

FILLING THE HOLLOW: RESIGNIFYING MEMORY AND IDENTITY THROUGH STORYTELLING IN HIROMI GOTO'S *CHORUS OF MUSHROOMS*

PREENCHENDO O VAZIO: RESSIGNIFICANDO A MEMÓRIA E A IDENTIDADE ATRAVÉS DA NARRAÇÃO DE HISTÓRIAS EM *CORO DE COGUMELOS* DE HIROMI GOTO

Valeria Silva de Oliveira

Centro de Instrução Almirante Graça Aranha (Marinha do Brasil)

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Instituto de Letras

voliveirj@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4828-6768>

ABSTRACT

Chorus of Mushrooms tells the story of a Japanese family that immigrates to the small town of Nanton, Canada. It depicts the challenges of three women from different generations who are engaged in the continuous process (re)construction of their respective identities and memories. This essay analyzes the narrative strategies employed by Hiromi Goto, which contribute to a better understanding of how female voices enact creative forms of (re)constructing memories and identities. The analyses reveal not only how the identities of these women are (re)constructed, but also how stories and memories are resignified in the process. First, a brief account of the sociocultural and historical background of the author and the novel is provided. Then, some narrative strategies are highlighted in the light of Suzan Lanser's (1982) categories, mainly because of the importance of understanding how memory culture unfolds in the novel via these strategies. Finally, issues of memory and identity are identified and examined in light of Astrid Erll (2011) and Doreen Massey (2014). The present study reveals the importance of women's narrative voices not only in the process of (re)signifying memories, but also in reinventing a present and future where the dynamic nature of their voices is acknowledged.

Keywords: memory, identity, *Chorus of Mushrooms*, female narrative voices

RESUMO

Chorus of Mushrooms narra a história de uma família japonesa que imigra para a pequena cidade de Nanton, Canadá. A obra retrata os desafios de três mulheres de diferentes gerações que estão engajadas no processo contínuo de (re)construção de suas respectivas identidades e memórias. Este ensaio analisa as estratégias narrativas empregadas por Hiromi Goto, buscando uma melhor compreensão de como as vozes femininas encenam formas criativas de (re)construção de memórias e identidades. As análises revelam não apenas como as identidades dessas mulheres são (re)construídas, mas também como as histórias e memórias são ressignificadas no processo. Primeiramente, são brevemente apresentados aspectos socioculturais e históricos do autor e do romance. Em seguida, algumas estratégias narrativas são analisadas a partir das categorias de Suzan Lanser (1982), principalmente pela importância de compreender como a cultura da memória se desdobra no romance por meio dessas estratégias. Finalmente, questões de memória e identidade são identificadas e examinadas à luz de Astrid Erll (2011) e Doreen Massey (2014). O presente estudo revela a importância das vozes narrativas das mulheres não só no processo de (re)significação de memórias, mas também na reinvenção de um presente e futuro onde a natureza dinâmica das suas vozes é reconhecida.

Palavras-chave: memória, identidade. *Chorus of Mushrooms*, vozes narrativas de mulheres

INTRODUCTION

Hiromi Goto's *Chorus of Mushrooms* is one of those classic novels, which is always worth revisiting, especially because, as suggested by Rkanimalkingdown (2020), "there is so much intricately wrapped within these pages". This novel, which was first published in 1994, tells the story of a Japanese family that immigrated to the small city of Nanton, in Canada. It depicts the challenges of three women of different generations – a grandmother, a mother and a granddaughter – and also a father, engaged in the ongoing process of surviving

and (re)constructing new identities in a foreign environment. Most importantly, storytelling seems to be the core strategy, or rather, the backbone of the narrative, so much so that even the characters plead for it throughout the novel: “I wanted to hear bedtime stories, hear lies and truth dissembled. I wanted to fill the hollow with sound and pain. Roar like the prairie wind. Roar, like Obachan” (Goto, 1994: 29). The aforementioned quotation refers to the character’s strong desire to “fill the hollow” with stories. As suggested by an online dictionary¹, “hollow” means “having a hole or an empty space inside”. As for the character’s request, as will be shown, the referred emptiness might be the result of an accumulation of untold stories and erased or inexistent memories.

It is important to mention that issues related to neglected and erased memories which can be observed in the previous passage quoted from a fictional narrative, have actually been the object of scrutiny by many postcolonial critics from different areas of studies such as anthropologists, historians, geographers, among others. Most importantly, many of those Humanities scholars suggest that literature is a valuable form of art especially because its fictionalized nature serves as an important means to explore or reveal untold stories, i.e. the stories erased or omitted by the master narrative. Thus, literature created by the ones who are often objectified by hegemonic discourse might be worth scrutiny. Indeed, as suggested by Elide Bastos (2009), the sociologist Octavio Ianni believes that

(...) art [is] a privileged form of knowledge. (...) artistic fable can unravel the dilemmas and absurdity that reality seeks to hide. In this

¹ <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-portuguese/hollow> (Last accessed: 10 Jan. 2023)

way, dictatorships, the nightmare of Latin American peoples, could be seen “from within” by novelists, who portray its abnormal and grotesque [nature], while showing the fear, insecurity, and panic that surrounds people.² (Bastos, 2009: 387)

Likewise, Edouard Glissant (1999) suggests that because the collective consciousness is actually fed on a day-to-day basis by hegemonic discourse, it ends up deprived from its original memory. Therefore, “the problem faced by collective consciousness makes a creative approach necessary (...)” (Glissant, 1999: 61). According to Glissant (1999: 64), the writer would have the duty to “dig deep” into this consciousness and find creative means to express this memory which, regardless of being obsessively present, has often been wiped out by the master narratives. This being said, it might be worth scrutinizing the creative means used by Hiromi Goto in *Chorus of Mushrooms*, which contribute to the fight against the erasure of collective memories, i.e. to “nonhistory” (Glissant, 1999: 62), while telling a story – or stories – of an immigrant family from different points of view.

Discussing all the strategies used in the aforementioned novel would be beyond the scope of the present essay. Hence, only some narrative strategies will be briefly examined in order to provide a sample of how the narrative act works in the novel as a means not only to fill the “hollow”, but also to construct the female characters’ and narrators’ identities. Thus, this essay aims to analyze not

² Translation is mine. Original: (...) a arte [é] uma forma privilegiada de conhecimento. (...) a fabulação artística pode desvendar os dilemas e o absurdo que a realidade procura esconder. Desse modo, as ditaduras, pesadelo dos povos latino-americanos, puderam ser vistas “desde dentro” pelos romancistas, os quais retratam seu insólito e grotesco, ao mesmo tempo que mostram o medo, a insegurança, o pânico que envolve o povo. (Bastos, 2009: 387)

only how the identities of these three generations of women are constructed in the novel, but also how the story – or stories – is/are creatively told. First of all, it is important to understand the novel's context of production and the author's background. Secondly, narrative strategies – or acts – will be discussed in the light of Suzan Lanser's categories (1982). After all, as suggested by Astrid Erll, "cultural memory rests on narrative processes. (...) narrative structures play a significant role in every memory culture. We find them in the life stories and anecdotes that are listened to oral historians; and in the patterns of oral tradition (...)" (Erll, 2011: 147). Lanser's categories are based on a poetics of point of view which entails status, contact and stance (Lanser, 1982: 149). This essay shows the status of narrative voice aiming to understand the dynamic roles played by the characters' voices in the process of resignifying memory and identity through storytelling. Finally, it will be observed issues of memory and identity in *Chorus of Mushrooms* in view of Astrid Erll (2011), Vijay Agnew (2013) and Doreen Massey's (2014) and Linda McDowell's (1999) theoretical approaches to space, place and gender.

LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD: A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE AUTHOR'S AND THE NOVEL'S SOCIOCULTURAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS

The second half of the 20th century was characterized by remarkable global and local events and new ways of thinking and making politics in many places all over the world. In Canada, for example, although the first wave of Japanese immigrants started to arrive between the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century,³ it was only in

³ <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/japanese-canadians> (Last accessed: 10/01/2023)

1971 that the federal government declared that a multicultural policy should be adopted.⁴ Canada's recognition of diversity in its territory in the early seventies led to the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, which was passed in 1988, and it has been considered a Consolidated Act ever since.⁵ The importance of this law lies in the fact that it officially reinforces the need for preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada. As a result, a very specific literary work of art started to stand out. Indeed, voices historically erased and/or subjugated started to find means to be heard more widely and effectively. Consequently, it also became a fertile environment for the beginning of the study of new types of narratives which were created by writers who survived forced displacements and migration and were engaged in revealing stories that have always been omitted by the hegemonic discourse. Most importantly, as suggested by Slapkauskaite (2010: 214), "(...) minority literatures offer a discursive space for cultures to encounter and change one another as well as a space to challenge the limitations of our understanding of difference and its ideological implications". Thus, many immigrants such as Hiromi Goto found a positive and receptive environment for a very specific kind of writing from the seventies onward.

Hiromi Goto was born in Japan in 1966 and immigrated to Canada with her family in 1969. Therefore, she is part of the second generation of immigrants that arrived after 1967. Goto and her family, including her eighty-year-old grandmother, first settled in the west coast of British Columbia where they lived for eight years. Afterwards, they moved to Nanton, Alberta, where

⁴ <https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/canadian-multiculturalism-policy-1971>
(Last accessed: 10/01/2023)

⁵ <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-18.7/> (Last accessed: 10/01/2023)

her father farmed mushrooms. In 1989, Goto earned her B.A. in English from the University of Calgary where she studied creative writing. In 1994, she published her first novel *Chorus of Mushrooms* which led to significant prizes and awards (Starace, 2010: 4), such as the “Commonwealth Writers’ Prize Best First Book: Canada and Caribbean Region and was the co-winner of the Canada-Japan Book Award”.⁶

It is possible to observe that her own life experience, which was marked by transcultural and geographical displacements, might have served as an important source of inspiration in the process of writing the novel *Chorus of Mushrooms*. Indeed, “this novel explores the shifts and collisions of culture through the lives of three generations of women in a Japanese family living in a small prairie town”.⁷ Thus, as a debut of the then young Japanese Canadian, the novel not only contributes to cast light on the possible effects of multiculturalism in the private lives of Japanese immigrants, but also provides unique perspectives through the voices of female characters. These female voices play a crucial role in the narrative mainly because, historically, they tend to be erased and/or unheard.

Since her debut novel, Goto has published other seven books such as her second adult novel *The Kappa Child* (2001), a collection of short stories, three novels for children and youth, a book of poetry and more recently, in 2021, her first graphic novel *Shadow Life*.⁸

⁶ <https://www.vpl.ca/person/hiromi-goto> (Last accessed: 28/09/2023) & <https://www.hiromigoto.com/about/> (Last accessed: 12/01/2023).

⁷ <https://www.hiromigoto.com/young-adult/chorus-of-mushrooms/> (Last accessed: 13/01/2023)

⁸ <https://www.hiromigoto.com/about/> (Last accessed: 13/01/2023)

CHORUS OF MUSHROOM'S NARRATIVE ACTS: UNDERSTANDING
HOW IDENTITIES AND MEMORIES ARE INTERWOVEN AND
(RE)CONSTRUCTED CREATIVELY

To start with, it is important to explain how memory can be understood in the light of literary studies in order to show how this concept can contribute to a better understanding of Goto's novel. As suggested by Astrid Erll, "as an all-encompassing sociocultural phenomenon, memory plays an important role in various areas of social practice. (...) remembering and forgetting are major themes in contemporary literature and art" (Erll, 2011: 1). By the same token, the practices of remembering and forgetting play a crucial role in Goto's novel for it is precisely through the creative and, at the same time, systematic representation of these cognitive processes that the complex identity of each character is dynamically and transculturally translated. It might be even possible to consider each character a metaphor for the diverse and dynamic nature of memories. Thus, whereas the grandmother Naoe would stand for the role of remembering, Keiko would represent the effects of forgetting or of attempting to forget. Last but not least, Murasaki/Muriel,⁹ Naoe's granddaughter and Keiko's daughter, would stand for a literary conduit, connecting time, places and spaces, filling the hollow and resignifying not only her own existence, but also her family members'.

The novel is composed by two main narrative frameworks. As suggested by Beautell (2003: 18), "the outer framework, marked in italics, is set in Calgary where the granddaughter, Murasaki, tells stories to her lover. Those stories constitute the inner framework

⁹ In the narrative, Naoe, the grandmother, calls Muriel, the granddaughter, with the Japanese name Murasaki. In this article, Muriel will always be referred to as Murasaki as an attempt to show the reader how memory and identity are resignified in the narrative.

(...) set in Nanton, Alberta (...).” The inner framework’s stories are mostly told by the grandmother Naoe and by the granddaughter Murasaki and there is also the presence of a third-person narrator. Although much of it is narrated by first-person narrator(s), the story is told from very different points of view. Thus, the narrative voice is a complex element in the novel that ends up, as suggested previously, revealing and interweaving remembered and forgotten memories.

Naoe is the grandmother, or *Obachan*, who used to be part of a wealthy family back in Japan and saw her father lose everything they had on account of a misused *hanko* (family seal). It is not clear how she ends up in Canada. However, Naoe makes sure to explain that as an eighty-five-year-old grandma she lives in a very oppressive house. She secretly receives packages with Japanese goods from her brother Shige, who lives in Japan and turns out to be a reliable food supplier. She refuses to speak in English but nobody speaks to her in Japanese, as she complains “I mutter and mutter and no one to listen. I speak my words in Japanese and my daughter will not hear them. The words that come from our ears, our mouths, they collide in the space between us.” (Goto, 1994: 4). At first, Naoe portrays herself as a very lonely old lady and an outcast in her own home except for the moments shared with her granddaughter Murasaki who, although could not speak in Japanese, seems to enjoy the “exotic” moments with the grandma.

The story is also told by Murasaki, the granddaughter raised in Canada but very interested in the tales that Naoe loves to share. Despite the good relationship with the grandmother, she seems to be unable to have any kind of conversation with her mother and the too quiet father. Murasaki also seems to be displaced in a house where the only person she could empathize with is her grandmother who speaks only Japanese. Thus, her whole view of events is narrated

from a perspective marked by thorough dislocation and disruption which, in turn, is translated in the attempt of resignifying memories voiced from a very specific locus of enunciation.

The other first-person narrator, whose voice appears in italics signaling memories voiced from a different time and space, is also assumed to be Murasaki (Beautell, 2003: 18). This voice first appears on the very first pages in which the scene set is an intimate conversation between the narrator and an unnamed lover, who suddenly makes a very specific request: “Will you tell me a story? (...) Will you tell me a story about your *Obachan*?” (Goto, 1994: 1). The unnamed lover’s request sets the narrative in motion and triggers a search for home via the process of digging memories. Indeed, as suggested by Vijay Agnew,

Memories establish a connection between our individual past and our collective past (our origins, heritage, and history). The past is always with us, and it defines our present; it resonates in our voices, hovers over our silences, and explains how we came to be ourselves and to inhabit what we call ‘our homes’. (Agnew, 2013: 3)

The different first-narrators’ voices are, in the beginning, clearly marked by the names which give the title to each section and to the passages in italics. However, at some point in the novel the narrator’s voice in italics suddenly also starts to narrate her relationship with the lover and this narrative is marked by the absence of italics (Goto, 1994: 183). The lover of the outer framework shows dissatisfaction with the sudden fictionalization of his identity, and he complains: “‘Hey’, you say, ‘you’re mixing up the story with what’s really happening right now in our lives. I don’t like that. I want to be able to separate the stories from our real lives. What we’re living right now.’” (Goto, 1994: 186). The complexity of the narrative

act increases. Indeed, as suggested by Beautell (2003: 18), there is a point in the narrative in which the outer and the inner narratives “collapse into each other and the characters of Murasaki and Naoe also become confused in the midst of memories and myths (...)”. This “collapsing” also happens within the inner narratives as the narrator of Murasaki’s relationship with her lover – which is not the voice of the outer framework, in italics – blends with other voices: “‘I’d like to speak with your Obachan sometime,’ he said drowsily. / ‘You are ...’ But he was asleep.” (Goto, 1994: 83). Therefore, the identity of this narrator also starts to get blurred:

“It occurred to me. That I’ve known you since you arrived at the airport, but you’ve never taken an English class at Y or anything. And you’re so fluent, I don’t even notice an accent when we’re talking together.” He looked incredulously at me.

“But when I speak with you, I only speak in Japanese. *Jibun de wakaranai no? Itsumo Nihongo de hanashiteiru noni.*”

Oh. (Goto, 1994: 187)

How could Murasaki understand Japanese if she had never been taught this language before? Thus, it seems that Murasaki’s and Naoe’s identities indeed mingled at some point in the novel.

Most importantly, as said, the story is not only narrated by first-person narrators, but also by a heterodiegetic narrator (i.e. third-person narrator). The main difference between these two types of narrators is that the heterodiegetic voice is characterized by his/her non-involvement in the narrative whereas the autodiegetic voice, i.e. first-person voice, is characterized by narrators who are also protagonist in the story. Another important difference is “limitations on privilege”. As Lanser explains:

(...) the narrator who is part of the story world is conventionally subject to the limitations of human knowledge. These limitations restrict a given individual to the “contents” of only one mind – his or her own. (...) the traditional third-person narrator, on the other hand, conventionally has the authority to be omniscient, which means s/he may have access to every character’s mind. (Lanser, 1982: 161)

Thus, the third-person narrator might be considered privileged as she/he plays an omniscient role and is able to see beyond the first-person narrator’s grasp of the world.

It is a third-person narrator the one in charge of describing Naoe’s deepest thoughts and feelings at a very important point of the narrative. Naoe, dissatisfied with the somehow oppressive environment of her daughter’s house, decides to leave this home and experience the world that has been denied to her. As she walks through the snow, she catches sight of a building that has always been in the vicinity, but was unknown to her. Unable to hold her curiosity, she walks towards it and steps inside. Suddenly, she realizes that it is a place where mushrooms are cultivated. The mushrooms create a cozy atmosphere, leading her to fill the hollows of her memories and reconnect herself to her fragmented and complex identity. Indeed, it is in this very place of possibility of (re)connection, or rather (re)invention/ (re)signification, that she is able to have a first experience with her “whole self” living in the world:

The hallway was huge, like the wet cavern of a whale. (...) It was much warmer than the house she had lived in, and she unbuttoned her heavy coat (...). The blanket wet of humidity enclosing her tiny figure. (...) The fungal silence as thick as the moisture around her. And she lay down, spread her arms, her legs wide and peat water soaking, lay down, in puddles warm and glowing. Closed her eyes, feeling the seeping the

sinking into. Slipped deeper, and deeper, her eyes closed, her hands floating on the water. Floating towards herself. (Goto, 1994: 83-86)

By holding the attribute of omniscience and by not being involved in the story, the third-person narrator has the power of providing a more detailed and accurate account of what is in Naoe's mind during an important moment of breakthrough in her life. As can be noticed, as far as narrative strategy is concerned, Goto (1994) skillfully manages to play along the "Heterodiegesis _____ Autodiegesis" (Lanser, 1982: 159) and "Human limitation _____ Omniscience" (Lanser, 1982: 161) spectrums¹⁰ throughout the novel by working with different kinds of narrators simultaneously. These narrative strategies contribute to provide a thorough account of events as the story(ies) about the experience of being the other in foreign lands is/are told from different points of view. Most importantly, as Slapkauskaitė explains, "what we are given is a polyphony of voices and stories, where cultural paradigms are disrupted and historical truths subverted to ironize cultural prejudices and traditional storytelling patterns (...)" (Slapkauskaitė, 2010: 216).

Another aspect of the status of the narrative voice which Lanser (1982) advocates that should be incorporated to the aforementioned framework of point of view¹¹ in prose fiction is the narrator's social identity. In her view, "identity includes such aspects of social

¹⁰ These spectrums are Lanser's representations of the axes of status of the narrative voice and can be found in the Chapter Four of *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (Lanser: 1982).

¹¹ Lanser (1982) suggests that the axes of status of the narrative voice presented in Chapter Four of *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction*, which contributed to the present analysis on the narrators' point of view, provide a "basic framework for the narrator's relationship to a particular storytelling act" i.e. "the claims that the particular voice makes regarding its authorization to tell a tale" (Lanser, 1982: 165).

status as profession, gender, nationality, marital situation, sexual preference, education, race and socioeconomic class” (Lanser, 1982: 166). However, the readers are not always fully aware or informed of all these layers of identity. Most of it is inferred from the narrative. In *Chorus of Mushrooms*, the narrator who first appears in the story, marked by the italic font, does not introduce herself formally at any time.¹² Thus, she could actually be either Murasaki or any granddaughter telling a tale. The importance of the narrator’s social identity lies not only in our presumptions of narrative authority and reliability, but also in the process of creation of her/his voice or image.

It is also important to highlight that the *locus* of enunciation represented in the narrative is marked by the entanglement of female voices which are projected not only from different generations (i.e., time), but also from different spaces and places. Having said that, place and space theories might contribute to enlighten our understanding of how specific geographies of home might also have played a part in the process of translating and rebuilding the characters’ memories and identities. According to Massey, place and space should be thought of as very dynamic concepts. Thus,

¹² Although narrators are not really obliged to introduce him/herself, this might be a strategy used by some narrators in fictional narratives as a means of not only sharing the narrator’s voice status with the readers, but also, in a way, guiding readers into understanding from which standpoint the story is being shared/hollows are being filled. For example, in the novel *Black Mamba Boy*, by Nadifa Mohamed, the author and the voice of narrator somehow overlaps as Nadifa Mohamed introduces herself as a griot of her father, she says in an introductory chapter: “*I am my father’s griot, this is a hymn to him*” (Mohamed, 2010, Edição Kindle). By doing this she shares with the reader her intention to sew the patches of her father’s memories. For further information about the narrator’s strategies in *Black Mamba Boy*, see <https://www.bdt.d.uerj.br:8443/handle/1/5987>.

(...) the directions of social recomposition can be quite different from one area to the next. 'National' changes can take highly variegated forms across the country. The decline of the old is not always happening in the same place as the rise of the new. And what that means is that different problems are being faced, different battles fought out, in different places. (Massey, 2014: 80)

Stereotyped narratives that tend to homogenize, subjugate and erase memories are unable to account for the layers of social diversity and its ongoing inescapable changes. These changes, which Doreen Massey (2014: 80) also calls "recomposition", should be understood as a dynamic process. Most importantly, Massey also says that there is a need to recognize "(...) a process of social change which may often be difficult and painful" and that it varies locally. In *Chorus of Mushrooms* Naoe, Murasaki, Keiko and even Murasaki's father fight their own battles from their very specific places or locations in the narrative and, likewise, all of them go through to a process of "recomposition" to the extent that none of them are the same by the end of the novel.

McDowell affirms that "places may no longer be 'authentic' and 'rooted in tradition' (...) they are instead defined by social-spatial relations that intersect there and give a place its distinctive character" (McDowell, 1999: 4). Although, geographic dislocations might lead to cultural displacements, memory is always there in the characters' voices resignifying past and present and building new possibilities of being/existing through reinvention and questioning of the boundaries of culture and identity. The prospect of new possibilities can be observed in Murasaki's reflections in the following passage, in which she shows the dynamics of memory erasure and reinvention and how the now called "Jap oranges" are included in the Christmas'

menu, despite Keiko's, Murasaki's mom, deliberate attempts to erase traditional food from the day-to-day menu:

Mom never bought eggplants when she went shopping. (...) She didn't buy *hakusai* or *shoga* or *shiitake* or *daikon* or *satoimo* or *moyashi* or *nira*. There was a vegetable blind spot in her chosen menu and Obachan must have felt it sorely I only noticed what I was missing after I began to question. (...). But there was one thing Mom could forgive and that was a box of Jap oranges for Christmas. Funny how they're called Jap oranges. (...) Funny how words and meaning twist beyond the dimensions of logic. (Goto, 1994: 91)

The complex nature of the social interactions and memories represented in the novel are marked by a dynamic intersection of gender, identity, age and place. By way of illustration, Murasaki, the granddaughter, and Obachan, the grandmother, find their own means to question and resignify their respective memories and identities. Besides, the geography of gender relations is consistently built and rebuilt in the novel through the relationship between the three different generations of women related by blood. Most importantly, although these three women are represented, only two of them are actually willing to share their own view of events: Naoe and Murasaki. In order to understand how a sense of identity is constructed in the three women as characters – and in the case of Murasaki and Naoe, also as narrators –, it is important to scrutinize how their relationship evolves throughout the novel.

Murasaki is not the only one who realizes how language and what we do with it can speak volumes about culture and identity. Whereas in the previous passage Murasaki reflects on how cultural displacement resulted in turning “oranges” into “Jap oranges”, for instance, Obachan is willing to fight the discomfort of dislocation

by deciding not to use English, although she is totally capable of doing it. While attempting to fight the erasure of her own cultural memories by not speaking in English, Naoe, the grandmother, depicts herself misunderstood most of the time and ostracized in her own “home”.

Talk loudly and e-n-u-c-i-a-t-e. I might be stupid as well as deaf. How can they think a body can live in this country for twenty years and not learn the language? But let them think this. (...) Solly, Obachan no speeku Eeenglishu. (...) Keiko glances at me these days. I’ve heard the talk. “I think we should start looking for a h-o-m-e.” As if I can’t spell. Eighty-five years old and cast from my home. (...) No time now to learn new dust in a new home. Let me just sit here. Let me sit here in the hall by the door. (...)

I mutter and mutter and no one to listen. (Goto, 1994: 4)

Keiko refuses to speak in Japanese with her mother. Therefore, Naoe feels as if there is a space between her and her own daughter, who seems to make no effort to interact with her own mother. This abyss or “empty space” (Goto, 1994: 4) between Naoe and Keiko happens due to differences not only in age and but also in how they conceptualize and understand the space and place in which they are located. Indeed, these two characters seem to have very strong and different beliefs about everything. At first, Obachan appears in the novel standing for the preservation of Japanese culture and tradition regardless of living in foreign lands. She resists being brainwashed by a foreign culture by insisting on speaking the language she was educated, sharing the tales she was told when she was a child and eating Japanese food. She strongly criticizes Keiko who is constantly described as a robot in a dusting mode and a betrayer of Japanese culture:

My daughter who has forsaken identity. Forsaken! So biblical, but it suits her, my little convert. Converted from rice and *daikon* to wieners and beans. Endless evenings of tedious roast chicken and honey smoked ham and overdone rump roast. My daughter, you were raised on fish cakes and pickled plums. This Western food has changed you and you've grown more opaque (...). (Goto, 1994: 13)

Naoe sees her own daughter as someone who wants to erase her Japanese background whereas Murasaki, the granddaughter, is seen as the only one in the house who really cares. Murasaki's birth name is Muriel and she was not taught Japanese. Despite Keiko's efforts to force Murasaki's adaptation or mingling with local Canadian culture, the granddaughter is really interested in Naoe and in the stories she is willing to share. Besides, she secretly steals Japanese food, which not only satisfies her grandma's need for something edible but also her imagination. Indeed, by activating all the senses – taste, sight, smell and touch – the stolen food is actually a trigger, a one-way ticket to a location which Naoe identifies with and to a certain extent feels like “home”. However, Naoe's understanding of home has nothing to do with the traditional concept of it, i.e., it is not static, fixed or any stereotyped woman's place. Indeed, it has no boundaries, so much so that she manages to defy the imaginary barriers that society imposes on her aged and female body.

Murasaki gets along very well with her grandma, as she herself states “we ate, we drank, on Obachan's bed of feasts (...) I snuggled my head in Obachan's bony lap and closed my eyes to listen. I couldn't understand the words she spoke, but this is what I heard. ***Mukashi, mukashi, omukashi...***” (Goto, 1994: 18). Together these two women created a common place beyond differences filled with Japanese food, memories and stories. While her grandmother would offer her an opportunity to access the family's buried memories

and stories in creative ways, her mother would choose the silence, denying her other possible ways of (re)inventing herself, her own memories and identities. Indeed, Murasaki could not understand her mother's attitude towards life and she complains: "My Mom didn't tell tales at all. And the only make-believe she knew was thinking that she was as white as her neighbor." (Goto, 1994: 29)

There is an empty space between Keiko and her daughter, a hollow which is built and maintained during years and years of neglected and untold stories, erased memories, and, because of it, Murasaki strongly criticizes her mother Keiko throughout the novel. She seems to disagree with Keiko's strong effort to cover up what is believed to be "Oriental tracks" (Goto, 1994: 62) as an attempt to be part of the community they live in. Thus, it is possible to observe that Keiko seems to stick to a very stereotyped and limited view of place: one in which no diversity is welcome. Therefore, she tries to create a controlled environment in which no differences or contradictions are allowed. Because of that, Keiko sacrifices not only herself but also her own relationships.

Evidence of the differences in mother-daughter relationships can be observed in a scene in which Murasaki narrates the moment she is chosen to be Alice in a school play. According to Beautell (2003: 10), "the episode is portrayed as especially traumatic for the narrator because of the mother's uncritical collaboration":

"Well, Alice is a story about a English girl, you know. An English girl with lovely blonde hair. And strictly for the play, you understand, Muriel will have to have blonde hair or no one will know what part she is playing. You simply cannot have an Alice with black hair."

"Of course," Mom nodded, to my growing horror. "It's the nature of theatre and costume, is it not? (...)"

I was horrified, Mom and Mrs. Spear chatting away and dye my beautiful black hair blonde? (...) I would look ridiculous and stand out like a freak. (Goto, 1994: 177)

However, in an amazing turn of events, all characters, and, by extension, the autodiegetic narrators, gain an opportunity to engage in the process of “recomposition”. The trigger is Naoe’s departure. She decides to leave on the premise that there are things she has not experienced yet and staying where she is would only lead to a predictable life stuck in a “chair of incubation” (Goto, 1994: 76), culminating with her own death. She says: “There are so many things I want to do and I’m ready to begin them now. (...) I need to live outside the habit of my words. I go.” (Goto, 1994: 76) Then, she starts an endless journey not only on the road, but also towards a freer and deeper self. As can be observed, Naoe openly resists to any possibility of being confined to the domestic sphere. By resisting to any kind of spatial control she also resists to any attempt of social control on her identity and memories. So, against all the odds, she manages to get a ride on the road and start an affair with the truck driver.

Most importantly, Naoe finally seems to be free to rewrite her present and future, build new memories, live her life on her own terms and to become whoever she wants to be. Thus, her new lifestyle disrupts with any attempt of control over her body and mind as it goes completely against “(...) the masculine desire to fix the woman in a stable and stabilizing identity” (Massey, 2014: 238). In the end, the untamed and wise old lady decides to tame bulls once in a while, as a mysterious bull rider under a purple mask. As suggested by Slapkauskaite (2010: 217), “this Japanese Canadian female rodeo star (...) subverts the cultural stereotypes attached to Asian Canadians, women and elderly people”. Indeed, stereotyped views

of how women are supposed to behave, especially when reaching a certain age, are put forth in the narrative. Obachan shows herself as a very strong woman who defies the *status quo*, but she knows that it has consequences, as she says: “When you do something different, not everyone will like you, I’ve noticed. Ahhh, I say, nothing an old woman can’t manage.” (Goto, 1994: 216)

Naoe’s translocal and dislocated identity challenges the traditional idea of home as a fixed location. Moreover, the storytelling which unfolds through the voices of the female characters blurs the frontiers of unrealistic and/or stereotyped places and spaces. As suggested by bell hooks in *Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness*,

Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting. (Hooks, 1999: 148)

Naoe’s assumed fragmented identity does not mean forgetting, but resignification. Most importantly, this process of resignification takes place in the narrative mainly through the strategic (re)combination of various narrative acts which, in turn, play a special role in the process of rewriting, recomposing and reinventing memories, lives and stories, as shown in the present study.

While Naoe carries on with a life with no constraints or boundaries, Murasaki witnesses the apparently insensitive Keiko suffering from a deep depression with the grandmother’s departure. Keiko is a character trapped in a zone of inbetweenness, where memories and stories keep on clashing irreconcilably. On the one

hand, she wishes to erase her Japanese cultural ancestry to fit in the Canadian community, but on the other hand her memories of her ancestry keep on being urgently recalled by the presence, and later the absence, of her mother Naoe. It seems that with Naoe's departure the opportunity of recomposition turns into a very painful process (Massey, 2014). She ends up stuck in a bed, unable to speak, eat and follow the day-to-day routines.

In a significant turn of events, Keiko gains another chance of rewriting her memories as her sudden and unexpected breakdown leads to a unique family partnership. As Murasaki started to support her mother to improve her health, she notices that it is precisely the "Oriental tracks" the remedy needed to help Keiko's recovery not only from depression, but also from a long time of self-oppression and memory suppression. While taking care of her mother, Murasaki finds out that Keiko had always been on a survival mode and acted based on her own beliefs on what should be the right thing to do living in a new country. Apparently, Keiko thought that, by sacrificing/erasing the whole family members' memories and stories, they would be better able to fit in Canada. While taking care of her mother, Murasaki also discovers that even her father has been affected by Keiko's mindset and attitudes. Indeed, he turns out to be a very quiet person with secret habits himself such as furtively buying Japanese food or reading in Japanese. The disclosure of family members' secretive behaviors, the new family partnership and the family's views on Naoe's departure are described from Murasaki's point of view, whereas Naoe herself continues sharing her own view of her new life experiences, creating memories, reinventing herself, filling the hollow.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

All in all, the characters' identities, and, therefore, the first-person narrators' identities, Murasaki's and Naoe's, are not static. Rather, they are very complex and dynamic as they engage in an ongoing process of recomposition and resignification which unfolds in creative ways in *Chorus of Mushrooms*. This process takes place not only through the strategic moves of female voices and storytelling, but also through the continuous (re)construction of memories and identities that constitute the social relations in the narrative. As Massey argues, the past is vital to identity and "there is no (...) essential past. The identity (...) is always and continuously being produced" (Massey, 2014: 171), or rather rewritten. In the novel, the female characters stage different possibilities of resignifying their cultural identities and memories by filling the hollow in creative ways. Most importantly, those very specific memories of the respective female characters are (re)constructed precisely through their interconnectedness and dynamic social relations that takes place in the narrative. As suggested by Massey, the geography of social relations has to do with "(...) a sense of place, an understanding of 'its character', which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond." (Massey, 2014: 156) Murasaki, Keiko and Naoe are all women from different generations sharing past and present experiences. Their voices and memories which are constantly rewritten and resignified in creative ways mainly through the strategy of storytelling offer the possibility of hope for a better future in which the diversities that lie in the characters' female voices and memories are not erased, but heard and acknowledged.¹³

¹³ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers who suggested important improvements to the article.

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