorization of the relationship between colonizer and colonized as interdependent. In The Location of Culture Bhabha refers to the ambivalent space of these cultural productions as the "third Space of enunciation." Bhabha argues that the cultural production that arises from this ambivalent or in-between space makes any claim to cultural purity untenable. As we have seen, Wah refers explicitly to Pratt's work on transculturation in Diamond Grill (68-70). He also draws on both Pratt and Bhabha in his own critical writing. In his essay "Half-Bred Poetics" Wah refers to Bhabha's work on hybridity and ends with a quotation from Pratt. Closely related to theories of hybridity, theories of diaspora also inform Wah's writing. In this respect he is in dialogue with theorists like Hall and Radhakrishnan who interrogate where diasporic subjects speak from and the various factors that complicate a unified speaking position.

Wah's theorizing of his racial and ethnic identifications also leads him to engage in debates about the nation in contemporary Canadian literature and criticism. He rejects what he sees as "a nationalistic aesthetic that continually attempts to expropriate difference into its own consuming narrative" ("Half-Bred" 60) and engages instead in debates around the

⁹⁴ It is important to note that Canada cannot unproblematically be considered a postcolonial nation alongside other countries that have fought and won their liberation struggles. There is a fundamental difference between a settler society and a postcolonial one as well as between the aboriginal population of a settler society and the settlers themselves. For discussions of Canada and postcolonial theory, see Donna Bennett's article "Canada's Postcolonial Complexities," the special issue of Essays on Canadian Writing on postcolonialism, Linda Hutcheon's "Circling the Downspout of Empire," and Diana Brydon's "The White Inuit Speaks."

constructedness of the Canadian nation and the role of the nation state in the subject's identification. Cultural nationalism is not considered enabling for Wah. For Wah the idea of Canada is a dangerous one. He claims for himself its margins: "I don't want to be inducted into someone else's story, or project. Particularly one that would reduce and usurp my family's residue of ghost values to a status quo. Sorry, but I'm just not interested in this collective enterprise erected from the sacrosanct great railway imagination dedicated to harvesting a dominant white cultural landscape" (Diamond Grill 125). In "A Poetics of Ethnicity," Wah suggests that "the tactical imagination of a 'national unity' is, for some writers, a 'disunity'" (108). Instead he locates the hyphen—the in-between—as the site of contestation. This space, argues Wah, "could be the answer in this country" (Diamond Grill 53): "If you're pure anything you can't be Canadian. We'll save that name for all the mixed bloods in this country and when the cities have Heritage Days and ethnic festivals there'll be a group I can identify with, the Canadians" (54).

Mapping and motion. In Diamond Grill Wah carefully sets out the terrain of his past by describing in detail the local, the individual, the specific. He actively writes himself into the Canadian prairies and claims for himself a space there. There is intense anger in these descriptions of the particular, but there is much love. Most importantly, these descriptions do not stay still. Everyone, including people in the cafe, members of Wah's family, even the Baker Street millionaires, are in motion. Although all of them perform their different roles within the context mapped out for them, resistance is grounded in this motion. By rattling and clanging the hyphen, by layering his text to evoke the various layers of his own subjectivity, by describing community, origins and roots at the same time that he problematizes them,

Wah has created a text that pushes the limits of borders and boundaries and labels and challenges the reader to negotiate a poetics of copresence, interaction and permeability instead. As Wah suggests, “this gap between map and motion sometimes requires subversion and complication in order to reconfigure the terrain into possibility” (Faking It 106). In Diamond Grill the text itself becomes this terrain of possibility.

Chapter 6. Conclusion: Writing the Roaming Subject

As anticipated in my introduction, I have, in developing my argument, followed Bowering's useful distinction between autobiography as the replacement of the author and "biotext" as an extension of the author. Running in the Family, Ghost Works, Mothertalk, and Diamond Grill are indeed all extensions of their authors in the sense that each text draws attention to the process involved in "recovering" (in Hall's formation) and representing the fragments of a life being lived. The term "biotext" evokes both the "bio," or the real and tangible aspects of a life, and the "text," or the necessary constructedness involved in the representation of that life. By exploring the historical specificities of their origins and families in relation to both physical and imaginative spaces, all four writers not only tell stories in order to claim experience, but also foreground their dislocation through textual strategies of estrangement. For Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah, self-representation is further complicated by the impact of cultural displacement, resulting from multiple movements or migration, on the construction of their cultural identities.⁹⁵ In the process of giving shape to their diverse experiences, they bring to the surface the power relations that constitute any notion of belonging. In fact, the focus on displacement in all

⁹⁵ The term "displacement" can mean different things. Angelika Bammer defines it as "the separation of people from their native culture either through physical dislocation (as refugees, immigrants, migrants, exiles, or expatriates) or the colonizing imposition of a foreign culture" (xi) and argues that "it is one of the most formative experiences of our century" (xi). In my study the term is used as a very broad frame of reference for the kinds of movements that provide the context for each of the texts. Displacement can be either voluntary or involuntary. For example, it may include the very different experiences of immigration to Canada of Ondaatje, Marlatt, and Mary Kiyooka, the forced relocation of the Kiyooka family during WWII, Wah's father's movements between Canada and China, and Wah's own movements across the prairies. In each of these displacements, the author experiences a sense of cultural dislocation.

four texts leads to a growing mistrust about the possibility of belonging at all: Ondaatje is clearly cut off from the memory-scape of his parents; Marlatt is suspicious of language because of her gender and sexuality as well as her immigrant consciousness; Kiyooka seeks to recapture his lost mothertongue; Wah recognizes that he is “not the same anything” on account of his hybrid identity. The impulse to capture the sense of alienation from language and from place within the framework of a broader autobiographical narrative gives rise to the provocative cultural performances that constitute these biotexts.

In Running in the Family, Ghost Works, Mothertalk, and Diamond Grill the text itself becomes the site of articulation, a space for working through the different aspects of identity. All four authors foreground this site of articulation by focusing explicitly on the textuality, the language, the syntax, and the formal and generic disruption of their works.⁹⁶ Their texts act as “journal journeys” (Wah Diamond Grill 1) intended to capture the process of articulating a sense of self in relation to a shifting and, more often, absent, idea of “home.” Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah all use exploratory and innovative textual strategies to draw attention to language and how it

⁹⁶ All four writers are interested in making the text an active site of exploration by crossing disciplinary as well as generic boundaries. For example, Wah’s most recent projects are collaborations with various performance artists, photographers, and painters. Parts of Diamond Grill were curated for the exhibit Doors. Similarly, when fragments of Marlatt’s “Month of Hungry Ghosts” and Ondaatje’s Running in the Family were first published by The Capilano Review, they were interspersed with photographs of family, flora, and self-portraits. Kiyooka’s “Pacific Windows,” also first published in The Capilano Review, was initially a photo essay or montage with text running in and between full-page black and white photographs. The poem ran along the middle of the page, between photos that are doubled below the text, upside down and backwards. The poem itself doubles back at the end of the journal and begins again (upside down) so that it moves in a circular, repetitive loop. In each case, the juxtaposition of photo and text dramatically calls attention to the multidimensionality of the “space of the page” in particularly dramatic ways. The photograph seems a particularly apt complement to the biotext because not only do photos serve to provoke memory but memory is often considered to work like photography, capturing fragments of a particular time and place.

functions in their different experiences of displacement. And yet, the specificity of their experiences leads to different and distinctive textual practices. In fact, what emerges from a comparative reading of the four texts is that each writer approaches a “poetics of displacement” from a particular angle. Thus, each of my chapters actually serves to unsettle certain assumptions from earlier chapters, as the stability of language and the healing power of story become less and less sure in each of the biotexts studied. As Wah argues, “a practical and applied ‘poetics’ is a singular and personal toolbox and a writer who seeks to articulate a distinctive ethnic and, as I shall suggest, ethical sensibility requires particular and circumstantial poetics, the right tools” (“A Poetics” 52). What is evident is that there is no shared toolbox among these writers. As each of these texts makes clear, displaced subjects are not selfhoods that are essential and unchanging; they are culturally produced and historically contextualized. For example, Marlatt experiences her alienation or sense of dislocation most forcibly on the basis of her gender, whereas Wah experiences his displacement as a result of his mixed-race background. The paradoxical common denominator found by studying these four texts together rests in the fact that each resists categorization and definition.

Nonetheless, given their long history of working through similar issues in their writing, it is not surprising that Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah do share a certain poetic sensibility that is dramatically manifested in their biotexts. As we have seen, a large part of their connection is rooted in their common mistrust of a “central Canadian” politics and poetics, a mistrust that grows out of their shared experiments with the contestatory long poem in the 1970s. The moment of the long poem in Canadian literary history was

an event that opened up a number of literary avenues, including the examination of both the “geo” (as place and space) and the “bio”, encouraging, in particular, the exploration of ethnicity and multiculturalism, as writers of the long poem shifted their attention from a national consciousness to the specifics of the local. Because most writers of the long poem refused to define themselves in relationship to what was recognized as a more mainstream literature which they saw as being produced largely in Ontario, they resisted the category “Canadian,” and instead focused on the particularities of a given time and space and their relationship to it.⁹⁷ The focus on specifics in the long poem also allowed for a shift to the anecdotal, so that small stories grounded in the particularities of the local replaced larger, more universalizing tendencies in narrative. At the same time, there also lurked within the anecdote an attention to language that was disruptive, disturbing, so that poetry and narrative were forced to confront one another in these texts. Similar tensions—between the local and the national, the individual and the community, and between a minute attention to language and a concern for overarching narrative patterns—got carried over into the biotexts that are the focus of this study.

If the long poem arose from a particular historical climate in which many writers were attempting to write back to what they considered a “centralist” poetics, the biotext is a similar type of language “event.” During the last two decades, there has been more and more critical attention brought

⁹⁷ This construction of “Canadian literature” as being produced largely in Ontario is still apparently alive and well. For example, in her 1998 study of prairie literature Deborah Keahey argues that “in the Canadian case, it is still generally accepted that national identity has been narrowly defined around southern Ontario’s cultural production and reception. Southern Ontario, also known as ‘central Canada,’ is thus not itself a region, but the centre of the nation, and a text produced there is automatically considered ‘Canadian literature’” (161).

to bear on constructions of race and ethnicity in relation to a national imaginary as identity politics have come to the fore. There has also been a growing interest in the theorizing of life-writing and autobiography as literary genres. I am suggesting that the biotext grows out of and responds to these critical emergences. Just as the long poem both questioned and absorbed genres such as the lyric, the epic, the drama, the documentary, and the prose poem, the biotext disrupts the boundaries amongst the various genres that it both resists and takes part in, including autobiography, biography, the immigrant “coming to voice” narrative, and the prose poem. Because of the focus on displacement in each of the texts, the process of writing the self is intimately connected to a reevaluation of language, the body, and the body in (and out of) place. In each case there is a desire to claim experience for oneself, while still acknowledging the tremendous shaping influences that have the power to define subjects. Rather than rely on the more familiar “norms and forms” of autobiography as a way of representing their experiences of displacement, all four writers foreground their use of a poetics of process—one that stresses deferral and prolongation—as a possible strategy to attempt to capture the tension that is generated by the impulse to write one’s self into place, while, at the same time, resisting the homogenizing tendencies equated with belonging. In the case of the biotext, the authors make themselves present throughout the writing, ordering, filtering, and actively negotiating of the multiple threads of their lives.⁹⁸ As Wah argues, “home is how, not where, you hang your hat”

⁹⁸ In a process poetics the writer becomes reader and writes him or herself into the text as a subject of experience. According to Miriam Nichols, “form unfolds behind the poet as he moves through a poem or a life, rather than in or before her as an origin or a thesis to be explicated. Only as the poem approaches its end—the end of the poet’s life in the case of the life-long poem—does the form begin to emerge and then only fully for others, rather

("Strangle Two" 50). Although the biotext does rely on the recognizable narrative structure of autobiography, the intensive focus on language as event and process as complex and contradictory serves to draw attention away from the overarching shape of it.

The connections among these writers, first forged as "long poets" and then cemented as self-conscious writers of the biotext, was made even more evident in the fall of 1999 at a conference in Vancouver celebrating the life and commemorating the death of Roy Kiyooka.⁹⁹ Wah, Marlatt, and Ondaatje were all active participants in the conference (in fact, both Marlatt and Ondaatje both were on the conference committee and were instrumental in conceiving the event). The event was both exciting and enabling (and of distinct relevance to the argument of this study) because it was more than just a celebration of Kiyooka's work. The conference also took up the political challenge, at once literary and political, of determining how best to situate Kiyooka in relation to a Canadian literary history while acknowledging his own resistance to what he considered the centralizing (and disempowering) tendencies of the Canadian literary establishment that was based in Ontario.¹⁰⁰

In a paper entitled "Unraveling Roy Kiyooka," Roy Miki gave a fascinating account of Kiyooka's complex and ambivalent relationship to

than the one who has lived it to its end and will never see the whole of it. Hence the readerly quality of process poetry (the writer reads her own writing), and the absence of devices that distance or ironize; the poet is finding out as he goes along, as it were..." (n.p.).

⁹⁹ The "Roy Kiyooka Conference" took place at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design from October 1-2, 1999. Participants included George Bowering, Joy Kogawa, Sarah Sheard, Gerry Shikatani, Roy Miki, and Sharon Thesen.

¹⁰⁰ Kiyooka self-published most of his limited edition chapbooks out of his Blue Mule Press in Vancouver's Chinatown. His chapbooks were distributed for free. He consciously resisted the kind of Canadian literary power inherent in the big publishing houses in central Canada. He saw his position as a writer in opposition to literary institutions. For more on publishing's relationship to canon formation, see Davey; Lecker; Miki.

“Canada,” in which he suggested that, when it came to the Canadian establishment, Kiyooka could be thought of as a pivot between insiderness and outsiderness. According to Miki, Kiyooka was both of and not of. Miki explained how these tensions both drove Kiyooka’s artistic undertakings and were dramatically illustrated throughout his life. On the one hand, he and his family were labeled “enemy aliens” and relocated from Calgary to Opal, Alberta during WWII; on the other, during the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, he was celebrated as one of Canada’s foremost abstract painters and, in fact, represented Canada at the Sao Paulo Biennial in 1966 and at Expo 70 in Osaka, Japan. Small wonder that his experience of enforced displacement and the shifting sense of an “I” necessary for exploring both the “Japanese” and the “Canadian” aspects of his Japanese-Canadian identity complicate, for Kiyooka, any straightforward sense of national belonging or any easy voicing of his experience. He manifested the discomfort of his positioning in his writing in which both his sense of self and his sense of self in language are brought to the surface and interrogated in particularly dramatic ways. Acknowledging the constructed nature of his various positionings, Kiyooka chose in his photography and poetry to “roam,” actively and self-consciously resisting the labels that he found so disabling. For Kiyooka, geocultural spaces thus became “athwarted spaces,” as he continually troubled the often naturalized connection between identity and place and resisted his incorporation into a larger “Canadian” narrative. According to Miki, “roaming” subjects like Kiyooka significantly alter the way we position them in terms of a national imaginary. As we have seen in this study, they also serve to challenge the conventional ways we conceive of and read their autobiographical narratives.

Miki's paper offers a useful blueprint for thinking about the textual strategies of each of the authors in this study. Works like Running in the Family, Ghost Works, Mothertalk, and Diamond Grill also foreground the rupture between place and identity that results from a "roaming" subject. There is no natural or stable connection between the authorial subject and place; instead this relationship is in process, in flux. Official multiculturalism, argue its critics, insists that the subject stays still; however, the texts in this study actively resist settling.¹⁰¹ By writing biotexts and working with a poetics of process, Wah, Marlatt, Ondaatje, and Kiyooka manage to explore the possibility of the subject in motion. And yet, as we have seen, each of the authors focuses on the specific historical details of his or her past. In the same way that Kiyooka needs to articulate the way he and his family were constructed by the Canadian state during WWII, Wah clearly describes the impact of Canadian immigration laws on Chinese-Canadians and the continuing pressure to conform to a system predicated upon racist stereotypes. This is precisely the tension that all four authors negotiate in their texts: all allow for an exploration of language and the arbitrariness of the word while carefully mapping out the details of very specific terrain and paying attention to the particular histories attached to them.

For Ondaatje that terrain is both spatial and temporal. It includes the lush, dense landscape of Columbo and the surrounding countryside of his parents' generation's Ceylon. The act of traveling back to his birthplace, and, perhaps more importantly, to his parents' memory-scape, offers him glimpses of where he came from. Other people's stories are filtered through

¹⁰¹ Kamboureli describes what she sees as the ideological assumptions behind the Canadian Multiculturalism Act: "that ethnic subjectivity, understood and contained in collective terms, is always determined by reference to a distant, and often dehistoricized past" (Scandalous Bodies 135).

him as he attempts to make connections by writing himself into the landscape of Ceylon. There is some sense, in the end, that he is able to locate himself there. The stories of others, however fragmented, do provide fragile links to a distant time and place. In spite of his multiple movements and the rupture between his present and his past, of the four authors examined, Ondaatje experiences the least disruption in terms of his relationship to place. In this sense, his is the most conventional of the four biotexts under review here (and it is also the first chronologically).

In Running in the Family Ondaatje does begin to tease out the various layers of his own displaced self, and his text sets out a number of the challenges that the other works actively take up. For example, how does the writer of a biotext capture the subject in motion's positioning in terms of both national and ethnic identification? For Ondaatje his journey back to Ceylon allows him to explore this challenge. By traveling back (both in terms of place and time), he manages to capture fragments of his own past and construct them into a version of himself. In this sense Ondaatje combines, as we have seen, aspects of his long poems (a fragmented narrative voice, a displaced subject, a mistrust of language) with a firm desire to locate himself within a specific community. However, the process of gathering the various traces of his past is a complicated one and one that resists linear and chronological ordering. Ondaatje discovers that language is suspect in the sense that everyone he engages with tells a different story and no two versions of the past are the same. Nonetheless, by the end of Ondaatje's text, there is still the sense that the subject can be captured, that it can be made to stand still. The traces of his past, however fragmented, do ultimately add up to an awareness of himself as a bridge between two very different places.

This tension between belonging and not belonging—the notion of “roaming”—is one that is actively taken up and developed in the texts by Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah. Each of the writers is highly self-conscious about his or her use of language as a means of destabilization. Marlatt may be particularly aware of language as a disorienting tool because of her own negotiation of the patriarchal structures of language. For Marlatt, the dawning of her gender consciousness (including a particularly heightened, albeit specific, sense of the body) reinforces her own concerns about her cultural identity. Like Ondaatje, Marlatt travels “home” to try to come to some terms with her past, but, unlike him, Marlatt finds her travels are more alienating than a source of comfort. Not only is she distanced from the places she travels through as a tourist, but she is also made more and more aware of her otherness in terms of gender and sexuality. As a woman, an immigrant, a lesbian, a tourist, she finds herself forced to negotiate a culture that is not of her own making. For example, in “Month of Hungry Ghosts,” she recognizes her essential apartness from a language that is not her own when she says to herself: “you caught in a language that sounded strange, stranger yourself, deprived of words that spoke what you knew” (94). Throughout Ghost Works Marlatt “roams,” constantly drawing attention to the disjunction between here and there, and probing language in an attempt to create a new, more representative, body language.

Kiyooka also writes his estrangement into being in his manuscripts for Mothertalk. Kiyooka’s process of discovering the past, of making use of the past in the present, and of giving it literary life, demonstrates his continuing preoccupation with language, identity, belonging, and inheritance. His creation of a distinctive shared autobiographical voice and his refusal to let his

narrative “settle” show how he is much more than a transcriber or filter of his mother’s stories; he is an active co-producer of them. His mother’s stories provide him with the raw material for imagining a set of origins that are, to a large extent, obscured by his growing up on the Canadian prairies, and Kiyooka rewrites them as a way to connect imaginatively to a past from which he is ultimately cut off. He acknowledges the tentative nature—the constructedness—of these connections by keeping the narrative in motion and resisting the idea of a finished product. For Kiyooka, writing the life of a “roaming” or shifting subject necessarily disturbs any easy relationship between language, place, and self. Throughout his manuscripts he strives to manifest this disturbance in textual form.

This notion of disturbance as resistance is perhaps most clearly articulated in Wah’s writing. By claiming the space of the hyphen, Wah “disclaims” both the delimiting space of the “ethnic” (“Chinese”) and the space of the nation (“Canadian”), and he refuses to be categorized as any one thing. In Wah’s writing, the sense of a static self that is somehow locatable in the past tense is ultimately abandoned in favour of a self in flux, continually changing, performing. Wah learns from his father that “language can be faked,” and thus it can be a tool for subversion. Unlike Kiyooka and Marlatt who attempt to articulate a pre- or originary experience in language, he recognizes that, because he is too far away from any originary experience in language, his language roots are too “messed up.”¹⁰² Instead Wah probes the authority of language to tease out the in-betweenness of the “father-tongue.” He admits, “I took to the poem as to jazz, as a way to subvert the authority of the formal, as a way to sluice out ‘my’ own voice for myself”

¹⁰² From an interview with the author, May 11, 2000.

(Faking It 16). In Diamond Grill his response to linguistic authority is to focus on the range of discourses that constitute himself as a subject: throughout the text he blends academic writing with newspaper articles, local gossip, family recipes, and the rhythms of everyday speech in Nelson, B.C. Wah thus draws attention both to the specificity of place—the small town B.C. diner—while acknowledging the variety of discourses that can be (need be?) faked within that particular context.

Clearly these four writers struggle with ways to inscribe their selves, including their relationships to language and to place, while still allowing these connections to be tentative, in motion. How do you tell yourself the story of yourself? How do you claim a past in spite of a history of displacement? These are particularly crucial questions at this moment in Canadian literary history when so many writers are insisting on new more diverse cultural performances that resist the pull of the national imaginary. Literature of displacement has traditionally been seen to be preoccupied with either the writer's assimilating to the dominant culture or challenging assimilation by maintaining and celebrating a nostalgic view of the past. Time and place—history and geography—become doubled in these narratives. According to Francesco Loriggio, works by immigrant writers tend to reflect the crisis of being caught between two worlds and the difficult and painful process of either coping or extricating oneself from that situation. In Other Solitudes Linda Hutcheon suggests that “doubleness is the essence of the immigrant experience” (9), and in A Meeting of Streams M.G. Vassanji argues that the South Asian poet in Canada “may be said to possess that double vision which comes only when one is alienated from the dominant group” (8). For many writers attempting to come to terms with their dislocation

(physical and/or cultural), doubleness—a celebration of a near-forgotten past or a focus on belonging in the here and now is a strategy for survival.

However, although doubleness may inform their writing, it is not in itself an empowering trope for writers like Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah because it cannot adequately contain the multiplicity of their identifications.

When I began this study, I called it “Claiming a Space in the Contemporary Canadian Biotext” because I read these writers’ resistance to genre and to more centralizing narratives of nation as coming from their insistence on their own experiences and their insistence upon conceptualizing such experiences within the specifics of the local. I still think this is a major preoccupation in their works. However, I now see that it is in fact the simultaneous and somewhat contradictory temptation to resist, even to refuse, claiming such space that marks these texts as a radical break from their predecessors. Although the focus on the local and on the anecdote is also crucially important in earlier critical texts such as Robert Kroetsch’s “Unhiding the Hidden” and Dennis Lee’s “Country, Cadence, Silence,” the emphasis changes in texts by writers who blend the creative and the critical in their explorations of place, language and identity and who write from a perspective of not wanting to or not being able to inscribe themselves into the landscape. For the authors in this study, origins, memories, and language are often located in a range of different places. “How do you grow a past” when the past is marked by a history of displacement? There is a very real tension among the need to ground oneself within a particular context, on the one hand, and the equally pressing need to acknowledge the various shaping factors that are at work in such a context, and the need to acknowledge the

subject's own motion, the desire to shape oneself as distinct from imposed definitions, on the other.

By keeping this tension at the forefront of their writing, Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah demand that the reader take on a new responsibility. In *Scandalous Bodies*, Kamboureli describes the role of what she calls "learners" in a multicultural society: "they don't simply learn knowledge as a specifically designated object: they also learn how knowledge is produced, perceiving the power relations usually concealed behind the force of knowledge. This pedagogy, then, deals with a different kind of knowledge, the kind that traces the relationship of knowledge to ideology, and vice versa" (26). This is the kind of reader these texts demand. Because of the generic instability of the biotext, there is a danger that it will fall through the cracks, both in terms of critical and pedagogical attention. Texts that refuse categories are often considered "difficult" texts in the classroom and are overlooked as a result. However, it is precisely because the biotext plays off and with different genres, that it allows the reader to imagine new entry points into a range of texts, including essays, poetry, fiction, autobiography and biography, as well as into the wide range of other contemporary texts that self-consciously cross the borders between these categories. The biotext is certainly not the only strategy for exploring the cross-currents of displacement and self-representation. However, teasing out the implications of the term and the practice and seeing such texts as marking a literary event that can be traced back to the contestatory long poem can potentially enable a useful examination of the complex relationships between language, place, and self, and the multiple ways these relationships can be manifested in textual form. By studying particular examples of these

articulations by Ondaatje, Marlatt, Kiyooka, and Wah, larger questions about belonging, both ethnic and national, and the subject's constantly shifting relationship to place and to language offer themselves up for further analysis.

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