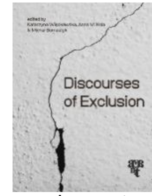

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Accepting Invisibility? Experiences of Exclusion in Grace Lau's Poetry

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Abstract

In her poetry collection *The Language We Were Never Taught to Speak* (2021), Grace Lau, a Hong Kong-born Chinese Canadian poet, showcases different experiences of exclusion and inclusion, some connected to the long history of prejudice and discrimination of racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities. The aim of this article is to discuss depictions of three types of exclusion experienced by Lau—that of a postcolonial subject, a queer subject, and, finally, a queer subject of colour—and the impact those experiences have on her identity. The analysis of three of Lau's poems—"Birth/Right," "Another God," and "Perfect Groupie"—provides an insight into her reflections on different instances of exclusion she experienced, whether motivated by her ethnicity and nationality, her sexual orientation, or the combination of both, and the impact they had on her identity as a queer postcolonial subject.

Keywords: Chinese Canadian literature, exclusion, Grace Lau, perpetual foreigner stereotype, model minority myth, queer literature

1. Introduction

The Language We Were Never Taught to Speak is a debut poetry collection published in 2021 by Grace Lau, a Hong Kong-born Chinese Canadian poet. The poems included in *The Language We Were Never Taught to Speak* can be described as vignettes illustrating Lau's experiences—being a Canadian and Chinese migrant stuck between the perpetual foreigner stereotype and the model minority myth ("Escape Artist," "Birth/Right"), a queer woman of colour caught adrift between the white queer community and the Chinese diaspora

("The Levity," "The Lies That Bind," "My Grief Is a Winter"), and an aficionado of both contemporary Western popular culture and traditional Chinese culture ("When Yuhua Hamasaki Went Home")—and highlighting the complexity and intricacy of the mosaic that is the contemporary Canadian identity.

Lau belongs to a group of young Canadian poets of East Asian descent[1] who in their works often describe their experiences of living in Canada as people of colour and address the issues plaguing the Canadian society, exposing the faux inclusivity of Canadian multiculturalism. This form of auto/biographical writing (Davis, 2011) can, as Larissa Lai (2014) notes, serve as "a way to 'break the silence,' especially for marginalized subjects and those people who have been rendered invisible through racist exclusions from Canadian cultural life" (p. 37). Therefore, the works of Lau and other poets become a mode of empowerment which allows them—and their readers—to liberate themselves from the stigma of "subjects excluded from official histories" (Lai, 2014, p. 38) and finally tell the stories of their communities on their own terms.

In her poetry collection, Lau showcases different experiences of exclusion and inclusion, some connected to the long history of prejudice and discrimination, such as the treatment of the Indigenous people ("Red and Yellow"), Asian migrants ("Pedicure at Pinky's"), or the queer community ("Another God"), and others—to more recent events, fuelled by the rapid development of media and technology as well as the exploitative and consumerist character of Western neoliberalism ("3 a.m. Communion," "I Don't Hear Cantonese in Chinatown Anymore"). Hence, her writing can be described as not only auto/biographic but also as autoethnographic[2]—it is the record of "the ethnography of one's own group [...], autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest" (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 2). Through the employment of this type of writing, Lau's works not only reflect Paul Ricoeur's perception of identity as "bound up in identifi-

[1] The said group consists of poets, often of Chinese or Japanese descent, who debuted in the late 2010s and early 2020s. Apart from Lau herself, other members of this group include, among others, Michael Prior, Isabella Wang, Mercedes Eng, Jody Chan, Phoebe Wang, Kai Cheng Thom, Natalie Wee, and David Ly.

[2] It is worth noting that the idea of the autoethnographic character of Asian diasporic fiction has been met with different reactions from postcolonial and diasporic scholars and writers. While Mary Louise Pratt (1992) claims that autoethnographic writing can function as a form of resistance against the colonizer, Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn (2008) note that, due to its reliance on the notion of the authentic self/other, autoethnography may not be fully applicable to discussing Asian diasporic writing since Asian Canadians are a highly heterogenous group that is "still in the formative stages of developing hybridized group identities" (p. 4). Similarly, Lai (2014) highlights that autoethnographic writing can deepen the oppression experienced by post-colonial subjects, "retrospectively folding [them] back into a discourse of national belonging, while actually covering over the violent history of exclusion it was supposed to have expiated" (p. 37).

cation with significant others" (in Davis, 2011, p. 9)—other members of the Chinese diaspora, the queer community and her own family—but also place her experiences in the context of the said communities (Davis, 2011, p. 11)[3].

The aim of this article is to discuss depictions of three types of exclusion experienced by Lau—that of a postcolonial subject, a queer subject, and, finally, a queer subject of colour—and the impact those experiences have on her identity. The analysis of three poems—"Birth/Right," "Another God," and "Perfect Groupie"—provides an insight into Lau's reflections on different instances of exclusion she experienced, whether motivated by her ethnicity and nationality, her sexual orientation, or the combination of both. Furthermore, the close reading of the selected poems allows this article to address the impact those experiences of exclusion have on Lau's identity.

2. Being a perpetual foreigner—experiencing exclusion as a postcolonial subject

As Dan Allman (2013) notes, different forms of exclusion and inclusion have existed since the beginning of human existence. The notion of exclusion, especially in the social context, can be seen as connected to other concepts, such as "depravation and destitution, hardship, poverty and inequality, discrimination, ghettoization, marginalisation, the underclass, disaffiliation, and dispossession" (Boardman, Killaspy & Mezey, 2022, p. 21). Hence, exclusion implies the existence of a limitation or restriction in the access to different spheres of life, being it employment opportunities, housing, education, social and cultural capital and participation in public and political life; in consequence, such a restriction negatively impacts not only self-perception of an excluded individual but also their sense of belonging (Silver, 1994).

This "multifaceted, multidimensional and fluid nature" (Boardman, Killaspy & Mezey, 2022, p. 23) of social exclusion is reflected in its different definitions. Ruth Levitas and colleagues (2007) describe social exclusion as a complex and multidimensional process which

> includes the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole. (p. 9)

[3] In this context, Lau's writing can be also described as an example of biomythography (Antoniak, 2023), a type of writing that "allows the author to discuss how social and cultural oppression can be internalised as a part of their identity" (Antoniak, 2023 p. 89). In her poetry, Lau's childhood recollections are placed side by side historical events which, in turn, are often mythologised and shaped by her affects and emotions. Hence, it is possible to identify the speaker in Lau's poems with the author herself.

Tania Burchardt and others (2002) also highlight the inability to fully participate in different key activities as the major feature of social exclusion due to a variety of interconnected factors, whether economic, social, cultural, political, spatial, individual, or group (Rimmerman, 2013). Allman (2013) notes that the state of exclusion is maintained through the reproduction of discriminatory practices and social relations, one of which is stigmatisation—this process occurs when "a shared characteristic of a category of people becomes consensually regarded as a basis for disassociating from (that is avoiding, excluding, or otherwise minimise interaction with) individuals who are perceived to be members of this category" (Leary, 2005, p. 48).

While inclusion can be seen as an answer to social exclusion, the relationship between those two can be seen as a multidimensional continuum "along which people and groups have different degrees of participation and unequal access to resources, capabilities, and rights" (Boardman, Killaspy & Mezey, 2022, p. 28). The multidimensional nature of the said continuum means that not only individuals can be simultaneously included in one dimension and excluded in others but also their experiences of exclusion and inclusion can differ over time and place (Boardman, Killaspy & Mezey, 2022). This leads to the possibility of inclusion in exclusion, a phenomenon that "implies inclusion, but in a position of subordination […] justified in traditional or community terms" (Mascareño & Carvajal, 2015, p. 137) and often experienced by groups who are discriminated against on the basis of their ethnic origin, class, caste, gender, sexual orientation, language, or religion.

As Hurriyet Babacan and Alpherhan Babacan (2013) observe, the categories of exclusion and inclusion can be particularly useful for discussing migrant and diasporic literature since immigrants want to be included in the host society and host culture without abandoning their own history, backgrounds and identity. Simultaneously, though, they often experience exclusion on the basis of their culture and race. Those experiences are an integral part of the history of Chinese diaspora in Canada. As noted by Jin Tan and Patricia E. Roy (1985), the Chinese migrants were subjected to anti-Asian prejudice and hostility from the moment they arrived. Seen as a threat to the labour market and the nation as a whole (Lee, 2006), the Chinese migrants fell victims to numerous exclusionary policies which aimed at not only limiting their participation in the cultural and political life but also restricting their presence in Canada. The implementation of legal solutions aiming at limiting Chinese immigration to Canada and their presence in Canadian spaces (the introduction of the head tax, the forceful ghettoization, the limitations imposed on Chinese-owned businesses, or the refusal to grant Chinese Canadians full civil and political rights) started as early as in the 1870s; however, it was not until 1923 that the Chinese Exclusion Act virtually ceased Chinese migration to Canada (Anderson, 2007). The discriminatory actions undertaken by the Canadian government—both on federal and provincial level—resulted in the withdrawal of Chinese migrants from public spaces.

Yet, this tendency to separate themselves from the host society was seen as a proof of their outright refusal to assimilate which, in turn, only further fuelled anti-Chinese prejudice and, in consequence, "prevented many Chinese from considering Canada as their permanent home" (Chan, 2019). Although the political situation of Chinese Canadians improved significantly in the second half of the twentieth century, their cultural and racial exclusion continued, either under the veil of inclusion as exemplified by the model minority myth, or more openly, in the form of the perpetual foreigner stereotype.

The perpetual foreigner stereotype is the assumption that Asian immigrants are unassimilable and unable to fit with the idea of perfect—meaning white—Canadian (Huynh et al., 2011). The perpetual foreigner stereotype is considered to be an instance of microinvalidation, a type of microaggression "characterised by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity" (Leonard, 2014, p. 6). Microinvalidations are considered to be more harmful than other types of microaggression as they "exclude, negate, or deny the psychological thoughts and feelings of target groups and persons" (Leonard, 2014, p. 7).

The impossibility of escaping the perpetual foreigner stereotype and the markers of difference and Otherness it entails as well as its microinvalidating character are discussed by Lau in the last poem of the collection, "Birth/Right." The tone of the poem seeps with anger and frustration, accentuated by the structure of "Birth/Right"—the poem consist of eleven couplets that create tense and suspenseful atmosphere—and more aggressive language. The poem opens with Lau acknowledging her colonial origins, but its tone quickly turns accusatory:

> I was born
> in an English colony so naturally
> I'm pro-Oxford
> comma, I know when to use a semicolon, and also
> who the fuck cares.
> Have you ever seen white people
> care about grammar as much as
> Chinese parents do? (Lau, 2021)

Born in one of the last vestiges of the British Empire, Lau highlights the pressure of adopting some characteristics of the former colonizers—in this case the fluent command of the English language—by the postcolonial subject. This process of mimicking the former colonizer is, as Lau points out, intergenerational in nature as parents and grandparents believe that speaking English perfectly would ensure future success of their children and grandchildren[4]. However,

[4] According to Daniel Shek and colleagues (2022), one of the biggest parenting stresses affecting Chinese/Hong Kong parents is academic achievement of their children—as they want them to attend the best schools, preferably those located abroad, they often pressure them to speak perfect English.

anger and frustration voiced by Lau in the last two couplets undermine that belief—the sudden and unexpected use of profanity “who the fuck cares” shocks the reader, but, at the same time, emphasizes all the negative emotions Lau is experiencing when she talks about mimicking the former colonizers. As noted by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (2007),

> [w]hen colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to “mimic” the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a “blurred copy” of the colonizer that can be quite threatening. (p. 125)

The threat posed by such mimicking becomes a justification of further discrimination as the impossibility to flawlessly replicate the former colonizer highlights the Otherness of the postcolonial subject. Lau is aware of that as she openly acknowledges that people like her—people of colour born in the former colonies of the British Empire—will never be fully accepted or treated as equals by their white counterparts, no matter how successful they are in mimicking their culture. This painful awareness of rejection faced by the postcolonial subject is particularly visible in the second part of the poem when Lau mentions using her English name, Grace, over her Chinese one:

> […] there is no redemption
> in keeping strange tongues from stumbling
> over who I am
> when Eve still remembers the taste
> of mutiny, so I fall back into waves
> of a fragrant harbour.
> A baptism
> will not save me. (Lau, 2021)

Lau points to the precariousness of her position as a person of colour: no matter how much she tries to adapt herself to the Western culture—going even as far as choosing a name that would be easier to pronounce for English speakers—she knows that, ultimately, she would still be seen as an exotic Other, a perpetual foreigner. The pointlessness of the intergenerational effort to mimic the former colonizer, as Lau sees it, becomes the source of her anger and frustration as she slowly realizes that the main reason for her exclusion is not her insufficient command of English, but the colour of her skin. Yet, despite all the frustration, Lau acknowledges that rebelling against such treatment would not change anything. In the final couplets of the poem, Lau refers to Eve and her disobedience; however, unlike Eve, Lau knows that her rebellion would be unsuccessful—she is aware that, as a migrant from a former British colony, she would never be able to successfully challenge her position and the way she is perceived by the Westerners. Knowing that she will never be accepted for who she really is, Lau is forced to accept her role of a perpetual foreigner, an Other simultaneously included and excluded from the white Western communities.

This sense of helplessness is reflected in the last two couplets of the poem. Lau's claim that she "fall[s] back into waves of a fragrant harbour" shows that she passively accepts the reality in which she is reduced to her place of origin; this is emphasized by the reference to "a fragrant harbour," the name of Hong Kong in Cantonese which was adopted by the British colonizers and applied to the whole island. In the poem's concluding statement—"A baptism will not save me"—Lau acknowledges that even taking a new name and identity will not change her situation. While the reference to baptism ties in with the water imagery introduced earlier—as falling back into the waters of the harbour resembles an immersion baptism—it also implies that the removal of one's true self is an impossible endeavour. Furthermore, baptism serves not only a religious but also a communal function—through a performative act of naming an individual, they officially become a member of a group. However, as Lau notes, even when she adopts a new Anglophone name, she is still not treated as an equal and rightful member of the white Canadian community. Therefore, the experience she describes is an example of inclusion in exclusion as, while she is included in the white host society, her position is still that of a subordinate, a second-class citizen.

3. Looking for representation—experiencing exclusion as a queer subject

The beginnings of Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement (GLLM) in Canada can be traced back to the introduction of Bill C-150 by Pierre Trudeau's government in 1969. The bill—which decriminalised homosexual acts between consenting adults (Adam, 2009)—was implemented as a result of the public debate surrounding the case of Everett Klippert who, in 1965, was sentenced to three years[5] in prison after revealing that he had engaged in sexual activities with male partners (Warner, 2002). The fight for sexual minority rights gained momentum in the 1970s when, in 1977, the provincial government of Quebec prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and the amended Canadian Immigration Act lifted the ban on the immigration of gay man (Rau, 2021). However, it was not until the introduction of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1985[6] that challenging discriminatory legislation became easier (Lahey, 1999). In 1995, the Supreme Court ruled that Section 15 of the Charter—the one that guaranteed "right to the equal protection and equal benefit to the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability" (Rau, 2021)—included "sexual orientation as prohi-

[5] Klipper sentence was later indefinitely extended on the basis of diagnosis made by a forensic psychologist who described Kippler as 'a dangerous sex offender'. Despite his appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada, Klipper was released from prison only in 1971, six years after his sentencing (Warner, 2002).

[6] The Canadian Charter for Rights and Freedoms was adopted in 1982 but it was not until 1985 that it came into effect (Rau, 2021).

bited basis of discrimination" (Rau, 2021). The first three decades of the twenty-first century focused predominantly on the issues of same-sex marriage and trans rights. The former was achieved on 20 July 2005 when the introduction of Bill C-38 allowed same-sex marriage (Rau, 2021) while the 2017 amendment to the Canadian Human Rights Act paved way for the latter since it provided legal protection to trans and gender-fluid people[7] through including "gender identity and gender expression as prohibited grounds of discrimination" (Rau, 2021)[8]. However, despite all the progress made by GLLM, queer people either are still being excluded from some spheres of social and cultural life—for instance, representation of queerness and queer people in the media is still rather scarce or limited only to more socially acceptable "forms" of queerness, such as lesbianism—or prohibited from speaking openly about their sexual orientation.

Those issues are addressed by Lau in "Another God," a poem about her fascination with an African American basketball player Allen Iverson. Although Iverson himself is not gay, his refusal to adhere to the norms imposed on him by the dominant white culture—"You were a walking unapology, so much swagger the NBA declared a dress code to contain your durags and baggy jeans and recreate you in its own image" (Lau, 2021)—gave young Lau strength to find her own voice and be open about her sexuality:

> This is how a shy girl
> raised to fear the Lord,
> the devil and her own queer self
> becomes fearless like you
> have to be when you're the smallest player.
> Learns to fight through giants
> with flair,
> always with flair. (Lau, 2021)

Using her younger self as an example, Lau acknowledges the power diverse representation in media and other public spheres of life has on the marginalised youth. She notes that through embracing his Otherness and refusing to fit in within clearly defined categories, Iverson questions—or even threatens—the existing cultural order, making his presence even more captivating and alluring. In "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" Stuart Hall (1997) notes that difference is both necessary and dangerous as it constitutes the foundation of cultural order.

[7] Furthermore, in 2018, the process of changing gender on official documents was made easier in all Canadian provinces while in December 2021 the Canadian government banned conversion therapy (Rau, 2021).

[8] It is also worth noting that Canada was one of the first Western countries to grant refugee status on the basis of sexual orientation (Molnar, 2018).

Therefore,

> [m]arking "difference" leads us, symbolically, to close ranks, shore up culture and to stigmatize and expel anything which is defined as impure, abnormal. However, paradoxically, it also makes "difference" powerful, strangely attractive precisely because it is forbidden, taboo, threatening to cultural order. (Hall, 1997, p. 237)

This ability to threaten the supposedly fixed cultural order becomes a source of inspiration and strength for Lau. This is reflected by the epithet "a walking unapology" she uses to describe Iverson. While the noun "unapology" has negative connotations as it is usually used to refer to an insincere apology, Lau uses it to both praise, rather than condemn, Iverson's behaviour and criticise the NBA for trying to restrict his freedom of expression—it is, after all, Iverson's refusal to apologize for his "different" way of living that earned him Lau's respect and elevated him to the position of her new idol.

Similarly, in the stanza quoted above, Lau lists the fear of "her own queer self" alongside that of God and devil, indicating how her religious upbringing impacted her perception of her own sexuality as something shameful and dangerous. However, this fear is contrasted by Lau with Iverson's unapologetic attitude, the approach to life that Lau wants to imitate; as a result, she remains torn between the fear of her queerness and the desire to express it freely. Interestingly, Lau takes inspiration not only from Iverson's behaviour outside of the court but also on it. In a later part of the aforementioned stanza, she draws parallels between the game of basketball and her own struggles, noting that both she and Iverson are faced with giants. While, due to his stature, Iverson often plays against much taller players, in her attempts at being more accepting of and open about her sexuality, Lau fights with more metaphorical giants: both important and intimidating people in her life, such as her parents and prominent figures in her community, as well as the ideas concerning sexuality that were instilled in her since the very young age.

As the penultimate stanza of the poem suggests, Iverson, the embodiment of the freedom of self-expression and being true to oneself, became a god-like figure for young Lau, replacing that of the Christian god whose image was used to make her feel ashamed and scared of her true self. However, despite her admiration, Lau is quite critical of Iverson's later complicity in commodity capitalism:

> […] godliness is not
> a part-time job.
> Even gods make
> music of murder, 40 Bars
> of money, blood, and pulling triggers.
> I traded one God of violence for
> another, yet

> another god
> who has painted me with death,
> yet another god who will not
> see me. (Lau, 2021)

In this stanza Lau expresses her disappointment upon discovering that, in the end, Iverson has transformed his difference and resistance into a commodity that can be marketed and sold as he uses his controversial image to sell his music. Furthermore, while she acknowledges the impact Iverson has had on her life and subsequent rebellion, Lau realizes that, as a god figure, he is not that different from the Christian god he replaced in her personal pantheon when she traded "one God of violence for another" (Lau, 2021). In the quoted fragment Lau refers to "40 Bars," a rap song written and performed by Iverson and infamous for not only the use of derogatory language and imagery associated with gun violence, but also the inclusion of threats of physical violence against queer people (Moss, 2001). As she draws parallels between Iverson's song and the teachings of Christianity concerning the treatment of queer people, underlining their disrespectful and violent attitude towards sexual minorities, Lau concludes that, despite everything, Iverson cannot represent her as he refuses to see people like her as human beings.

This epiphany leads Lau to the conclusion that only queer athletes, who understand the plight of people like her, can serve as role models for new generations of queer youth. However, she is aware that having this type of representation, especially in male-dominated sport disciplines, is almost impossible to achieve. At the same time, in the last stanza of the poem—"There are still no out NBA players" (Lau, 2021)—she poses an important question concerning the lack of queer representation in professional sport. Lau notes that what is possible for Iverson through embracing his difference is not possible for queer male athletes. Pat Griffin (1998, p. 20) highlights that sport, and especially team sport, "is where men learn their masculinity skills: [to be] competitive and tough[,] to deny feelings of compassion [and] to value physical strength and size, aggressiveness and the will to dominate." Hence, Griffin notes, gay male athletes subvert not one but two stereotypical representations: "[a] gay male athlete violates both the image of athletes as strong, virile and heterosexual and the image of gay men as swishy and homosexual" (1992, p. 25). Furthermore, while the world of professional sport may be more accepting of athletes of colour, it still creates a hostile environment for queer male athletes, discouraging them from coming out publicly. This discouragement is particularly disheartening for Lau because, as Lai (2014, p. 126) notes, "[t]he identities themselves become less important than the action taken to produce them," preventing them from being used for consumption, "marketing [or] institutionalization." Although

Lau seems to be aware of those issues, she still feels disappointed by the scarceness of queer representation in sports[9], implying, on the basis of her own experiences, how beneficial it can be for queer youth[10].

4. The curse of the model minority—experiencing exclusion as a queer subject of colour

As a queer Chinese Canadian, Lau remains torn between the Canadian society—and the queer community in particular—and the Chinese diaspora. While the former provides her with understanding and acceptance, the latter functions as a combination of a safe space (Strier & Roer-Strier, 2010), foundation for building a new migrant identity (Délano & Gamlen, 2015), and a place providing a sense of stability (Dahinden, 2010). Hence, for Lau and many other queer Chinese Canadians maintaining the connection with their diaspora becomes an important element of their everyday life in the new homeland[11].

Due to the turbulent history of the Chinese community in Canada, the members of diaspora remain anxious of becoming a target of racially motivated preju-

[9] It is worth highlighting that Lau's comments on the scarceness of queer representation in sports seem to be rooted in her own observations from her youth and apply predominantly to male sports. As Frankie de la Cretaz (2022) observes, "women's sports spaces are reflective of queerness: they centre certain aspects of queer culture, making them safer places to be out, and making them unique among an often homophobic and heteronormative men's sports culture—even as the media and culture at large wants to heterosexualize women's sport."

[10] The question of queer representation in media—especially that of queer people of colour—is also addressed by Lau in the first poem of the collection, "When Yuhua Hamasaki Went Home." The poem, which serves as a celebration of the inclusion of the first drag queen of Chinese descent in a popular American reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, uses the differences between performativity of gender in Western and Chinese cultures as a starting point for the discussion on the importance of representation and its role in challenging racialized stereotypes. What seems to matter to Lau the most is the fact that Yuhua serves as an example of positive representation of queer Asian North Americans in a world where "the oversaturation of white [gays and] lesbians in LGBTQ+ media consequently promotes the exclusion of queer [men and] women of colour in the LGBTQ+ community and broader society" (Patel, 2021, p. 29).

[11] Maintaining connection with their diasporic communities seems to be of particular importance for queer people of colour since they are often excluded from Western, white-dominated queer communities. According to Daniel Eng (2010), the queer identity created by Western activists places whiteness at the centre of queer experiences; in consequence, it reinforces colonial and imperial discourses, often opposing "a politics of intersectionality, resisting any acknowledgement of the ways in which sexuality and race are constituted in relation to one another, each often serving to articulate, subsume, and frame the other's legibility in the social domain" (Eng, 2010, p. 4). The clash between the dominant—and white—experience of queerness and that of people of colour is also addressed by Lau in her poem "The Levity" in which she describes how her experience of coming out to her mother differed significantly from the images she encountered in mainstream media and the stories she heard from her white friends.

dice. As a result, they try to avoid engaging in any behaviours which could potentially draw the negative attention of the host society. This decision to become socially invisible resulted in the emergence of the model minority myth, a construction which depicts Asian immigrants as examples of successful adaptation to new conditions—it exaggerates economic and academic success of Asian diaspora while being rooted in anti-Asian prejudice, often questioning their cultural assimilation (Kim, 1999). Furthermore, the existence of the myth contributes to the erasure of all the discrimination and disenfranchisement Asian migrants have suffered since arriving to Canada (Cui, 2019). Despite its harmfulness[12], many members of Chinese diaspora try to maintain and reinforce the model minority myth since it aids the process of becoming socially invisible, even if it involves adjusting their cultural practices to the Western norms and standards or emphasising those behaviours and characteristics that are seen as "normal" by the host society. One of such examples of normalcy is heteronormativity (Zhu et al., 2022)[13]. In fact, as Stephen Hong Sohn (2018) notes, emphasising heteronormativity in Asian diasporic communities is a way of reproducing the model minority myth:

> Sex is simply a mechanism for parents to replicate the model minority child in their own heteronuclear families. […] [T]he heterosexuality of the Asian or Asian North American parent exists only as a function of raising the model minority child from birth to overachieving adulthood. In this sense, the model minority plot implicitly precludes the possibility of the queer subject, while promoting the centrality of the monogamous, heterosexual marriage and nuclear family formation. (p. 29)

As a result, performative heteronormativity[14] becomes a means of survival for many queer Asian migrants, a way of reinforcing the model minority myth cherished by so many of their compatriots (Tam, 2018). The notion of performative heteronormativity is addressed by Lau in "The Perfect Groupie," a poem in which she reminisces on her fascination with boybands:

> For a time I went to bed
> dreaming of boys.
> My first boy band was a tweenage dream

[12] According to Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin (2010), the negative consequences of adherence to the model minority myth include, among others, substantial emotional and cultural stress, significant increase in the rates of depression, suicide and suicidal thoughts as well as substance abuse.

[13] It needs to be noted that pre-colonial Asian societies were much more tolerant of queerness than their Western counterparts; the notion of compulsory heterosexuality was implemented in those societies by the British colonizers who labelled their openness to alternative sexualities and gender roles as the proof of the barbarity and degeneracy of Asian societies (Rajgopal, 2018).

[14] Performative heteronormativity should be understood here as "the execution of cultural, systemic, and individual practices that normalize opposite-sex attraction and behaviours" (Zhu et al., 2022, p. 345).

> of ripped jeans, frosted tips, and too much hairspray
> pouting from my bedroom walls. [...]
> For a time
> I went to bed dreaming
> of five man-boys named after Orlando
> but not from Orlando.
> I still remember
> their favourite books, sports, and pizza toppings;
> I studied Angelfire fansites the way we study
> what we want to become.
> My mother was so excited for me
> to act like a girl. (Lau, 2021)

The opening couplet—"For a time I went to bed dreaming of boys"—is repeated three times in the poem, each repetition marking the introduction of a different aspect of Lau's fan behaviour and its connection to performative heteronormativity. In the first part of the poem, quoted above, Lau describes her pre-teen fascination with boybands, listing different fan activities in which she engaged, such as decorating her room with posters, collecting merchandise, watching shows and performances, or actively participating in online communities dedicated to her favourite singers. In fact, in the penultimate stanza of the quoted part of the poem, Lau draws parallels between her motivation to learn more about the band through extensively studying the websites made by fans—Angelfire she refers to is a paid web hosting service—to the dedication people put in choosing and pursuing their careers or learning skills necessary to achieve success. The introduction of such a comparison implies that, as a teenager, Lau considered collecting information about her favourite boyband equally important to her future as choosing a career. The part ends with a couplet highlighting the positive reaction of Lau's mother to her daughter's behaviour as finally she "act[ed] like a girl" (Lau, 2021). Lau notes that her mother's excitement stemmed not from her support for her child's hobby, but rather from the fact that the hobby itself was labelled as feminine.

Fascination with pop music has been connected with femininity since the 1960s (Coates, 2003). Pop music plays an important role in reinforcing traditional feminine gender roles while giving girls "the freedom to be individual wives, mothers, lovers [and] glamorous, desirable male sex objects" (Firth & McRobbie, 1990, p. 381). Furthermore, according to Simon Firth (1983), as girls' public engagement with music serves primarily as a tool to find a male partner, it is seen as an act of performing patriarchal femininity. More recent studies on girls' listening habits also reveal that pop music plays an important role in negotiating gender identities and is used by both pre-adolescent and teenage girls to not only facilitate interactions with their peers but, more importantly, to construct and express their cultural and ethnic identities (Coulter, 2020). Hence, it is not surprising that Lau's mother interprets her daughter's fascination with boybands—a staple of pop music of the 1990s and the 2000s—

as her embracing and accepting traditional feminine gender roles. Additionally, Lau's obsession with male artists is seen by her mother as a confirmation of her daughter's heterosexuality[15] as exemplified by the second couplet of the poem—"My first boy band was a tweenage dream of ripped jeans, frosted tips, and too much hairspray" (Lau, 2021)—with "a tweenage dream," a wordplay on "a teenage dream," referring to the feeling of falling in love for the first time.

The second part of the poem further explores the performative nature of sexuality:

> For a time
> I went to be dreaming of boys—
> their hair, their clothes,
> their songs, their dances.
> They were the perfect
> blueprint for a little girl
> who longed to be a teen
> -age heartthrob,
> the kind of girl
> a girl could love. (Lau, 2021)

Immediately after mentioning her mother's excitement upon seeing her daughter behave in a more girly manner, Lau reveals the real motivation behind her fascination with boybands—for her, they were icons of masculinity that she could observe and, later, try to replicate. In fact, in the second couplet of the quoted fragment, she lists the features that she paid particular attention to, analysed in depth and, later, incorporated into her model of a perfect boy. Lau's decision to use the word "blueprint" to describe the real reason for her interest in boybands indicates that, even as a teenager, she seems to be aware, whether consciously or not, of both her sexuality and the artificiality of gender norms. Hence, in her teenage naivete, she does see boybands as a literal blueprint, believing that through copying, recreating and adapting some of the features she determined to be attractive to girls she could also reshape herself into a being that would attract the same attention.

Performing heteronormativity was for Lau a cover which allowed her to explore her own queerness. In an act of rebellion, teenage Lau engages in an activity seen as manifestation of both femininity and heteronormativity; however, she uses the knowledge she acquires to transgress traditional perceptions of gender and sexuality as she weaponizes those ideas to fit her own purposes. Furthermore, she seems to be rather proud of her plan as it allows her to not

[15] Interestingly, the attention Lau gets from her mother for her interest in pop music is rather paradoxical in nature. While the mother "sees" her daughter, noticing her for her activities, the real Lau remains invisible, hiding beneath the mask of performative heteronormativity. Such an invisibility can be interpreted as another illustration of exclusion in inclusion as Lau can only feel visible and accepted when she adheres to expectations both her mother and her community places on her.

only achieve her goal but also keep her mother happy and satisfied. Even as a young girl, Lau seems to understand that performing heteronormativity is not only beneficial for her as it ensures parental acceptance but also for her mother, who is satisfied that, to the outside world, her daughter appears "normal." Although the tone of the poem remains relatively carefree, reflecting cheekiness of Lau's younger self, it already foreshadows the conflict between the need of an individual to express themselves and the responsibility of maintaining face and protecting family reputation of which adult Lau, from whose perspective the poem is written, is fully aware[16].

5. Conclusions

Grace Lau devotes a significant number of poems included in *The Language We Were Never Taught to Speak* to share her experiences of exclusion with her readers. Whether rooted in the markers of Otherness that make her a perpetual foreigner or her sexuality, those experiences influence Lau's identity and the ways she perceives and expresses herself. She addresses the faux inclusivity of the Western world, showcasing that even determination to become fully assimilated and eagerness to mimic and replicate Western behaviours and norms are not able to ensure equal treatment. In "Birth/Right," Lau points out the hypocrisy of the Western world which, on the one hand, encourages migrants to integrate and assimilate with white host societies while, on the other, continues to see them as perpetual foreigners, continually judged and appraised on the basis of their skin colour. Unsurprisingly, such an experience of exclusion in inclusion influences Lau as illustrated by the anger and frustration she feels upon realising that no matter how successful she is in assimilating, she will never be fully accepted by her white counterparts. However, those emotions are quickly replaced by helplessness and resignation as Lau realizes that no matter how much she challenges the hypocrisy of the West and how vocal she

[16] Lau discusses performative heteronormativity as a way of maintaining face and protecting family reputation (and, through that, further reinforcing the model minority myth) even at the cost of her own comfort and self-expression in another of her poems, "The Lies That Bind." In this poem, Lau presents her sexuality as a secret plaguing her family and compares it with another one, namely that of her grandmother's real age. Both women keep the truth about themselves hidden from the rest of the family to protect their loved ones from emotional harm and, in Lau's case, also to ensure the peaceful coexistence within the confines of both the diasporic community and the host society. The poem, therefore, can be seen as a depiction of the difficulty of negotiating queer Chinese Canadian identity as it takes into consideration both individual's need for self-expression and the needs of family and community (Antoniak, 2023). Lau continues her discussion on this particular topic in "My Grief Is a Winter," this time, however, focusing on the negative side effects of performative heteronormativity, especially on the mental state of queer diasporic individuals and their relationships with their families and the Chinese diaspora as a whole.

is about it, she would not be able to change her situation. In the end, she feels that she has no other choice but to accept that she will have to constantly defend her identity to others.

The difficulty of challenging the norms and ideas imposed by the white dominant culture is also discussed by Lau in the context of queer experience. In “Another God” she describes how enormous of an impact Iverson had on her when she was a child—his refusal to apologize for being “different” and “Other” aids her in overcoming the fear of her own queerness, instilled in her by her Christian parents and other prominent members of her community. Unfortunately, those feelings of excitement, admiration and elation that Lau felt upon watching Iverson play quickly turn to disappointment as she learns that, despite his own experiences with exclusion, her hero refuses to see queer people as human beings. While Lau uses the figure of Iverson to showcase the importance of diverse representation for the process of identity formation, especially among the youth, she also bemoans how, despite the inclusivity the Western world praises itself over, the representation in cultural, social, and political spheres of life is far from reflecting that. The relative invisibility of queer people in the public sphere and the scarceness of their proper representation becomes another source of disappointment for Lau as she realizes that, once again, she experiences exclusion in inclusion—while she may be accepted as the queer subject, she does not enjoy the same level of privilege as others.

However, what also transpires from Lau’s poetry is the interconnectedness of those experiences of exclusion as illustrated in “Perfect Groupie” where she discusses how the pressure to adhere to the model minority myths present in many Asian diasporic communities, forces its queer members either to repress this side of their identity or to explore it only in secret. While Lau’s younger self seems to be excited at the thought of using gender norms and conventions for the sole purpose of exploring her own queer identity, as an adult she is aware of the conflict between the natural desire to express herself and the fear of being excluded by both the diasporic community and the queer community. This tension mars her identity, forcing her to either hide parts of it or to constantly modify and transform them.

Yet, although Lau’s depiction of her personal experiences of exclusion seems to be particularly gloom, she, in fact, manages to find a space where she feels she belongs. In two of her poems—“3 a.m. Communion” and “Red and Yellow”—Lau describes that she feels accepted in the community created by her and other queer people of colour. The community in question, founded in the shared experiences of exclusion, not only allows its members to freely express themselves without the fear of being rejected but, most importantly, provides them with a safe space where they can find respite from all the negative emotions and trauma they experience as a result of being excluded from either their diasporic communities or the host society. Finally, Lau acknowledges in her

poems—many of which are written from the perspective of an adult reminiscing about their childhood—that although some of her experiences were undoubtedly negative and traumatic, going through them was necessary as they helped her form her identity and become the person she is today.

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