

# **Self and Other in Chinese Canadian Literature: Identity and Belonging in Larissa Lai's *When Fox Is a Thousand***

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Asian North American literature did not begin to emerge as a separate genre in mainstream discourse until the late 1980s and early 1990s with publications by so-called “ethnically Asian” authors. By uniting American and Canadian writers with different Asian backgrounds under a common goal, namely the much-needed addressing of their ethnic, political and social situations, a long-lasting silence was broken and various individual and collective histories of racialization, marginalization, paternalism, and sexism expressed. It was through the literary portrayal of problematic issues such as identity, cultural assimilation, displacement, and hybridity, which are inherent in the situation of “minorities” living in a dominating society, that Asian North American writers found their voice in the larger community. In turn, through finding this voice many writers began to experience liberation from mainstream society’s oppression, and discovered a means of further articulating their place, identity formation, and cultural space in Canada and the United States.

## **1. Creating Space: Cultural, Ethnic, Sexual Belonging**

The novel *When Fox Is a Thousand* by Larissa Lai was published in 1995 and focuses on establishing ethnic and sexual identity, on constructing spaces of belonging for racialized and marginalized individuals facing the white Canadian mainstream. Lai attempts to create a shared history for minority members, to rewrite white Canadian history for those discriminated against for their ethnic background and sexual orientation. She calls the members of this oppressed minority the “diaspora of the queer,” addressing not only Chinese Canadian community members, but also homosexuals, or “queers.” She also discusses discrimination on part of the Chinese Canadian community against queers within this community, adding to the complexities of finding a sense of belonging in an environment under pressure from the inside and outside.

Her novel’s unique structure mirrors the many-layered difficulties that diasporic members face when coming to terms with their hybrid identity. It is set at different locations and places in time, including Vancouver in the late 1980s and China in the ninth century. The three protagonists, similar at the core despite obvious differences, are Artemis Wong, a young woman living in contemporary Vancouver; the poetess Yu

Hsuan-Chi, living in ancient China; and Fox, a female, mythical creature that has the ability to transcend time and space. Fox is not bound to a single geographical location or a specific point in time. This mobility enables her to link the other two women.

All three characters struggle with creating a space of belonging for themselves in an environment that discriminates against them for ethnic and sexist reasons. They are all lesbian, and face deep prejudice from all sides. Artemis, around whom most of the novel revolves, is also exposed to racism for her Chinese background in Vancouver. Her sense of self is fragmented, her identity accordingly fragile. *When Fox Is A Thousand* addresses current socio-political problems which young Chinese Canadian women face, while Vancouver acts as the main physical location where their search for identity takes place.

Lai uses a Chinese myth to relate to Chinese Canadians' roots, whether they still maintain ties to China or simply feel connected to the country due to distant ancestors or white Canadians' associations. At the same time she criticizes conventional traditionalism by portraying Fox as lesbian, and discloses the term "traditional" as being highly constructed and ideological. Embedding an ancient plot in a modern setting (Canada in the late 1980s) and feeding an age-old myth with contemporary notions of class and sexuality (personified by an economically independent, lesbian poetess in ninth century China), Lai manages to create a new space: one where racialized, queer Chinese women discover a sense of identity and belonging.

*When Fox Is a Thousand* is Larissa Lai's first novel. During her early years at university, Lai searched for people and communities that would give her a sense of belonging and acceptance. She gradually found her way into Vancouver's anti-racist community, following the work of the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop, a non-profit organization which supports emerging Asian Canadian writers. In the summer of 1990, Lai worked at an exhibition called "Yellow Peril: Reconsidered." 25 Asian Canadian artists presented a large selection of photography, film and video on a tour across Canada, aiming at drawing increasing attention to Asian Canadian art. As Lai stated in an interview I did with her in August 2007, this experience influenced her immensely intellectually and emotionally. She started doing book and visual art reviews and eventually received a nine-month grant by the Canada Council to write her first novel.

## 2. Chinese Canadian in Contemporary Vancouver

Artemis Wong, the novel's protagonist, is an orphan adopted by a white, Asia-enthusiastic couple. Her father is a professor of Asian Studies and her mother a curator at a museum of ancient cultures, causing her friend Diane to wonder whether Artemis is "just part of the collection" (*Fox* 50). Artemis has apparently never considered her ethnic background to be a large constituent of her identity, but as the novel progresses and she spends more time with other Canadian women of Chinese descent, her unknown past becomes increasingly important.

As a young woman who has not yet completely reached adulthood, Artemis is searching for a place for herself in the adult world. What Jennifer Ann Ho observes concerning Asian American youths is equally true for Chinese Canadian adolescents like Artemis:

Adolescence marks a time of exploration and experimentation, as these young adults attempt to find their place in society. And Asian American adolescents exemplify this marginalized status through the instability of both their age and their ethnic or cultural affiliation; ... The uncertainty of ethnic identity combined with the classic instability of adolescence makes ... Asian-ethnic American adolescents ... attend to the identity shaping forces of the dominant society, as well as to pressures from within their ethnic families. (5-6)

Although Artemis never met her biological parents, her childhood was influenced by a certain “Chineseness” due to her adoptive parents’ great interest in Asia. She spends increasing amounts of time with a group of Chinese Canadian women—Lai merely hints at these women’s ethnic background, never explicitly describing them as “Chinese Canadian”—and is thus exposed to the contrast between white Canadian and Chinese Canadian lifestyles. Throughout the novel, Artemis tries to find a place of belonging for her racialized, marginalized and queer self; as suggested above, this search is even more pronounced due to the fact that she is in a transition period from youth to adulthood.

Initially, there are few things that link Artemis to her Chinese past and the life of her biological mother. There is her Chinese last name. There is the odor of mothballs, which is of some significance because this “was the smell of China, the smell of the small wooden trunk her biological mother had passed on to her adoptive mother” (Fox 31). Describing the sensation caused by smelling mothballs, Lai is possibly referring to Freud’s theory about the human unconscious. Freud claims that memories buried in the unconscious can be triggered by smells. When an individual experiences something too horrific for the mind to grasp, this experience is hidden in the deep recesses of the mind. A memory of the event resurfaces when the subject is exposed to a sense of creepiness, something that makes the flesh crawl, in the present. This feeling is by no means a conscious recollection of a given event, but rather a quiet, persistent haunting.

In Artemis’ case and referring to the odor of mothballs, Lai seems to be addressing a collective Chinese Canadian memory buried deep within the young woman. The rupture from Chinese lifestyle that her ancestors grappled with when emigrating generations earlier makes up part of her consciousness, the author’s suggestion goes; her forebearers’ grief and suffering link her to China in some uncanny way even now. Consciously, Artemis feels no special connection to China at first. It is only when her friend Ethan does a photo shoot with her wearing a traditional Chinese costume that a fire is kindled inside of Artemis, sparking her curiosity for discovering the “Chinese” side of herself. Lai describes it as a deep-seated aching that might be called “exercising the collective memory” (Fox 32): “as [the Chinese costume] engulfed her, it felt all the more alive.” At the same time, the tiny shoes that go with it evoke pictures of

foot binding, and “Artemis was sure that she herself would not have the constitution to endure such torture” (*Fox* 33). Also, “[t]he stink of mothballs rose from it, strong and poisonous. The odour threw her” (*Fox* 31). Artemis feels connected to the broader culture that the traditional costume is part of, but is at the same time repelled by the method of foot binding and the odor of mothballs. This symbolizes her position between two “worlds,” suggesting unconscious memories of her Chinese past.

As the flame longing to discover the “Chinese” part of herself is kindled and the feeling of estrangement from her Canadian surroundings grows, the wish to find a space of belonging in a world she does not seem to fit into any longer increases. She has never been to China, but begins to feel a subconscious connection to an undefined place: for instance, walking on the beach one day, “[t]he sand was damp with a chill that made Artemis think of the ground in another country” (*Fox* 68). Donald Goellnicht suggests that these sensations “of racial or ethnic memory incorporate Artemis into the body of the Chinese diasporic community, routing her back to a sense of Chineseness even though she is not a daily member of that community” (164).

Pondering the idea of a collective memory and a link to an imaginary past, she wonders

where the melancholy she sometimes felt came from? The possibility that she might not recognize an act of repression when it struck? Or did it come from tapping into a collective memory of all the deaths, abandonments, and slow stresses of war that have gone unspoken through generations? Perhaps the precise stories and politics had been lost, but the emotional memory moves from one generation to the next as surely as any genetic trait. (*Fox* 89)

Lai explores the idea of an emotional memory moving through generations throughout her book, sending Artemis on a search for belonging, identity, and meaning. Goellnicht suggests that Artemis “must re-inhabit her past if she is to come to terms with her identity and the feelings of loss she experiences,” borrowing Anne Cheng’s term of “racial grief.”

Artemis begins to grapple with a sense of disorientation and uprootedness, part of the collective memory that many Chinese Canadians arguably share. In the tug-of-war between the Canadian mainstream and the Chinese diaspora, Artemis is portrayed as slowly connecting with her Chinese roots in order to find a stronger sense of self in the present. This process is not a conscious one, happening without her realizing it. She feels increasingly that she does not fit in mainstream society and probes for alternatives, slipping into the small community of Chinese Canadian queer women almost by accident. They are not yet a cohesive group, however, but still fragmented and tentative in their behavior towards each other. While Artemis finds friends among them, she does not find belonging and a home.

Artemis suffers from the lack of a home: “[S]he felt more than ever as though she didn’t really live here. It was a problem she could never describe to anyone how her own home never felt like hers” (*Fox* 94). In her article “Ethnicizing Gender,” Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong writes that “for the ‘native son’ or ‘native daughter,’ prevented by ra-

cism from feeling at home in their homeland, the most urgent struggle is that of fashioning a Chinese American selfhood" (124). This fashioning of selfhood as something between being Chinese and being Canadian is a struggle that Artemis faces. When reflecting on a home and belonging, she realizes which material objects, interestingly enough, mean the most to her: a "little ivory statuette [and] pictures of an Asian family she had bought at a garage sale having no idea who any of them were" (Fox 98). The pictures of the Asian family, whose subjects are unknown but strangely comforting to Artemis, symbolize her longing to fit in without being perceived as different, as "the other." The small statue, a genuine antique depicting a traditionally clad Chinese woman, foreshadows the character of Fox entering her life.

### 3. Enter Fox

The fox myth is very well-known and popular in China. The legend goes that a fox can take on the shape of a woman by animating a recently deceased body, and starts paying regular visits to a young man. The man feels drawn to the fox-lady, takes her in and starts neglecting everything else. After a while, the man becomes ill due to the fox-spirit's bad influence: the "human and non-human are not, in the proper order of things, supposed to become intimately involved" (Fox 256). In her novel, Lai "take[s] that mythology apart so [she] could play with its gender and class biases" (Fox 256), portraying Fox as a lesbian spirit who starts haunting Artemis. However, Fox is not presented as an absolute threat to those she visits, as she traditionally is in the myth. Instead, she is given a voice and tells her own story, and thus

ceases to be an evil or undesirable seducing spirit, as she is in most of the original, misogynist Chinese versions, and becomes instead a figure of powerful challenge to Confucian patriarchal values as well as to contemporary heteronormativity. (Goellnicht 159)

In the Afterword to the novel Lai emphasizes that she recognizes the "traditional" as being a highly constructed and ideological concept and that she has "very little interest in those old colonial tropes of the 'authentic' because they are invested in the production of an exotic other in order to maintain the centrality of the white European subject" (Fox 257). While aware of the dangers of romanticizing a time or place in history and creating some kind of idealized origin myth for the Chinese Canadian diaspora, Lai nevertheless finds it essential to use a construed, fake past to create a present for herself and people in similar situations as a base to build a future upon. In her own words,

I am trying to produce a consciously artificial history for those of us who come from histories that are broken, fragmented and discontinuous, histories that exist in multiple languages and that have survived multiple traumas and multiple acts of forgetting. In the words of poet and essayist Fred Wah, I am "faking it." I see a kind of liberation in fakery and its acknowledgment, especially in contradistinction to notions of pureness and authenticity, which in the end produce only fascism and violence." (Fox 257)

Lai offers an alternative access to history for minority members who are united by violence, suffering, and shared traumas of the past. Though the languages used to describe this grief changed over time and many stories were almost forgotten, due to an imposed silence inflicted by dominant society, Lai suggests that history can be reconstructed to offer minority groups a common space of belonging. In blending real and fake elements, a unique version of the past can be created to suit a minority of whichever kind. Any type of marginalized group—discriminated against for its ethnicity, gender, class, etc.—can construct a space for its members that is free of mainstream expectations to a large extent. This amalgamation of fact and fiction can move the subject away from notions of “authenticity” and “purity,” making way for societal acceptance and integration instead. Societal progress in this sense is described by David Eng and Alice Hom as being “not about the valorization of a static past but about reconstituting that past, transforming the contemporary, and imagining a more liveable present and future” (8).

Because the mainstream associates Chinese-looking people in Canada with traditional Chinese culture and the Chinese Canadian diaspora is influenced by this view, Lai goes back a long way into ancient Chinese history to find a base for her reconstruction of the diaspora’s past—giving her tale a modern twist by turning gender aspects upside down, for instance, so that her contemporary readers can identify more closely with the subject matter. Acknowledging the highly constructed “traditional” aspects of the novel (employing an ancient Chinese myth) and at the same time addressing current issues of race, sex, and gender makes *When Fox Is A Thousand* an authentic tale not in spite of, but precisely because of its fakery.

The character of Fox has a “decidedly diasporic identity that enables her to move through space ... as well as time” (Goellnicht 162); this diasporic identity parallels Artemis’ growing sense of self-identity. The novel switches frequently from scenes set in ancient China to the plot in contemporary Vancouver. When Fox finds shelter one night with two women in ancient China, she is so touched by their generous hospitality—and the fact that they are secret lovers—that she leaves them a pot of gold when departing. Lai depicts a certain friendliness and solidarity on the part of Fox in this scene, created by the three characters’ shared homosexuality and awareness of male oppression (cf. *Fox* 97).

Fox, like Artemis, is on a search. Hers is not as pressing as Artemis’ search for identity, but Fox, too, likes the idea of acceptance and belonging. She says,

I look forward to a time whereby dealings with humans are not so uncertain, a time when I can tell at a glance whether there is a chance of trust and affection. (I need humans now; foxes are bad company.) ... The only complaint that I have is the more time I spend in human form, the more human I become. And the more human I become, the more I want a human past of my own—festivals, candy, costumed dancers, and simple magic that can be easily and delightfully disassembled like an acrobat’s tricks. (*Fox* 29)

Fox expresses a wish in the novel for what Lai does in reality: creating a past that is suited to fit the diasporic individual. Assembling and disassembling feelings, memo-

ries, wishes, and ideas creates a past, present and future which grants marginalized individuals a space of belonging. Donald Goellnicht observes that Fox and Artemis “are two sides of the same coin, each seeking completion in the other” (164). The above quote sheds light on the similarity of their situations: as Artemis begins to identify more and more with her Chinese heritage, she longs for a more intimate and familiar level of interaction with China—whatever this concept may mean to her. Much of this longing manifests itself on a subconscious level. Fox, who wants to become human, shows a distinct awareness for human affairs from the beginning of the novel. Artemis slowly discovers the meaning of her ethnic background while Fox has wanted to become human for a long time. They are alike in their desire to fit in, to be part of a group they do not yet belong to.

Artemis’ increased identification with her Chinese heritage does not occur randomly but is caused by the social context she lives in. She looks Chinese or Asian, which makes white society associate her with a place and a past she is unfamiliar with. She accepts a summer job in Hong Kong, eager to experience China and to discover whether she will fit in “there” more than “here.”

In Hong Kong, Fox watches Artemis closely but doesn’t reveal her presence to the young woman. Artemis is trying to cope with her new surroundings, realizing that she still sticks out—very differently than in Canada, not for her outer appearance, but for her awkward behavior and inability to speak Cantonese. She feels foreign and isolated once again, much more so than in Vancouver. Lai describes a problem that many racialized individuals face: being accepted neither in their country of birth nor in their ancestors’ home country.

To use Eurocentric terminology, Chinese Canadians like Artemis are Easterners in the West and Westerners in the East. Artemis muses on her impressions of Hong Kong:

To her, the tall buildings and shiny cars are mere overgrowth, a disguise, concealing the past. This she glimpses when she peers into the backs of shops, or steals up certain side streets where the cobblestones have not yet been paved over. ... She knows these are the things a Western tourist would see. This disturbs her. Is she trying to prove to herself how quaint and archaic these people are, even the ones who have managed to disguise themselves in three-piece suits and well-cut dresses? Or is she merely looking for shadows of herself, glimpses of a truth beyond the dull surface mirage of twentieth-century life in any city? She does not know that beneath every mirage is another mirage. (Fox 124)

Artemis knows that she is looking for the China she is associated with by mainstream Canadian society. Searching for her Chinese past by looking for glimpses of Chinese life as it was before modernity crept in, she realizes that this past has made way for the 20th century, which manifests itself similarly in any large city around the globe. While Artemis finds life in Hong Kong inspiring and challenging, she does not find a “home” or sense of belonging there.

Back in Vancouver and towards the end of the novel, Fox reveals herself to Artemis and starts visiting her often. In accordance with the myth, the young woman be-

comes so dependent on the spirit that she withdraws completely from her former social life, surfacing only once more. A funeral ceremony is held in honor of Ming, a former friend of Artemis' found murdered in the park. The character of Ming changes dramatically over the course of the novel: when she discovers that her father is responsible for the deaths of countless factory workers in a Chinese sweatshop, her world turns upside down. Her father's religiosity seems a farce considering his unwillingness to admit to having caused so much pain and grief. Ming realizes that her parents, as Chinese Canadians, have succumbed to societal pressures of assimilation, her father treating his Chinese employees no better than white company owners do. Although her father is far from being accepted as "fully Canadian," he continuously tries to assimilate to Canadian society—a futile attempt that merely reinforces his constant oppression by the mainstream. Ming's transformation from a quiet, religious girl (still called Mercy, incidentally) into a shaved, punky artist is a vibrant example of how societal influences can change the self-perception and self-expectation of individuals under extreme pressure. Setting her death towards the end of the novel brilliantly depicts the rises and falls that minority subjects go through on their search for identity and belonging in an oppressive environment.

In the last part of the novel, Fox tells Artemis a number of traditional Chinese tales that "instead of fixing a rigid ethnic identity for Artemis, carve out for her a hybrid identity that unites Chinese myths with Western fairy tales, ... animal with human, living with dead—an identity truly mobile, diasporic, and transpacific in its diverse dimensions" (Goellnicht 165). The fluidity of identity that Fox offers through her stories enables Artemis to feel "Chinese" and "Canadian" at the same time, while defining these terms to fit her individual self. She now manages to be part of multiple worlds instead of a single one, being at times queer, at times straight, at times more Chinese than Canadian and vice versa, at times a woman, and at times something else.

The space Fox constructs with her tales liberates Artemis from mainstream societal categories to a certain extent, but the coexistence between spirit and human does not last. In the end, Fox leaves Artemis because she sees that "congress between the divine and the mortal should not take place with such sordid regularity" (*Fox* 248). Inevitably, the question arises what statement Lai is making about hybrid identities such as Fox offers: is the fusion of these multiple worlds too much for a single person's self-perception? Or is it the extent to which Lai describes these binary oppositions simply too radical?

#### 4. Diverse Diaspora: Racialized and Queer

Lai discusses questions of a hybrid identity all throughout *When Fox Is a Thousand*. Early in the novel, she reflects on the name "Artemis Wong":

A funny name for a Chinese girl. I will correct you. Chinese-Canadian. Make no mistake, because her name is a name that marks a generation of immigrant children whose parents loved the idea of the Enlightenment and thought they would find it blooming in



the full heat of its rational fragrance right here in North America. So here she is, with a good mouthful of a first name to go with the short, crisp monosyllable last—Artemis, the virgin huntress. It's Greek. (*Fox* 20)

Interestingly, Artemis' friend Diane is also called Wong. "Diane" is the Roman version of the hunting goddess, so "Artemis Wong" and "Diane Wong" are essentially the same names. Lai may be hinting at the widespread notion that "all Chinese" have similar, monosyllabic surnames. Thus, she juxtaposes notions of Chinese and Canadian identity, even adding European elements to the mix.

Lai's novel, importantly enough, does not only describe a search for ethnic identity, but also addresses issues of sexuality. Most characters in *When Fox Is a Thousand* are both Chinese Canadian and homosexual, suffering double marginalization. Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong argues that "sexuality propels the protagonists into diverse relationships whose configurations embody the workings of social forces, especially those of ethnicity" (125). Lai examines the interdependent relationship of sexuality and ethnicity closely. Donald Goellnicht rightly suggests that she shows "a determination to (re)construct for Chinese Canadian diasporic subjects an historical and/or mythic past in Asia, as well as a commitment to exploring Chinese and Chinese Canadian queer, especially lesbian, subjectivities," calling this process "the simultaneous queering of the diaspora and diasporizing of the queer" (155-156). The notion of "being queer" is introduced into the Chinese diaspora, which—similarly to mainstream society—often has no tolerance for homosexuality. Not only racialized but also sexually marginalized, it is even more difficult as an "ethnic" queer to find foothold and acceptance in the community; especially because the community itself is a minority enclave and already marked as "different" by the mainstream. Thus, Chinese Canadian queers deal with discrimination both in mainstream society and the Chinese Canadian diaspora.

In their book *Q&A: Queer in Asian America*, David Eng and Alice Hom emphasize that "[f]rom a queer studies point of view, to insert questions of sexuality, sexual identification, and sexual orientation into our concept of Asian American identity would immediately help to dislodge a static, outdated, and exclusively *racial* notion of who 'we' are" (3). Lai broadens the term "Chinese Canadian" by extracting it from a purely racial context and adding issues of gender and sexuality, namely of racialized women's homosexuality. "[T]he invisible Asian American lesbian" (Eng/Hom 12) is where the novel's focus lies, depicting a group of Chinese Canadian queer women living in a society that grants them no space for being anything other than "ethnic Chinese." Due to the prevalent stereotype of hyperfemale, submissive Asian women, it seems that mainstream society is only reluctantly accepting homosexual women of Asian descent. This stereotype, which Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong calls "the ultrafeminization of the Asian woman" (112), is turned upside down in *When Fox Is a Thousand*. The characters are anything but submissive, on the contrary: Lai writes in the Afterword that "[n]one of the characters in this book are particularly 'nice' people"

(*Fox* 253). They are purposely angry, defiant, strong, and rude, while at the same time vulnerable to any kind of harm, especially racism and sexual abuse.

Lai is careful not to depict the Chinese Canadian community as being tolerant of everything the mainstream despises. Chinese Canadians, too, are prejudiced against homosexuality. A prime example in the novel is Claude's brother Andie, who rapes her over the course of several years when he discovers that she is lesbian. He and Claude initially had a mutual sexual relationship they both considered normal despite its incestuous nature. However, when Andie discovers Claude's real sexual preference, he—and symbolically the entire community—rejects and punishes her for her homosexuality by raping her repeatedly. To emphasize this kind of intolerance, Lai constructs

an alternative queer Asian-Canadian community that offers support, but is depicted as a tentative and fragmented community, at times divided and chaotic, which leads many of the women to feel isolated and depressed and seek solace through reconnecting with their families. Caught between their families and the lesbian community, these Chinese Canadian women do not appear to be 'at home' anywhere. (Goellnicht 168-169)

In an ethnic community, life can be alienating enough as identity is not easily asserted in a racializing environment. When queerness comes into the equation, individuals often cannot even rely on their families for support, much less the broader community, which results in additional isolation. They seek support from others in similar situations, others who are equally insecure about their homosexuality and unsure about their societal position. The groups that form through these processes are fragmented and unstable, at least initially. Until their internal cohesion is strengthened, no true place of belonging can be created in their midst. Only when groups are able to consolidate can they give real support.

Lai perceives "diasporic queerness as an inter-national and ultimately inter-ethnic or inter-racial condition or process that does not look back nostalgically at or militantly hold onto an originary identity" (Goellnicht 158). She constructs fluid notions of identity, sexuality, and homeland in her work that are not linked to a special place, nationality or ethnicity. Realizing that she will neither be integrated into mainstream society nor ever fully accepted in the Chinese diasporic community is Lai's starting point for coming to terms with the lack of "home," a place of belonging. She suggests that by creating one's own space, together with people of similar backgrounds and in similar situations, true belonging can be found. Following this line of thought, three things are crucial for the Chinese Canadian queer diaspora to find its integrity: (1) an awareness of its unique societal position and historical background, which includes a non-linear, disrupted history; (2) clearly distancing itself from mainstream notions of sexuality; and (3) embracing the fact that it is regarded as "different" by majority society for both of these aspects.

In *When Fox Is a Thousand*, fluidity and contingency of identity are symbolized first and foremost by Fox herself, who is both human and spirit, at home both in Canada and China, now and then, "here" and "there." She is lesbian and a foil to Artemis,

a “narrating and self-fashioning subject” and as such “calls into question the masculinist root notion of ‘diaspora’ as a scattering of seeds from the father to the fatherland” (Goellnicht 160). Instead of a male-based diaspora, a female, lesbian one is created to oppose traditional Chinese patriarchal values from the ninth through the 20th century. Modernity is not only attributed to the contemporary Western world, but already appears during the lifetime of the poetess. The poetess is lesbian, too, and practices her sexuality freely. Gayatri Spivak maintains that these “new,” queer diasporas are not truly new. They have existed for a long time without being acknowledged. Lai suggests that the past and present are connected in a dynamic, vibrant way, shown in Fox’s ability to transcend time. The past does not simply lead up to the present; rather, both are in constant interaction and determine each other, meaning that cultural and social circumstances are never fixed: “with Fox, [Lai] presents culture as a mobile, evolving text(ure) that always needs to be rewritten and rewoven, using threads from ethnic experience, especially in diaspora” (Goellnicht 167).

Fox is the connecting link between the poetess in ninth-century China and Artemis in contemporary Vancouver. Even though the two women are never in actual contact, their lives mirror each other: both try to make space for themselves as queer minority individuals in societies that traditionally don’t grant women “like them” a valid place. The character of Fox suggests how this oppression can be counteracted: by shedding a different light on one’s own history through the means of borrowing and inventing themes and topics of ethnic, queer, and female experiences. This non-linear approach to history offers liberation from mainstream rules and expectations and grants alternative constructions of identity that have traditionally been denied those considered “different.”

In the context of ethnicity, sexuality, and gender, one must keep in mind that “conceptualizations of racism and sexism as if they were distinctly opposed discourses is a construction that serves the dominant formations; we cannot isolate ‘race’ from ‘gender’ without reproducing the logic of domination” (Lowe 74). For this reason, Lai’s diaspora is not one based solely on either ethnicity, or sexuality, or gender, but rests upon all three pillars. Lai is careful not to construct the space she creates as paralleling dominant society’s conceptions of “home” and “history”—her space is not bound to a single location and timeline. Although Eng and Hom admit that racialized and marginalized people “harbour yearnings for the kind of contained boundaries enjoyed by mainstream society” (206), Lai envisions a space without internal boundaries, devoid of mainstream categorical structures such as us/them, Canadian/foreign, “normal”/queer, etc., to every possible extent. She aims at accentuating difference in order to show likeness and shared traits between different groups, which she sees as the only way of changing racist societal values. Trying to overcome binary oppositions such as Canadian/foreign, “normal”/queer, etc., is inevitably extremely difficult in an environment that enforces these notions day by day, but it is the only way to enable a truly new and authentic space to emerge.

In her essay "Going Home: Enacting Justice in Queer Asian America," Karin Aguilar-San Juan considers that

the problem of authenticity arises when community-building efforts among Asian American lesbians and gay men treat 'home' or 'experience' as preordained facts and thus mimic the exclusive and hierarchical frameworks that make efforts toward visibility and recognition necessary in the first place. (34)

Lai breaks out of this pattern of hierarchy and exclusiveness, while at the same time emphasizing what sets members of the queer diaspora apart from the mainstream. She tries to avoid imitating mainstream societal constructions, fully aware of how difficult this is. In an essay that appeared in the *Canadian Literature Quarterly* in 1999, Lai elaborates on writing from a racialized and marginalized space. Being asked how a person can "write from a place constructed for her, pejoratively, by someone else" ("Political" 146), she calls this an "awkward question because it demands a starting point apart from the self. A question that assumes one already knows how she is looked at from someplace that is by definition outside of her, and yet familiar at the same time" ("Political" 145). This double-take on one's self-identity implies to Lai that it is her responsibility to undo "this othering of my body and my work by the mainstream" ("Political" 146), a responsibility which minority authors do not have by choice but through their marginalized status. She did not ask for a position of being "the other," but cannot escape its implications, especially as a writer. As a strong voice of the Chinese Canadian community, Lai seeks to address prejudice and oppression in Canadian society and create a shared history to strengthen the cohesion, identity and sense of belonging of this minority group, at the same time providing other minorities with an example of coming to terms with one's marginalized status. She observes that

[i]n everyday discussions of politically active people of colour, lesbians, gay or straight, I hear this nostalgic referring back to a homeland that no longer exists, indeed, one that never did. ... This practice originates [with] a burning desire for that past; that it should have form, that it should have a body. Sometimes I feel our very survival in this country depends on the articulation of this form, the construction and affirmation of this body. ... We must have the power of construction, as long, of course, as we behave as responsibly as we know how in the act of construction. ("Political" 150)

## 5. Conclusion: Creating Space

Members of a diaspora, according to authors discussed here and elsewhere, must renegotiate their identities to create a homeland independent of the binary geographical locations of "East" and "West," "Orient" and "Occident," "here" and "there." Moving away from a purely geographical definition of "diaspora," other identity-shaping factors can be considered: religious beliefs, political views, sexual orientation, profession, social status, and so forth. In cultural anthropology, the term "ethnicity" signifies belonging to a group based on the individual's own perception, as opposed to that of "race," which is externally imposed (cf. Peoples/Bailey). If ethnicity is defined as

“membership in a group that behaves and interprets in ways that reflect shared ancestral background, history, cultural values, notions of acceptable behaviors, and options” (Uba 113), “ethnicity, as a sense of peoplehood, probably has different meanings for multiracial, homosexual or deaf Asian [North] Americans because their ethnicity has a different significance in various communities” (Uba 119). As the individual moves within different diasporas, his or her self-perception alters accordingly. Members of the Chinese community are more than “just” ethnically Chinese, but their “behaviors are too often interpreted solely in terms of an Asian culture ... cultural complexity is obscured, and the effects of other pressures are minimized” (Uba 86). Instead, if the critical reader were to examine the position from which a minority writer is speaking without assuming him or her to be writing exclusively about his or her ascribed background, a more accurate light could be shed on the topics that marginalized authors choose to discuss.

Lai distances herself from Canadian national historicism and creates a novel space of belonging for ethnic minority members, queers and women alike. Her ultimate goal is to deconstruct an idea of identity as bound to a geographical location; instead, she suggests an imagined space to call “home” that combines Chinese and Canadian cultural elements, but also a contingent notion of time. History, in this view, is not a linear occurrence of events, but consists of experiences that the diaspora consciously chooses to incorporate in its past. These elements are both real and imagined, reflecting the unique position that uprooted and displaced individuals find themselves in. This construction resists Anglo-Canadian historicism, i.e. mainstream parameters of history. Lai consciously abandons these parameters and creates her own space and past.

Minority literature has always had to deal with majority expectations regarding its subject matter, namely discussing ethnic topics. While these expectations do not necessarily have to be met—an “ethnic” author will have more to write about than his or her ethnic background—many marginalized authors choose to discuss the reasons for which they are marginalized, including their ethnicity. By drawing attention to social deficits like racism and discrimination, societal views can be changed. And yet, while taking this responsibility upon herself, Lai first and foremost loves the narrative and loves to write, asking “[w]hat is history, after all, but narrative?” (“Political” 149).

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