"When the myth of life began our people shared life with humans, stone to earth, fire to water, trees to sky": Multiplicity and Commonality in Hiromi Goto's Water of Possibility

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Until recently, Canadian children's literature produced by immigrants has not been classified as equal to that written by "the two founding nations" (Seiler 53). This situation has definitely changed, judging for instance from the number of books published in the series under the telling title In the Same Boat. As Margaret Mackey has commented, "[i]n terms of multimodal awareness and multicultural understanding, we are in a different universe from that a generation ago" (97). Still, in the essay "Alien Texts, Alien Seductions: The Context of Colour Full Writing", Hiromi Goto, a young Japanese-Canadian writer, one of the In the Same Boat authors, thus defines her practice: "I write well aware of race. I cannot imagine writing outside of this [racialized] context. My subject position and the subject positions my readers are something that I must (...) incorporate into the integrity of the text. I live in a racialized environment, and the politics of my writing are distinctly Colour Full" (266). As she admits, her strategy is close to that of another member of Canadian visible minorities, Larissa Lai, who speaks "with her world at the centre (...), explains afterwards, if she feels it necessary and desirable" and is always ready "to change and challenge" ("Alien Texts..." 266). This in turn enables Lai, and Goto, for that matter, "to imagine and create new worlds that may not be otherwise written or welcomed" ("Alien Texts..." 266). Goto explains that such a stance is conducive to Colour Full writing, "a site of strength, possibility and change" that is far from providing readers of other cultural backgrounds with "exotic delicacies meant to be sampled" ("Alien Texts..." 266). Rather, to follow Goto's phrasing, her texts "seduce" "non-alien readership" ("Alien Texts..." 266) and make them abandon the positions of "site tourists" so that they would take responsibility for their "desire to read the alien" ("Alien Texts..." 266).

In my article I aim to analyze how this subversive strategy functions in Goto's young adult fantasy novel The Water of Possibility (2002), which can be seen as a successful attempt at a narrative depicting a development of identity both within a specifically ethnic context and in more general social terms. I will argue that Goto does not incorporate a range of folkloristic material into her fiction just for the sake of artistic effect, but uses it far more expansively; transforming her story into literary folklore in which "[p]ast and present are often intertwined to cast light on contemporary society" (Inggs 29), she simultaneously addresses social realities, inscribing her strategy in the process of cross-culturation. Goto's protagonist, twelve-year old Sayuri Kato, a Japanese-Canadian, is forced to move from Calgary to the provincial town of Ganola, Alberta, because of economic reasons. Being Canadian-born and attending a public school in which she is most probably taught English history, Sayuri is only slightly aware of her ethnically complicated predicament. By transporting the girl to Living Earth, a secondary world which is perhaps greatest of humanity's steps towards a life-enhancing technology. To early man, fire was a divine gift randomly delivered in the form of lightning, forest fire or burning lava. Fire-lighting was revolutionized by the discovery of phosphorus, isolated in 1669 by a German alchemist trying to transmute silver into gold. Impressed by the element's combustibility, several 17th century chemists used it to manufacture fire-lighting devices, but the results were dangerously inflammable. The quest for a practical match really began after 1781 when a group of French chemists came up with the Phosphoric Candle or Ethereal Match, a sealed glass tube containing a twist of paper tipped with phosphorus. The "creation of life from clay" is a miraculous birth theme and scientific study that appears in mythology, literature, and modern theory. In Greek mythology, according to Pseudo-Apollodorus, Prometheus moulded men out of water and earth. In Sumerian mythology, the gods Enki or Enili create a servant of the gods,
humankind, out of clay and blood (see Enki and the Making of Man). In another Sumerian story, both Enki and Ninnmah create humans from the clay of the Abzu, the fresh water of the underground...
fantastic creatures from Living Earth. Having been drawn into their world, Sayuri begins to see things and herself from the inside out. This experience in turn exemplifies what Shaobo Xie defines as “identifying with an ‘other’s’ thought. To speak from an other’s thought is to redefine and renarrativize the world” (1). As will be shown, for Sayuri this renarrativization will actually involve not only her Japanese-Canadian identity but also her humanity in general.

Sayuri's own act of retelling begins when she hears the following story told to her by the tanuki, one of the races from Japanese folklore:

"When the myth of life began
our people shared life with humans,
(...)
But the spiral turning
saw human break the pattern
as if they were their own masters.
Instead of magic they wrought death.
They broke the living law.

So Great Mother Tanuki,
(...), enchanted humans into story
and they were never seen again.
So many ages of peace
and life
flowed like the mountain stream"

(The Water... 148-149)

The tanuki, for whom the tale is a factual historical account, explains to the girl the principles governing life in Living Earth and why every creature she meets is shocked at the sight of a human being as an evil omen [3]. As the only human being in Living Earth (apart from her brother Keiji), Sayuri feels humbled. She is also aware that she is judged by the alien creatures around her. A very evocative instance of such a critical observation is the first encounter between Sayuri and the tanuki: as the girl fell asleep in the sun, her skin became so red that they thought her to be a hairless pig suitable to eat. Aggrieved at such treatment as Sayuri is, she does admit that her "skin was as roasted as the delicious crackling pig she's seen hanging in the restaurants in Chinatown" (The Water... 140-141). In that way Goto subtly encourages her readers to experience a cognitive estrangement by trying to imagine how they could be seen by other creatures.

Even more challenging is her struggle with animal otherness haunting her in Living Earth. Sayuri's conception of humanity is organized by the radical opposition between nature and culture, manifested in seeing animals as the Other. In Living Earth the girl comes face to face with her own edibility as potential meat for animals living in the forest. She comes across a repugnant hollow in a tree and across in the dusk there, she sees that it is inhabited by the anthropomorphized fox, Machigai, whose diet consists of sweet chestnuts instead of fried tofu. As if this was not enough for the confused Sayuri, she experiences the blurring of the opposition between the human and the animal when witnessing various stages of Machigai’s metamorphosis into a Japanese girl in a kimono [3]. It takes considerable time before she understands that in Living Earth she represents one more of many species making up its ecosystem, just as her Japanese-Canadian origin is one of many other possible affiliations. Hence, as Goto shows, people must decide whether they are willing to share and co-exist with both the Otherness of the earth and with ethnic and cultural Others, without colonizing them and precluding any friction or challenge. Sayuri's initial experience of exclusion, which then changes into the sense of the continuum of identity, may be seen as Goto's envisioning of fluid interethnicity, which could be defined as the possibility of one's multiple identification with numerous communities, be it animals or people. Just as Sayuri begins to recognize her willingness to participate in several different communities -- her family, her swimming team, the inhabitants of Living Earth -- she notices the subtle balance of simultaneous belonging and alienation, which in turn constitutes her right to be the Other acknowledged by other Others. As McGillis states, "[w]e cannot but be 'Other' to the communities which contain us, and when everyone is an 'Other' then everyone shares an experience that might keep people together not by the bonds of community but by the choice of community" (215).

However, in Living Earth the multi-species diversity is threatened by the unification project of the Patriarch, a self-anthropomorphized fox, who, contrary to Machigai, conceals himself in a human form, thereby defying both his own "ethnic identity and preventing himself from dynamic interaction with Otherness. Just like a human, the fox can stand on his hind legs and has human hands [5]. His very human-like ambitions are about to cause an ecological disaster in Living Earth: to build and power his own city, which is to become the center of his empire, the fox treats the land as a commodity to be used for his disposal. As the fox justifies his endeavors, he finds inspiration in humans' domination approach to nature and the vision of constant economic, aesthetic, and spiritual progress towards an even more civilized world: "Does a human ask the ants and the beetles if they have hopes and dreams before destroying their homes to build his own? My vision is vast. I am not bound to the insect's details. I am pushing my world into a new existence. Power will feed power, and I will bind the many worlds into my own. " (The Water... 261). The Patriarch's conception of the world and his attitude to other animals represents what Heather Neff has called in the context of America "the emergerence of one dominant voice, mirrored against the other and virtually defined by the sense of competition engendered by both real and imaginary social adversaries" (57). A vivid example of cultural and ethnic homogenization imposed by the Patriarch is the platoon of the kappa soldiers, a well-organized group of creatures whose individualities, in Sayuri's eyes, always merge into "the enemy" (The Water... 179). The kappas can be seen as the colonized that have lost their ethnicity under the Patriarch's rule. Sayuri notices that, contrary to their nature, they do not "walk like forest creatures -- they swatted limbs of trees, cracked dry branches beneath their hard boots weighed down by heavy packs" (The Water... 175). Moreover, just as the fox has adopted human ways, the kappas use objects and food brought from the human world, such as tarpaulin or instant dehydrated soup. Sayuri's imprisonment in the fox's city again sensitizes her to her own human Otherness, to misbalances of power and to the struggle between the forces silencing Otherness and those empowering it.

The Patriarch's cynical tirade about people makes Sayuri decide to save the diversity of Living Earth and to expose the falsity of the fox's reasoning about humans by proving her own example that in spite of their greed "people have dreams and hopes and they love and share!" (The Water... 260-1). Simultaneously, Sayuri's opposition is an attempt at overcoming her own inability to push aside her egocentric motivations for the sake of others. Naturally, the slightly neurotic and self-conscious girl does not find it easy to oppose the Patriarch, who tempts her by appealing to her to defeat the Patriarch. Significantly, this combined effort becomes possible partly thanks to Sayuri's new ability to appreciate their intrinsic value: even such seemingly trivial qualities as a spider's weaving spinning talents or a frog's
towards a globalized postcoloniality” (13).

Postcolonial project in the long run, for the world always ultimately belongs to children. If today’s children (...) are not, in any sense, undercut the weight of individual aspects of minority experience” (35). This book helps young Enoch Padolsky puts it, “(e)lements of multiplicity, commonality, and intersectionality in Canadian minority writing do work with them” (Mackey 97). Goto’s book effectively responds to this challenge as it testifies to the fact that, as multicultural sophistication. Understanding the complexity of that context is a major challenge for those adults who world of various complex fictions, with ease and grace. Their reading often occurs in a context of multimodal and use Akiwenzie-Damm’s phrasing, the book teaches how “to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the experience “within a dominant culture that determines difference and normalcy” (Padolsky 26). In other words, to both describes a self-affirming cultural identification with Japanese traditions and contextualizes Japanese-Canadian politics of such an act? Do I imagine myself safe in this space? (...) So many questions you must ask yourself and alienation onto an other? (...) Do I imagine that I have the privilege to exoticize aliens without having to negotiate the cultural otherness as radical difference”, that is, to “strive towards a utopian future of unity that difference has to be creation” (85). Naturally, it is likely that in the future the girl’s behavior may happen to be inconsistent with what she and social identity”. As Akiwenzi-Damm puts it, “[w]e come to understand that behind us our ancestors, in front of us girls from her new swimming team seem unwilling to make friends with her simply because of their own inhibitions, including the inability to acknowledge encounters with Otherness as a vital experience on their lives. To paraphrase Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, Sayuri is “[s]tanding at this intersection” and she can “develop (...) [her] sense of personal and social identity”. As Akiwenzie-Damm puts it, “[w]e come to understand that behind us our ancestors, in front of us our descendents, in order to understand our individual relationship to all others around us, to all aspects of experience as mitigated by realities of race, class, gender, and generation” (10). Sayuri’s astonishment at the Otherness of Living Earth and the resulting insight into her own alterity allow her to acknowledge the Other within herself. Simultaneously, by trying to prevent the Patriarch Sayuri becomes “a self-reflexive homo textualis”, engaged, to paraphrase the tanuki’s tale, in disenchanting human from the realm of story through the process of continuous self-interperation and the discursive treatment of various Others (Kalaga 63). Sayuri does need alterity to envision her, but contrary to the idea of diversity in order to better know and better love herself” (Neft 53). This leads to her acknowledgement of the imperative the ethical relation to the Other based, as Richard Kearny contends, on the respect for “the singularity of the other person”, as well as the recognition of the [O]ther “as another self bearing universal rights and responsibilities” towards other Others (80). As Sayuri invites positive reader-identification, through witnessing her struggle with her own Otherness and that of creatures around her, readers are encouraged to reflect on their own attitudes to alterity. In this way Goto’s novel prompts reflection on the importance of Otherness for one’s development towards an expanded sense of identity, including its ethnic dimension and such values as tolerance, sympathy and altruism.

Sayuri’s hands-on experiences with the multiplicity and commonality of Otherness in Living Earth enable her to confront the problems of her Ganola life. First, before she leaves the magical realm, she is confronted with her monster and her good selves when immersing herself in the Water of Possibility, into which one has to reach and take out that is bad. Making Sayuri face turns out to be a psychological and emotional trauma gives Goto a chance to encourage both her heroine and readers to reimagine their own moral choices in a more abstract way. Now Sayuri can see in her good self the side of herself full of joy, self-contentment and love for her family, including the interest in her cultural heritage (The Water... 306). “The Sayuri Monster” repulses Sayuri, unable to assume a proper spiritual, moral, or ethnic stand in her life (The Water... 306). Sayuri finally manages to restrain her monstrosity by declaring it a part of herself that she needs to control. This self-chosen identification is the final confirmation of Sayuri’s potential for a more effective interaction with the Others around her. Having developed "the ability to feel something happening with as well as to an Other" (Keefee 102), Sayuri begins to respect her little brother and her "freak" mother, as well as try to understand that some of the girls from her new swimming team seem unwilling to make friends with her simply because of their own inhibitions, including the inability to acknowledge encounters with Otherness as a vital experience on their lives. To paraphrase Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, Sayuri is “[s]tanding at this intersection” and she can “develop (...) [her] sense of personal and social identity”. As Akiwenzie-Damm puts it, “[w]e come to understand that behind us our ancestors, in front of us our descendents, in order to understand our individual relationship to all others around us, to all aspects of experience as mitigated by realities of race, class, gender, and generation” (10). Sayuri’s astonishment at the Otherness of Living Earth and the resulting insight into her own alterity allow her to acknowledge the Other within herself. Simultaneously, by trying to prevent the Patriarch Sayuri becomes “a self-reflexive homo textualis”, engaged, to paraphrase the tanuki’s tale, in disenchanting human from the realm of story through the process of continuous self-interperation and the discursive treatment of various Others (Kalaga 63). Sayuri does need alterity to envision her, but contrary to the idea of diversity in order to better know and better love herself” (Neft 53). This leads to her acknowledgement of the imperative the ethical relation to the Other based, as Richard Kearny contends, on the respect for “the singularity of the other person”, as well as the recognition of the [O]ther “as another self bearing universal rights and responsibilities” towards other Others (80). As Sayuri invites positive reader-identification, through witnessing her struggle with her own Otherness and that of creatures around her, readers are encouraged to reflect on their own attitudes to alterity. In this way Goto’s novel prompts reflection on the importance of Otherness for one’s development towards an expanded sense of identity, including its ethnic dimension and such values as tolerance, sympathy and altruism.

Towards the end of her musings in “Alien Texts, Alien Seductions” Goto herself says: “Am I projecting my own alienation onto another? (...) Do I imagine that I have the privilege to exoticize aliens without having to negotiate the politics of such an act? Do I imagine myself safe in this space? (...) So many questions you must ask yourself and struggle to answer” (268). The Water of Possibility may be seen as a partial answer to these quandaries in that it both describes a self-affirming cultural identification with Japanese traditions and contextualizes Japanese-Canadian experience “within a dominant culture that determines difference and normalcy” (Padolsky 26). In other words, to use Akiwenzie-Damm's phrasing, the book teaches how "to embody, articulate, and share reality, to bring the isolated private self into harmony and balance with this reality, to verbalize the sense of the majesty and reverent mastery of all things (...)” (89). Sayuri is one of the many Canadian young people who “move smoothly through a world of various complex fictions, with ease and grace. Their reading often occurs in a context of multimodal and multicultural sophistication. Understanding the complexity of that context is a major challenge for those adults who work with them” (Goto 89). Goto’s book respectively responds to this challenge as it testifies to the fact that, as Enoch Padolsky puts it, “elements of multiplicity, commonality, and intersectionality in Canadian minority writing do not, in any sense, undercut the weight of individual aspects of minority experience” (35). This book helps young readers learn to interact with other voices and to recognize the transforming power of hybridity by acknowledging the status of Others in the world and reconsidering the existing cultural and political divisions in the world as constructed by various discourses. Having read Goto’s story one cannot but agree with Xie that “[i]f children’s literature and criticism of children’s literature take upon themselves to decolonize the world, they will prove the most effective postcolonial project in the long run, for the world always ultimately belongs to children. If today’s children (...) are encouraged to understand and appreciate racial/ethnic difference, that would tremendously expedite the progress toward a globalized postcoloniality” (13).

Notes
1. As Goto herself points out, the correct spelling is “Yama-uba,” but “when pronounced out loud, the word ‘sounds’ more like ‘yamanba’” (319). For more information see http://www.youkaimura.org/yamauba.htm.

2. Interestingly, Goto also emphasizes Sayuri’s alienation by introducing the theme of sexual development. Most males and females are preoccupied with the changes they experience during puberty, but females are often less satisfied with their physical appearance than males. As for Sayuri, on the rational level she tries to convince herself that, as her mother says, one’s body is “a mystery” and “a living work of art” (35). Still, she has a sense of losing control over it: she hates her pubic hair and growing breasts and wishes she would never have to wear a bra and have a period. She reasons that the “tender chest” and using tampons will negatively "affect her efficiency in the water” (34). In this way, Sayuri's developing body becomes another manifestation of the Other within herself which she desperately tries to escape.

3. The real tanuki is a badger- or raccoon-like, atypical species of dog, with stripes of black fur under its eyes. The mythical tanuki are “animals with the power of transformation -- for either benevolent or malevolent purposes” (Schumacher). They are believed to love sake and are often represented with...
In Japan, foxes are legendary creatures with magical powers for doing both good and evil. They can also metamorphose into any natural objects, including humans, and overhear people's secrets. They are also able "cast illusions, appear in dreams, and read thoughts" (Schumacher). As it is believed that their favorite food is fried tofu, Sayuri is right to conclude that Machigai's diet of chestnuts does not provide him enough energy. See Mark Schumacher's site "INARI or Oinari or Oinari-sama. Shinto God/Goddess of Rice and Food, Associated with the Fox (KITSUNE)", at http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/oinari.shtml. Perhaps this theme inspired Goto's Patriarch and his city.

Works Cited


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The control of fire was the first and perhaps greatest of humanity’s steps towards a life-enhancing technology. To early man, fire was a divine gift randomly delivered in the form of lightning, forest fire or burning lava. Fire-lighting was revolutionized by the discovery of phosphorus, isolated in 1669 by a German alchemist trying to transmute silver into gold. Impressed by the element’s combustibility, several 17th century chemists used it to manufacture fire-lighting devices, but the results were dangerously inflammable. The quest for a practical match really began after 1781 when a group of French chemists came up with the Phosphoric Candle or Ethereal Match, a sealed glass tube containing a twist of paper tipped with phosphorus. The “creation of life from clay” is a miraculous birth theme and scientific study that appears in mythology, literature, and modern theory. In Greek mythology, according to Pseudo-Apollodorus, Prometheus molded men out of water and earth. In Sumerian mythology, the gods Enki or Enlil create a servant of the gods, humankind, out of clay and blood (see Enki and the Making of Man). In another Sumerian story, both Enki and Ninmah create humans from the clay of the Abzu, the fresh water of the underground.