Transnational Maternal Genealogies in Contemporary Canadian Women's Historical Novels

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Abstract:
This article is a sustained analysis of transnational maternal genealogies in contemporary Canadian women's historical novels written in English. In contrast to conventional historical novels which privilege the lives of men, women's historical novel centralizes women's lives. Experiences such as pregnancy, rape, childbearing and rearing, breast cancer, and so on are prioritized. My article concentrates on the creation and expression of transnational maternal genealogies as manifest in an increasing number of contemporary historical novels by Canadian women. Beginning with Joy Kogawa's seminal novel Obasan, published in 1981, I trace the trajectory of this gendered genre to recent times with Padma Viswanathan's The Toss of a Lemon. Transnational maternal genealogies differ from other dominant trends in the genre such as masculinist mainstream historiography and "historiographic metafiction" because the genre contends that gender and a link to one's maternal past, not the national context, is paramount to lived experience. Furthermore, transnational female characters challenge "traditional boundaries of historical fiction," Canada's official history, and claims as to who is and who is not Canadian. Despite the critical acclaim and notoriety many Canadian women novelists enjoy, this genre has attracted little scholarship, thus this article partakes in the critical work which can and should be done to remedy this gap.

1 Literary criticism on women's historical novels not only in Canada but also globally is not as prevalent as one might imagine. This is curious given the international profile of award-winning authors like Margaret Atwood, the sheer number of historical novels written by women, and the popularity of women's novels with critics and readers despite these facts, a sustained analysis of Canadian women's historical fiction does not exist.[1] In this article, I remedy this neglect by bringing attention to a specific trend in many contemporary Canadian women's historical novels written in English: the establishment of a transnational maternal genealogy.[2] The purpose of a transnational maternal genealogy, in the corpus of this distinct sub-genre of Canadian women's historical fiction, I argue, is to achieve three important goals. First, it asserts a critical contemporary feminist narrative style as an intervention against the two preceding dominant trends in the genre: masculinist mainstream historiography also known as master narratives, express universal truths and nationalist sentiments and

[1] See Wallace; Nunes; Cooper and Short; Rody; Weldt-Basson; and Llewellyn and Heilmann for examples of the limited scholarship that currently exists. There are many studies on individual historical novels by Canadian women, for instance Atwood's "Alias Grace", as well as studies on a single Canadian woman historical novelist and her oeuvre but a comprehensive study is missing.

[2] For scholarship on contemporary Canadian historical novels, most of which pertains to postmodern writing, see Wyile; Cabajsky and Grubisic; Hutcheon; Monkman; Kuester; Duffy; Wyile, Andrews, and Viau.

postmodern "historiographic metafiction," as Linda Hutcheon calls it, (Poetics 5) approaches history as construction, undermines authenticity, and displaces identity. Second, transnational maternal genealogies suggest gender and a link to one's maternal past, not the national context, is more important in shaping the female protagonist's identity and in empowering her feminist challenges to patriarchal authority. Third, genealogies via "female characters subvert […] the traditional boundaries of historical fiction" (Cabajsky and Grubisic paraphrasing van Herk, xvi). These forms of feminist subversion, furthermore, explain why many of these women's novels focus on immigration and being Canadian without having been born in Canada or being able to locate one's ancestral roots in Canadian history.

2 The woman's historical novel is a neglected genre with the potential to address significant gaps in literary, social, and political history in Canada. Thus, this article forms part of a larger process of ongoing scholarship such as Carole Gerson's which is recovering Canada's history to reflect a social sphere that is domestic, personal, political, and historical. In order to understand this innovative writing better, I first define the woman's historical novel and a maternal genealogy and then briefly discuss the master narrative and the postmodern perspective. The majority of this article, however, takes up several women's novels, including those which do adhere to the genre of a transnational maternal genealogy and those which fail to do so. Discussing the novels relationally elucidates the challenges this writing poses, its complexity, and the unique features which make transnational maternal genealogies a distinct sub-genre of women's historical fiction.

3 The woman's historical novel is written by women about women (thus, novels like Heather Robertson's *The King Years* trilogy which centers on the life of former Canadian Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King is not taken into consideration): gender specific experiences to women such as pregnancy, rape, childbearing, childrearing, breast cancer, and so on are prioritized. Diana Wallace contends that the historical novel is a most suitable medium for women writers because "women have been violently excluded both from 'history' (the events of the past) and from 'History' (written accounts of the past) ("Letters" 25). Traditionally, women's history has been considered an oxymoron, being characterized as romantic, unhistorical or ahistorical, misrepresentative, inaccurate, fantastical, anti-nationalist, even escapist (Wallace, *Woman's* 15). The feminocentric foci in this genre, however, counter such claims. By filing in silences in the historical record, highlighting gaps in masculinist genre studies, promoting "feminisms in the plural" (Hutcheon *Canadian Postmodern*, 107), and rewriting women, symbolic progenitors of past, present, and future genealogies inside and outside of the text become visible. The novels establish a transnational

maternal genealogy anachronistically by following the life of either a fictional or factual woman over several decades, or the lives of several women within a family, who are not necessarily born in, but travel to, Canada.

4 Transnational maternal genealogies are women's historical novels, but they focus on women's inter-generational lives, cross national boundaries, and disrupt a unified setting in terms of space and time by incorporating the recent past. Beginning with Joy Kogawa's seminal novel *Obasan*, published in 1981, other novels which adhere to this categorization include Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic*, *Disappearing Moon Cafe* by Sky Lee, Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries*, Jane Urquhart's *Away*, Sandra Birdsell's *The Russlander*, Margaret Sweatman's *When Alice Lay Down With Peter*, Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, and *The Toss of a Lemon* by Padma Visawanathan amongst others.

5 The novels named above call attention to and supplement that which Herb Wyile identifies as underrepresentation in Canadian genre studies on its historical novel.

> [This includes] those whom the historical record has tended to exclude –women, the working class, and racial(ized) minorities[.] … Historical novels by Native Canadian writers or by Canadian writers of Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern, or African heritage are relatively scarce, something which may have to do with their historical exclusion from …the Canadian literary scene and with their exclusion from dominant narratives about Canada's past. (*Speaking* 4)

This trend has not necessarily ended (for instance, Native Canadian and African-Canadian writers are visibly missing in this study), but it is shifting: women's novels since the 1980s have sought to remedy the aforementioned gaps by employing a transnational maternal genealogy and developing it for feminist purposes.

6 My definition of transnational maternal genealogy references Luce Irigaray's nuanced definition of "maternal genealogy" but updates and develops it to take into account the transnational. Irigaray writes:

> If we are not to be accomplices in the murder of the mother, […we must] assert that there is a genealogy of women. There is a genealogy of women within our family: on our mother's side we have mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, and daughters. Given our exile in the family of the father-husband, we tend to forget this genealogy of women, and we are often persuaded to deny it. Let us try to situate ourselves within this female genealogy so as to conquer and keep our identity. Nor let us forget that we already have a history, that certain women have, even if it was culturally difficult, left their mark on history and that all too often we do not know them. (44)

A maternal genealogy connects women, and in the Canadian woman's historical novel these connections occur across familial generations, nations, and intersections of identity. This

writing emphasizes a traversing between a contemporary narrator/character to a maternal origin which begins in a different homeland and time frame. In doing so, transnational maternal genealogies express continuity between women's lives in the past with those in the present; the national context is secondary to emphasizing a sense of gendered consciousness and desire for feminist socio-political change which the protagonists develop over time. A shared sense of gendered consciousness, via a transnational maternal genealogy, openly resists traditional master narratives found in historical novels and corresponding nationalistic studies on the historical novel (see for example, *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* by Avrom Fleishman).

7 An early example of a master narrative in Canada is *The Golden Dog* by William Kirby (1877). Kirby's novel, though following the lives of French Canadians before the fall of New France in 1748, upholds the British as victorious and the idea that authors can provide objective historical accounts. As Wyile argues, the purpose of novels such as Kirby's were to assert an authentic and serious Canadian identity and history, independent of British colonialism and other national influences (*Speaking* 6). Unsurprisingly, novels like Kirby's reimagine public and official history by focusing on wars and conquests, especially the "political events and the deeds of 'great men'" (Von Dirke 417) or "white, upper-class English males" (Wyile, *Speaking* 5).

8 By propagating a national past, a collective mythology, and a unified identity, master narratives predominately ignore the lives and contributions of women; the writing is also highly individualistic and elitist: thus while political figures such as Laura Secord (recently fictionalized in a young reader's book *Acts of Courage – Laura Secord and the War of 1812* by Connie Brummel Cook) may be known, working-class women, who would have experienced some form of public life, are rarely deemed worthy of historical significance. In many cases, women's lives are recorded and referenced solely in relation to the achievements of male family members. In Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988), the narrator asks of Mrs. Richards, a new immigrant to British Columbia in 1873, "what is her first name? she must have one –/so far she has only the name of a dead man,/ someone somewhere else" (37). Women's historical novels, therefore, contest masculinist master narratives by "expos[ing] the subjective and phallocentric nature of mainstream historiography" (Wallace, *Woman's* 206), highlighting the inherent sexism of the official record, particularly as its representation distorts and excludes the lives and voices of women, while simultaneously arguing the way in which voices and lives are deemed worthy of historical recording/archiving is discriminatory and in need of transforming.

9 Beverly Boutillier and Alison Prentice, speaking about generations of historically minded women in Canada, assert the realization that there is an "[i]nability to identify their [women's] own lived experience with much of the content of history" (6), predominantly "political and military history" (Wyile, *Speculative* 3). Feminist historians, since the 1970s, however, (for instance Sylvia Van Kirk's pioneering text *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870* (1980)) have been actively rewriting Canada's traditional histories. Elizabeth Jameson argues that narratives like Edgar McInnis', Harold Innis's, or Frederick Jackson Turner's perpetuate an erroneous belief that women (both European-immigrants and Indigenous peoples) did not participate in fundamental ways to the colonizing of the Americas ("Ties" 67). Receiving literary attention via historical novels, is not surprising, for as Diana Wallace notes, "the historical novel has allowed [writers/readers] to invent or 're-imagine' … the unrecorded lives of marginalized and subordinated people, especially women, but also the working classes, Black people, slaves and colonized peoples, and to shape narratives, which are more appropriate to their experiences than those of conventional history" (*Woman's*, 2). Echoing Wallace's statement and supporting the argument of this article, Marlatt, once again in Ana Historic, claims, "i learned that history is the real story the city fathers tell of the only important events in the world. a tale of their exploits hacked out against a silent backdrop of trees, of wooden masses. so many claims to fame. so many ordinary men turned into heroes. (where are the city mothers?)" (28)

10 Arguably, the city mothers can be found in postmodern historical novels, or historiographic metafictions, because this position opens up the dominant masculine discourse to include and validate women's and other minorities' experiences. In postmodern texts, we read, against "significant" historical events, intersecting voices from the margins like those from the working classes, diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and women's perspectives. Historiographic metafiction decenters any focus (especially a masculine, Eurocentric, elitist one) and encourages a plurality of voices and perspectives, but the position is also deeply suspicious of a coherent identity, a sense of collective solidarity, or an attachment to a truth value or a claim based on "fact." Thus, postmodern historical novels like Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* simultaneously validate and delegitimize an authentic voice.

11 In Atwood's novel, which plays with fact and fiction, we can never be certain as to whether Grace Marks, an Irish girl who emigrates to Pre-Confederation Canada, is guilty of murdering her employer's servant, Nancy Montgomery. After the end of the novel, Atwood clarifies her postmodern approach: "I have of course fictionalized historical events (as did

many commentators on this case who claimed to be writing history)" (547). The truth in the case of Grace Marks, Atwood suggests, is beyond knowing because testimonies, documents, newspapers, and other forms of text based records and archives, like fictional stories, are inherently biased and constructed; the novel suggests that "[w]e cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are texts" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 16) and that ," there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth" (109).

12 By contrast, a maternal genealogy, as Irigaray emphasizes, subscribes to authenticity, a gendered reality, and the truth of lived experiences because it is committed to feminist socio-political change. There is a latent anxiety within these novels about subscribing to the historical record as either purely objective (master narrative) or merely invention and construction (postmodern). As Milda Danytė suggests, many contemporary historical novels, including transnational maternal genealogy ones, do "not celebrate the national myths, or the national heroes as did the 19th century novel, but at the same time, do not parody the past in postmodern fashion" (40). If truths or facts become inaccessible, categories of identity (race, class, sexuality, gender, etc.), which influence and shape the protagonist's lives in very real and meaningful ways, can be questioned and can be denied or negated. Chow reasons that, "[e]ven though feminists partake in the postmodernist ontological project of dismantling claims of cultural authority that are housed in specific representations, feminism's rootedness in overt political struggles against the subordination of women makes it very difficult to accept ("Postmodern Automatons" 103). Therefore, the transnational maternal genealogy counters historiographic metafiction which is skeptical of historical Truth, suspicious of continuity with the past, or hostile to accessing an authentic past.

13 While predominately breaking away from master narratives and postmodern attitudes, transnational maternal genealogies continue to contribute to and draw from several manifestations of the historical novel in Canada including the master, the postmodern, the regional, the romance, and the postcolonial. Like those which are from a postcolonial perspective (i.e., Rudy Wiebe's *Temptations of Big Bear*) or a neo-regional perspective (hearing a non-traditional voice within a specific region, e.g., Linda Abbott's *The Loss of the Marion*, set in Newfoundland in the early twentieth century and told from the familial, woman's point of view), maternal genealogies reflect dissatisfaction with the dominant discourses in Canada's history and fictional-history writing. Like the "'postcolonial, revisionist' accounts of Canadian history and historiography in recent historical novels" (Wyile, *Speculative Fictions* xii), neo-regional novels and transnational maternal genealogy

novels share a belief that reality is fundamentally marked by identity categories such as gender, race, and class and that these lived realities must be acknowledged and represented in Canada's historical fiction. For this reason, Lawrence Hill's *Book of Negroes* arguably does impart a maternal genealogy as the work centers on Aminata Diallo, an African woman brought as a slave to America who later resettles in Nova Scotia, Canada as a free woman. Aminata is freed for her participation as a Loyalist to the British government against the Americans. After leaving Canada, she returns to Africa and travels to England. This novel does important work in intervening in hegemonic Canadian history, and the only reasons it fails to fully meet the criteria of a maternal genealogy is because it does not engage the recent past, and it is written by a man.

14 As critical interventions in the dominant discourse, transnational maternal genealogies say as much about the distant past as they do about the recent past and present. Dorrit Cohn maintains that a typical feature of historical fiction is that "the historiographically oriented authorial discourse of a 'contemporary' narrator concerned with past events" (160) is markedly visible. Most women's historical novels conform to Cohn's claim because the storyteller is a woman reflecting both backwards and forwards on her life and/or the lives of her maternal family, thereby broadening the nineteenth century definition of historical fiction put forward by Walter Scott. In *Waverley* (1814), Scott insists novels should not be written in a period of the author's lifetime or the recent past; they should preferably take place "sixty years since" (4-5). Today, this caveat remains supported by several twentieth century critics including Georg Lukács, Avrom Fleishman, and Seymour Menton. Nevertheless, like Joseph W. Turner and Danytė, amongst others, I recognize the importance of broadening the requirement that the historical novel take place in a time preceding the author. This is particularly relevant in legitimizing women's narratives which assert a maternal genealogy.

15 Danytė believes "'popular' or 'unofficial memory' finds expression […] in family history or societies that collect the everyday material culture of the recent past" (36). The recent past, experienced through familial relations, is an integral part of maternal genealogies like Sweatman's *When Alice Lay Down With Peter*. Sweatman's text fuses memory and the familial history/future of the heroine, Blondie McCormach, starting in 1869 until her death in 1979 in St. Norbert, Manitoba. The transnational maternal genealogy put forth in the text, furthermore, can also be labelled as a "matrilineal narrative" (Cosslett7). A matrilineal narrative either "tell[s] the stories of several generations of women at once" (Cosslett 7), or it "shows how the identity of a central character is crucially formed by her female ancestors" (7). To reiterate, novels employing a transnational maternal genealogy, shuttle between

Canada and at least one other nation, shift anachronistically between past and present, and represent several female family members (grandmothers, aunts, mothers, sisters, and daughters), and conclude their narratives in Canada.

16 In the hands of women authors and readers, however, the historical novel has not endorsed "key periods of nationalist resurgence" (Duffy as referenced by Cabajsky and Grubisic x). In fact, the exact opposite is the case: transnational maternal genealogies contest homogenous notions of national identity, distinctions between nations are blurred, and the notion of the nation, including women's roles in nationhood and nation-making, are interrogated and called into question. As Wyile argues, "[c]ontemporary Canadian novelists are much less inclined to construct patriotic narratives of the building of a nation and of a unitary Canadian character than to dramatize the exploitation, appropriation, and exclusion that such narratives of nation have often served to efface" (*Speculative* 7). In Kogawa's *Obasan*, for example, racism and discrimination against Japanese-Canadians during WWII is centralized. The novel, set primarily in the recent past of the 1970s, follows the life of Naomi as she searches for clues as to the circumstances of her mother's life and death after her mother returned to Japan during the Second World War.

17 Naomi, a young child during the war, never sees or hears from her mother again after she leaves for Japan. Growing up in Canada during the war, Naomi, along with the rest of her family, suffers from racism, having her family's property absconded and sold, her family members separated, and having a forced relocation to Alberta, which leaves the family struggling to survive. Kogawa's novel does not glorify the Second World War, and it does not condone the acts of either Japan or Canada. Meredith Shoenut argues that "Naomi's purpose becomes to explore this political language, to question and deconstruct official versions of Canadian history, and to analyze Canada's past as though it were fiction" (481). The text offers personal perspectives by focusing on the familial lives of women. Naomi's family, particularly her mother and aunt, form a maternal connection in the text, which is stronger than any national identity: it manifests the "the matriarchal yearnings of dispossessed women seeking their own place in nations and in history" (Boehmer 3). The transnational maternal genealogy counters traditional records of the Second World War and demands Canada rethink its war involvement through apology to and redress to Canadians of Japanese descent.

18 A unified national identity is undermined by exploring "women's lives and loves, their families and their feelings" thus giving "the concerns of the so called private sphere the status and interest of history" (Light 59). Though contemporary women's historical fiction

has done much work in reclaiming and rewriting women's sexual lives, transnational maternal genealogies rely too heavily on heterosexuality. The familial and the romantic, typically suppressed and denigrated in masculinist novels and studies, nevertheless, are given historical and political importance; moreover, writing about female sexuality "allows coverage of normally taboo subjects, not just active female sexuality but also contraception, abortion, childbirth and homosexuality" (Wallace as qtd. by Cooper and Short 11). Urquhart's novel *Away* offers an ambivalent representation of female sexuality. Parodied as demonic, monstrous, and sinful, Mary's overt sexuality leads to her obsession and untimely death. Her death, therefore, serves as a warning to her female ancestors not to let romantic lust rule over reason.

19 The contemporary character, Esther, learns that her Irish great-grandmother, Mary took a young Irish sailor, who washed upon her shore, as "a daemon lover" (45); after hearing the man breathe "Moira" as his dying word (6), Mary becomes convinced her name has changed. Unable to relinquish the presence of the dead man from her life, Mary envisions that he follows her to Moira Lake, Canada in 1848 where she has made a home nearby with her husband, Brian. Disappearing one day and leaving her family forever, Mary declares, "In this land I thought he had forgotten me until I heard of the lake called Moira. Then I knew where he was. I will stay near him now until I die. I am loved by him and he is loved by me" (181). Her death symbolizes an inability to accept her new nation, and in keeping with the genre of maternal transnational genealogies, it serves as a warning against establishing a unilateral nationality. Furthermore, this fantastical romance, in which Mary freezes to death by the Lake, causes Eileen to caution her granddaughter, Esther against the perils of an all-consuming love: "'Never allow anyone, anything to change your name.' […] I am speaking of the kind of name change that turns you into someone else altogether, someone other than who you are, the change that takes you off to somewhere else" (9). For being besotted with a dead man, Mary is derogatively referred to several times in the narrative as "away" (45). Like Mary, however, we learn that her daughter, Eileen, (Esther's grandmother) too was "silenced by passion before the age of twenty, and […] had only now chosen to speak of the past" (8). Finally, Eileen tells Esther, "'If I were you,' […] I would stay in this house all my life. If I were you, I would never go away'" (350). Eileen's feminist perspective thus alerts her granddaughter to the devastating consequences of patriarchal love and marriage for women.

20 While vindicating female sexuality, not all maternal genealogies therefore subscribe to an ideology of romance as empowering. Pauline Holdstock's *Into the Heart of the Country* echoes Urquhart's text when her protagonist, Molly, declares, "All my world was the [Prince

of Wales] fort […] It was my home. Why would I desire ever to walk away from it? Why would anyone leave her home unless to be with her husband?" (1). Jane Spencer, commenting as Sophia Lee's *The Recess*, an early woman's historical novel, notes that " [r]omantic love is 'an illusion standing in the way of women's access to the romance of mother-daughter reconciliation and female power'" (as qtd. by Wallace, *Woman's* 17). Wallace, likewise, suggests, "Although Lee can offer a critique of women's victimisation by romantic love, she cannot imagine an alternative female autonomy" (*Woman's* 19): the same holds true for Holdstock's protagonist , Molly. Molly's life ends, just as Mary's in Urquhart's novel, when she freezes to death. In Urquhart's novel, however, the maternal genealogy breaks the spell of death and romantic love. Maternal genealogies, by focusing on love, sexuality, and personal lives, moreover, expose the absurdity of master narratives which claim there can be "peoples without *history*" (Cuder-Domínguez 114, italics mine).

21 Dennis Duffy controversially claims that "the [Canadian] historical novel has served as a vehicle for the imaginative representation of nationalistic ideologies" (v). One rightfully might ask what constitutes the Canadian in a transnational maternal genealogy. What makes a contemporary women's historical novel Canadian? Is it the nationality of the writer? Is it the setting of the novel? Perhaps, it is the nationality of the heroine which constitutes what we mean when we say "Canadian." Some examples of the kinds of classification difficulties I am identifying can be seen in the novel *Mina* (2004) by Jonatha Ceely. Is this a Canadian historical novel because the author was born in Kingston Ontario, though she has lived in Turkey, Italy, and now resides in the United States? The novel details the life of an Irish immigrant escaping the great famine by moving to England first and then later New York City. Similarly, Eva Stachniak, born in Wroclaw, Poland, has lived in Toronto for the last thirty years. She has recently written on the eighteenth century Russian Empress, Catherine the Great in *The Winter Palace*. Katherine Govier's *The Printmaker's Daughter* likewise is a novel set in nineteenth-century Japan and narrates the story of Oei, the daughter of the famous print maker, Hokusai. Canada as a nation, or even pre-Confederation colony, never figures in any of these novels. These concerns support Duffy's assertion that "Canadian writers have achieved international popularity by writing stories based on other people's histories, for example, […] Pauline Gedge" (iii).While these novels address the exclusion of women's voices and lives from the dominant discourse, they do not give the reader a sense of a transnational maternal genealogy.

22 Similarly, novels like *Ravensong* by Lee Maracle and *Midnight at the Dragon Café* by Judy Fong Bates focus on the familial lives of women and engage the recent past, but the

novels' settings and time-frames remain relatively static. Fong Bates' work describes a Chinese girl Su-Jen, and her family's struggle to adjust to a new life in Canada in the late 1950s. An emphasis on intergenerational lives in Su-Jen's life is lacking. Conversely, Maracle's work challenges the ontological divide between past and present by tracing the life of Stacey, a young girl who witnesses and experiences a flu epidemic in her Native community in the 1950s.The protagonist, Stacey, reflecting on the epidemic twenty-five years later, claims, "Over the next decade the village fell apart. Women left to marry after that. They left in droves. … The women lost the safety of the family. The village lost its clan because of it" (197). Celia, another female character, contemplates the number of babies who must have died over the last century because of European epidemics; "Whole lineages wiped out. Hundreds became thousands" (198). Dealing with their grief, the women family members sing an "ancient grieving song" to "an old hand drum" (198). While this genealogy marks pain and loss, it also signals hope and rebirth or a new maternal genealogy within Canada's recent past and future. At the same time, as a First Nations genealogy it exists independently of Canada and is subject to its own norms and conventions. The emphasis in this text, however, primarily because the women are indigenous, is not on the women's traveling or immigrating to Canada so much as experiencing the brutality and violence of colonialism, which places artificial and non-traditional boundaries on the women's lives. Jameson contends that Canadian colonialism has/had the devastating effect of "separating people of shared ethnicity and kinship into residents" of different political territories ("Connecting" 7); thus these narratives resist static notions of the nation and challenge in a productive way, the definition of "transnational" as being strictly cross "national."

23 Another potential pitfall of novels which invoke a transnational maternal genealogy is the establishment of origins. In *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, told from the perspective of Kae Ying Woo, a search for maternal origins is fundamental to the narrative. Lee writes, "The story began, I guess, with my great-grandmother, Lee Mui Lan, sometime in 1924, as she stood behind the cash register at the front of the even-now famous Disappearing Moon Cafe, 50 East Pender Street, Vancouver, British Columbia" (23). Lee continues later on in the novel to say "grown women are orphan children […] we have been broken from our mother's arms too son and made to cling to a man's world – which refuses to accept us" (138). An emphasis on recuperating maternal origins is thus necessary for feminist projects like Lee's. Her feminist comments, furthermore, resonate with Samantha Haigh's (re)articulation of the political goals, which Irigaray proposes, a maternal genealogy can achieve. She writes:

> In the absence of a maternal genealogy, daughters can never symbolize their relation to their mother, to 'origin', a relation men symbolize by recreating it in relationships with other women. It is the resymbolization of this relationship which is the condition for a (re)symbolized relationship between women. It is thus vital that a maternal genealogy be (re)discovered, that women be able to separate themselves from and symbolize their relation to be woman-mother as 'origin.' (Haigh 63)

Rethinking a link to our maternal past is an important step in creating a genealogy, but one must, nevertheless, maintain a critical stance.

24 Women's roles, especially as mothers, in shaping nations and territories have been marginalized and underwritten in Canada, but it is important to bear in mind how the transnational maternal genealogies, which this article identifies and discusses, risk essentializing women as mothers, intimating women are morally infallible, turning maternal ancestors into idols, and exercising exclusionary practices. The invocation of maternal roots suggests "that an ancient and continuous […] genealogy is important and desirable" (Sugars 21). Premised on an "anxiety of origins" (Zamora as qtd by Sugars 21) and "a sense of disinheritance in the present" (Sugars 24), this writing "enacts a desire for inheritability" (Sugars 24). An authentic claim to historical ancestors, even in the cases of invented genealogies, is a means for validating one's present and making sense of one's self through her history. Transnational maternal genealogies, as origin tales, as tales of the original mother, if left unexamined, therefore, have the potential of creating neo-master narratives and silencing the very same voices it seeks to articulate and recuperate.

25 In addition to the concern for origins and qualifying as distinctly transnational, other novels which fail to be considered transnational maternal genealogies are most women's historical novels rewriting pre-Confederation Canada. Though written presumably with the aim of rediscovering and emphasizing women's active political resistance to and participation in shaping the nation, these texts initially appear to fit the category, but they do not emphasize the recent past and the lives of women across generations. Thus, novels like Holdstock's *Into the Heart of the Country* and Suzanne Desrochers' *Bride of New France* (2011), while doing important work in addressing and redressing the violence of colonialism (both French and English) on indigenous peoples in the early historical record emphasize neo-regionalism (a specific time/setting) and the importance of a single woman's life.[3] For instance, Holdstock's text centralizes the life of a mixed-race woman, Molly Norton, but it traces her life in Prince Wales Fort primarily through her paternal ancestors (Richard Norton,

[3] This is also the case in "The End of East" by Jen Sookfong Lee. Though the novel is told from Samantha's first person perspective and details her life with her mother and four sisters in Vancouver, the central genealogical character is her grandfather, Chan Seid Quan, who immigrates to Canada from China in 1913.

Moses Norton and later, famed-explorer husband, Samuel Hearne).[4] Other than a few ethereal sequences titled "Molly's dream," the novel remains true to its static setting and time-frame.

26 While it is tempting to read contemporary transnational maternal genealogies as inherently anti-nation or anti-nationalistic, it is false to do so. Robert David Stacey also persuasively argues that "the critical tendency to treat Canadian historical fiction as a vehicle for national allegory" (as qtd. by Cabajsky and Grubisic xix) is not the only way one must perceive the nation. It's not that in contemporary women's historical novels "the national dimension […] is unimportant, but simply that the subject of the novel is not the nation per se, but what we might call the *nation-in-history*, a formulation that foregrounds the necessarily temporal dimension of the nation and national identity" (as qtd. by Cabajsky and Grubisic xix). When read relationally, maternal genealogies complicate the Canadian national identity and reject patriarchal authority over the past (Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern* 108), especially as to whose voices are deemed worthy of history and considered "Canadian." The fact remains, however, that because many of these works focus on non-traditional history, women's romances, families, and personal lives, and seemingly avoid official, public history, they "end up imbuing the 'nation' with a priority that haunts the narrative margins" (Cabjasky and Grubisic xiii). This is especially the case given that as counter-novels, transnational maternal genealogies "perform a writing back, a retort to having been written out of the settled story" (van Herk 131) to the dominant referent, a patriarchal nation.

27 Transnational maternal genealogies in women's historical novels certainly challenge any easy categorization according to nationality, and it is not surprising given that many contemporary Canadian women's historical novels no longer are written strictly about Canadian women, are set in Canada, or written by authors who were born in or have lived their entire lives in Canada. Rey Chow suggests that "[t]he issues involved in women's literature, gay and lesbian literature, ethnic literature, exceed the boundaries of the nation and national language and that they demand to be studied with newer conceptual methods" ("In the Name" 114). Rather, the traversing of several nations, including Canada, while establishing a maternal genealogy, is the central focus in all of these texts, and, therefore, a unified national identity is put into crises. By putting forth a transnational maternal genealogy inside and outside of the text, women's novels draw attention to the problematic fact that the

[4] See etymology of "patriot": a "patriot" is understood as "'one whose ruling passion is the love of his country' — F. patriote — late L. patriōta — Gr. patriōtēs, f. pátrios pátrios of one's fathers, patris fatherland, sb. use of adj. 'ancestral', f. pater, patr- Father" ("Patriot"). The historical and etymological link therefore between patria and pater frames familial and national politics as patriarchal (from the Greek patriarkh?s "patria, lineage + arkhos, chief or leader" ["Father"]).

nation, like the family, is under patriarchal authority.[5] In Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* the narrative switches back and forth between an aunt, Bibi-Ji, (who defiantly immigrates to Canada from India in 1946, marrying for social mobility, not love), her Indian-Canadian neighbour, Leela, and her niece, Nimmo, who suffers the hardships of India's political upheavals and social unrest for nearly fifty years. The tensions between the two female relatives is visible, and is an allegory for political suspicions, religious divisions, and strained relations between Indians within India and those in the Canadian diaspora, epitomized in the novel by the terrorist attack on Air India Flight 182 in 1985. The Epilogue, set in 1986, features Nimmo's narrative in India and her reunion with her estranged son, Jasbeer (because Bibi-ji, who cannot have her own children, appropriates him as her own son). Jasbeer's return to the maternal root de-centralizes Canada as the promised land, but it also problematically transfers the maternal genealogy back to a notion of an "authentic" mother, Nimmo, and mother-land, India.

28 Shield's *The Stone Diaries*, similarly, does not finish in Canada but in another nation, the United States. Via a visible instantiation of a transnational maternal genealogy, the novel follows chronologically the life of Daisy Goodwill, later Flett, from her birth in 1905, in Manitoba, in the Dominion of Canada, to her death in 199- in Florida (347). Shields' work, as many transnational maternal genealogies do, begins by focusing on Daisy's mother, Mercy Stone, who unknowingly is pregnant and about to give birth to a daughter. Mercy's last name signifies the ability to read a maternal genealogy as a palimpsest – its presence is erased or written over by the paternal genealogy. Shields highlights this when Daisy does not take her mother's name but her father's, though Shield's title suggests the presence or importance of Mercy Stone's life is never fully forgotten. The title also plays with the occupation of Mercy's husband, Cuyler Goodwill who is a mason working in a limestone quarry. After

[5] Desrocher's novel rewrites a rewrites a familiar and official topic in Canadian and French Canadian history and fiction: the filles du roi. The novel highlights the historical impacts and consequences when maternal genealogies are appropriated for colonial, patriarchal gains. Laure, however, confounds traditional images of the filles du roi by befriending an Iroquois named Deskaheh. With her husband gone, Laure begins a romantic relationship with Deskaheh. The result, as Laure declares, is that "Lord, there is a Savage baby growing within me" (254). Laure is told by her neighbour, who knows the true paternity of the child, "Only the women sent from France can give the King the French colony he wants to see in Canada […] they cannot know what you have done" (263). Laure potentially faces imprisonment or worse for having Deskaheh's child and for propagating a corrupt maternal genealogy. Thus she consents for her daughter, Luce, to be adopted by Deskaheh and his people (265-6). Desrochers' novel complicates the origin stories of New France and stories of Canada's founding mothers by showing not only how children of mixed race were considered illegitimate by the French but also how it is not only French men who begot children with the indigenous. This novel, nonetheless, does not acknowledge indigenous women as progenitors of the nation, nor can it be deemed a transnational maternal genealogy because it never addresses the recent/contemporary past, it does not shuttle between the past and the present, and it is not a matrilineal narrative. The text deliberately refuses a maternal genealogy and partakes in undermining its own recognition of mixed-race Canadians by silencing Luce's voice and future life.

Mercy dies in childbirth, Cuyler erects a monument affectionately called the Goodwill Tower, which is a careful grouping of stones dedicated to his recently deceased wife. The tower reaches a formidable 30 feet in the air, and bears Cuyler's eclectic carvings such as holy words and depictions of animals and birds (65), which attract visitors and tourists from around the country. Cuyler, however, soon after his wife's death in the novel moves to Indiana, and Daisy, who has been under the care of her neighbor Mrs. Clarentine Flett up until this time, moves to join him. From this point on, throughout the novel, Daisy travels back and forth between Canada and the United States, living in Manitoba, Indiana, Ottawa, and Florida. While Daisy is the central protagonist, the text focuses on the lives of her children, grandchildren, and other family members (Shields even playfully includes photographs of historical people who she pretends represent or are her fictionalized characters).

29 Another novel which exemplifies the kinds of challenges I have identified is *The Russlander* by Sandra Birdsell. Birdsell's novel narrates the massacre of Katherine Vogt's Prussian Mennonite family in 1917, Russia (now Ukraine) and her survival. After the massacre, Katya reunites with her grandparents who are suffering from starvation from the war; Katya claims "Canada, a word on a map, a place to escape to, providing her grandparents would be able to sell their house and what furniture hadn't already been sold. She didn't know anything at the time about Canada except the little she had learned from letters her grandparents received from distant relatives in Manitoba" (339). The novel ends in the same way it begins: Katya is a great-grandmother telling her survival story to a man named Ernest Unger who is collecting and recording Mennonite stories, primarily women's from Russia, to piece together a collective narrative. While Katya's life ends in Canada, the majority of the novel takes place in the Ukraine, thus emphasizing the importance of a transnational genealogy, but what Birdsell gives women's voices with one hand, she quickly takes away with the other. Katya's voice is appropriated by a male counterpart – a character deceptively lurking in the margins of the narrative. Unger, thus, is not the insignificant character readers mistake him for – he is the one who creates, constructs, edits, and compiles the women's narratives into a form deemed acceptable and worthy of the masculinist official record.

30 The transnational maternal genealogy established in Birdsell's novel, like many women's historical novels, also reflects a personal connection with the author. Coral Ann Howells notes, the biography of an author is never completely separate from the text (7), and indeed, in these works, it forms part of the paratext. Similar to Shields, an American-born,

Canadian author, who won the U.S. Pulitzer Prize for Fiction as well as the Governor General's Award in Canada for her novel, Birdsell's personal relation to her narrative is evident. In the bio on her personal website, she writes, "My father was a French-speaking Cree Métis, and my mother a Low-German speaking Mennonite who was born in Russia. My mother immigrated to Canada in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. That makes me a first generation Canadian on my maternal side, while many of my father's people claimed to have lived on the western plains since the beginning of the First Nations people." The author legitimizes her novel via her biographical past and emphasizes the need for women's histories to contribute to the national, official history of Canada. At the same time as undermining masculinist narratives, Birdsell's work, however, like Desrochers', problematically asserts a notion of racial/hereditary "origin" genealogies as being more legitimate than other Canadian narratives.

31 An example of a Canadian transnational maternal genealogy that traces its roots elsewhere is Viswanathan's *The Toss of a Lemon*. Like Birdsell's novel, Viswanathan's book briefly discusses Canada at the end of the narrative. Unlike Birdsell's work, however, Viswanathan's heroine never steps on Canadian soil nor does she even mention the country. The Canadian connection in this novel is beyond Sivakami, a protagonist born in late nineteenth century India. The novel begins in 1896 in Cholapatti, the date and place of Sivakami's marriage proposal and ends with the story told from Sivakami's great-grand daughter, who moves from India to Canada. She writes, "The tale has transmuted, passed from my great-grandmother into my mother, into me, from old world into new […] so it is that I sit here with you, the book of our lives between us, telling my story, and my people's in lands and languages I know but that are not my own" (616). The maternal genealogy established by Viswanathan is evidently transnational, as she finishes the novel not with Sivakami's words or mother-tongue but with her protagonist's kin living in Canada as a member of the Indian diaspora. Viswanathan's novel, like Badami's, underscores the circumstances behind immigration to Canada and the remaking of national identity by taking into account non-traditional voices and voices from outside of Canada.

32 Rewriting women as symbolic progenitors of contemporary and future genealogies both within and beyond the text is, thus, an important if not risky political goal. Transnational maternal genealogies bring together women's past lives with women's current transnational experiences by emphasizing continuity. Studying the Canadian woman's historical novel within a transnational feminist framework provides a way to understand coalitions and affinities as well as differences and divisions between the diverse social and political

experiences of women. Establishing a maternal genealogy within the Canadian woman's historical novel is considered a necessary step in creating an alternative literary-history for women. Promoting multiple perspectives and multiple truths, like postmodernists, these works refuse to privilege one narrative over another, thus undermining the authority of master narratives. At the same time, however, the works respect and validate the voices of minorities and claims to historical truth, which to reiterate distinguishes it from postmodern fiction. Transnational maternal genealogies, therefore, dialectically reconstruct history by strategically negotiating and engaging with multiple positions (master, postmodern, postcolonial, neo-regional, and romance).

33 In this newly created feminist space of reconstruction, historical voices from the margins can be heard and validated. Canadian women's lives (both as writers, subjects, and readers) are centralized, giving clarity and perspective on the issues and historical events that matter most to Canadian women (particularly body politics, family, immigration, religion, race, and colonialism). Speaking from the margins and breaking the silences within Canadian history and historiography, transnational maternal genealogies offer new and inventive ways of reimagining and transforming Canada's past, present, and future. These novels emphasize the need for Canadian literary criticism to engage more with the woman's historical novel because its variants, like transnational maternal genealogies, disrupt masculinist, Eurocentric definitions of what it means to be, or who is, and has been Canadian. Furthermore, the works recognize that many women's lived experiences are incompatible with the content of traditional Canadian history, and, therefore, stress reconstructing a multicultural history of Canada as a nation that is adequately reflected in its historical fiction. Finally, transnational maternal genealogies necessarily link a woman to her maternal past and contemporary present, thus broadening the traditional definition of the historical novel in Canada and demonstrating the genre's potential for activating feminist social change.

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