

*Re-Inventing National Literary Histories:
Ghosts and Cultural Memory in
Padma Viswanathan's House of Sacred Cows and
Velina Hasu Houston's Kokoro*

The stage reflects life, it doesn't invent it...
[...] The theatre is made up of all of us.
Everything we are and do and think and
believe gets into the theatre – it is the mirror
of life.

– Rachel Crothers (1967:133)

The idea that human identity and theatrical performance are closely interrelated is not new. Rachel Crothers' arguments in the quote opening this paper are in line with William Shakespeare's. Indeed, as Hamlet explains, the purpose of theater is "to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature" (1982: 288). Throughout history, the power of the theater to be lifelike has often played a role beyond mere entertainment. From Greek and Roman tragedies, to plays staged at royal courts, to contemporary experimental works, theater has mirrored the histories of society and the cultural values of its people.

Interestingly, the mirror of the stage does not merely *reflect* a society and its people's qualities and vices. It is a "magic mirror," John Russell Brown explains, one which reveals to an audience "the truth about themselves" (1997: 8). In other words, even though what happens onstage can look similar to ordinary life outside the theater, a theatrical performance constitutes the result of a chain of mediations. From the playwright's choice of subject material, the director's staging, the actors' interpretations to the audience's

reception, the events portrayed onstage are thus necessarily *re-fracted*.

If theater offers a mirror of society – however distorted the image – how does contemporary North American drama complement and/or revise historical narratives of Canada and the United States? As a platform of political debate and cultural exchange, how does dramatic literature – and more particularly multi-ethnic playwriting – re-invent the North American literary canon?

Thanks to the liberalization of immigration laws in both the U.S. and Canada in the mid-twentieth century along with the political protests initiated by the Civil Right movements of the 1960s, North American theater has become more inclusive of multi-ethnic artists than ever before. Owing to government subsidies, the activity of regional theaters in the U.S. and alternative theaters in Canada, the last four decades or so have proved particularly rich in the field of multi-ethnic dramatic literature.¹ Since the 1970s, a growing body of Asian, South Asian, African and indigenous playwrights have engaged with a diverse set of socio-political and aesthetic concerns on the North American stage. In their plays, these multi-ethnic authors challenge Eurocentric perspectives, explode traditional dramatic conventions, and re-inscribe their rich heritage within the fabric of U.S. and Canadian dramatic literary canons.

However, if colonialism and imperialism belonged to the past, there would no longer be cultural, national, or ethnic borders to be defended. It seems, however, that numerous ethnic and indigenous communities across North America are still fighting to move beyond an imposed image of inferiority as well as beyond discrimination and racism. As African American playwright August Wilson and others have argued, “whiteness” seems to remain at the center of aesthetic

¹ For more details about Canadian and American theatre histories, the reader is advised to turn to Felicia Hardison Londré and Daniel J. Watermeier's *The History of North American Theatre*, Eugene Benson and L.W. Conolly's *English-Canadian Theatre. Perspective on Canadian Culture*, Krasner's *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, and Bigsby's *Modern American Drama*, among others.

standards and artistic control.² Pluralism does not necessarily imply the empowerment of minority groups and cultures. Paradoxically, by encouraging cultural homogeneity, discourses of universality can prevent the development of genuine diversity.

In spite of flourishing theatrical activity across the North American stage, ethnic and indigenous dramatic productions continue to be neglected by scholarship. This in/visible presence has been translated into an interesting phenomenon in contemporary Canadian and American drama. In an increasing body of plays – from M.J. Kang's *Noran Bang: The Yellow Room*, Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, to August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, or David Henry Hwang's *Golden Child*, to cite but a few examples – the stage is haunted by literary ghosts in multiple guises. Relying on Lois Parkinson Zamora's essay "Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American Fiction," this paper explores the various meanings attached to literary ghosts and their relationships to the nation's cultural memory. Written at the end of the twentieth century, Padma Viswanathan's *House of Sacred Cows* and Velina Hasu Houston's *Kokoro* provide two particularly well-suited examples to examine the performative roles played by in/visible ghosts onstage in the larger contexts of Canadian and American literary histories.

Reconfiguring the literary histories of their respective country, Padma Viswanathan and Velina Hasu Houston both turned to playwriting to expose racial discrimination and gender inequalities. From Indian ancestry, Canadian playwright and novelist Padma Viswanathan was born in Nelson, British Columbia, and raised in Edmonton, Alberta.³ After living in Montreal for a few years where

² Among others, the reader should turn to August Wilson's address to the Theater Group Communication at the National Conference of 1996 entitled "The Ground on Which I Stand," as well as Harry Elam's introduction, "Getting the Spirit," to the anthology *The Fire This Time: African American Plays for the 21st Century*.

³ Viswanathan obtained her degree in sociology at the University of Alberta, where she became involved in social-action theater. One of her collective theater projects, *Acting Our Colours*, was devised for a high school anti-racist program. In addition, she co-wrote a video on family

House of Sacred Cows was workshopped by the Teesri Duniya Theatre,⁴ she moved to the United States and currently resides in Fayetteville, Arkansas. In 2008, she released her debut novel, *The Toss of a Lemon*, a story taking place in South India in the first half of the twentieth century and inspired by conversations with the playwright's grandmother.

Of mixed-race ancestry, African and Blackfoot Pikuni Native American on her father's side and Japanese on her mother's, Velina Hasu Houston is an acclaimed American playwright, poet, essayist, and screenwriter.⁵ Born on a military ship on international waters

violence for the Indo-Canadian Women's Association, entitled *Crossing the Line*. Furthermore, as a community outreach coordinator, she began an association with Catalyst Theatre. She received an MA from the Writing Seminar at Johns Hopkins University in 2005 and an MFA from the University of Arizona in 2006. For further details on Padma Viwanathan's biography, the reader is advised to turn to Anne Nothof's introduction in *Ethnicities: Plays from the New West*, pp 6–7.

⁴ As playwright Rahul Varma explains, Teesri Duniya Theatre, founded in 1981 in Montreal, "is a company where artists of every culture, colour, language and heritage work together" (1998: 25). The company develops and produces socially relevant productions that promote interculturalism. They work in theatrical styles that reflect the cultures and experiences of visible minority Canadians and the multicultural-multiracial reality of this country. For example, productions have included works of Aboriginal, East Asian, Middle Eastern, Quebecois, European, and many other artists (2008: <http://www.teesriduniyatheatre.com/home.htm>).

⁵ Houston holds a Ph.D. from the School of Cinema Arts, USC; a Master of Fine Arts from UCLA's School of Theater, Film, and Television; and a Bachelor of Arts in journalism, mass communications, and theater (with a minor in philosophy) from the A.Q. Miller School of Journalism and Mass Communications, Kansas State University. A Professor of Theater, Director of Dramatic Writing, and Resident Playwright at the School of Theater at University of Southern California, Houston has published two pivotal anthologies of Asian American drama: *The Politics of Life* (1993) and *But Still, Like Air, I'll Rise* (1997). Furthermore, Houston is the recipient of fifteen playwriting commissions from distinguished institutions. In Japan, several documentary films about her work and family have been produced by Japan's key broadcasting concerns: Nippon Hoso Kai, Mainichi Hoso,

enroute from Japan to the United States, Houston was reared in Junction City, Kansas, a small town adjacent to Fort Riley, a once-thriving Army installation. Houston's complex life story and multi-ethnic heritage inspired her acclaimed trilogy: *Asa Ga Kimashita* (*Morning Has Broken*), *American Dreams*, and *Tea*. She is currently involved in a multi-playwright commission, *The DNA Trail*, at Silk Road Theatre Project, Chicago.

From these two playwrights' vast array of works, I would wish to focus more specifically on Viswanathan's *House of Sacred Cows* and Houston's *Kokoro* (*True Heart*). Both written in the mid-nineties, these plays feature the presence of ghosts who carry a special significance with regard to their respective nation's cultural memory. Published in *Ethnicities: Plays from the New West*, edited by Anne Nothof, Viswanathan's *House of Sacred Cows* started as a twenty-minute scene in Catalyst Theatre's playwright's unit. The play then had its world premiere on 4 December 1997 at the Northern Light Theatre in Edmonton, Alberta. As stated in the playwright's Notes, *House of Sacred Cows* is carefully anchored in specific traditions. From the beginning, the playwright clearly states that "although concepts and practices are referred to as 'Indian,' the point of reference is my own – Tamil, Hindu, and specifically, Brahmin" (H 19).⁶ With 26 official languages, numerous religions, and various casts, the subcontinent of India constitutes a complex mosaic of cultures.

Interestingly, the play's setting and characters symbolically stand for another fragmented mosaic: contemporary Canadian society. Significantly, the action of the play is set in a co-op that metaphorically represents an idealized version of Canadian society as a whole. As Anne Nothof argues in her introduction, "the co-op functions as a microcosm for Canadian society, with its social and political struggles, its shared ideals and ongoing fractiousness, its

and Television Tokyo Channel 12. For more details about Houston's biography and awards, see the playwright's official website:

<http://www.velinahasuhouston.com>.

⁶ All my quotations are borrowed from Padma Viswanathan's *House of Sacred Cows* edited by Anne Nothof in the collection *Ethnicities: Plays from the New West* in 1999. Hereafter cited as H with page references given parenthetically in the text.

conflicts between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’” (H 3). Indeed, the co-op residents with their challenges and ideals purposefully point to the difficulties one faces to live in a multi-ethnic and socially diverse environment.

The playwright’s “Notes on Setting” tell us that “the play takes place sometime in the early to mid 90s, in a Western Canadian city, in a house whose architecture is pre-70s, so that the details evoke *memory*” (H 18 emphasis added). Long time co-op resident Orwell explains to the freshly arrived Anand: “this is a co-operative living complex. We have four wings: North Wing, Blue Wing, Freat Mother Wings, and Che Wing. Everyone takes equal share of cooking and cleaning, everyone participates in every decision regarding the house” (H 23). However, this “most excellent ideal of democracy” (H 23), as Anand remarks, faces numerous challenges. January, “a young Canadian woman” (H 17),⁷ is in search of her true father. As the founder’s daughter, January wishes to restore the co-op’s original ideals of democracy and equality. Leaf, an unemployed single mother, faces increasing difficulties to sustain herself and her child. Absorbed with her needs, she rejects her friend’s help and struggles with twin brothers Guy and Gui who both claim to be the true father of her child. Most strikingly, however, as this paper will show, the cast of characters also includes two ghosts: Anand’s deceased parents, Amma and Appa. Just before their son’s scheduled departure from India, Anand’s parents died in a riot provoked by the death of Chief Minister Mahapsara.

While Viswanathan depicts Anand’s integration process within his new co-op in particular and Canadian society in general, Houston

⁷ Interestingly, in the premiere production of *House of Sacred Cows* at the Northern Light Theatre, Edmonton, the character of January was performed by Asian Canadian actress Mieko Ouchi. Significantly, the director’s choice subverts our assumptions of “young Canadian woman” as necessarily meaning “white woman.” Viswanathan’s elusive stage directions indeed do not mention any specific race. Therefore, this meaningful choice reminds us of the complexity of contemporary multi-ethnic Canada. In addition, as January is associated with the West, the playwright also forces the audience to revise their stereotyped assumptions about clear-cut divisions between East and West.

dramatizes the struggle of a Japanese family to adapt to American life in her play *Kokoro*. Premiered at Theatre Yugen, San Francisco, in June 1994, *Kokoro* – nominated for Best Original Script by San Francisco Bay Area Theatre Critics Circle – centers on Yasako Yamashita, a Japanese woman in her early 30s, who wishes to retain her Japanese culture and transmit it to her young daughter, Kuniko. Yasako's husband, Hiro, decries his wife's inability to acculturate and yet expects her to conform to traditional Japanese family roles. When she discovers her husband's infidelity and must respond to his mistress' threats, Yasako believes the only way to preserve her honor would be to perform *oyako shinju* (parent-child suicide). As in *House of Sacred Cows*, *Kokoro* also features a spectral presence: Fuyo, the ghost of Yasako's mother, who accompanies the heroine in her tribulations.

In her article, Zamora offers an in-depth exploration of what she calls "literary ghosts" in magical romance/magical realist literature. While Zamora applies her arguments to U.S. and Latin American fiction, I wish to argue that her discussion of "literary ghosts" proves particularly interesting in the context of dramatic literature. Indeed, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to contemporary postcolonial plays, theatrical performances offer challenging ways in which to embody the (in)visible presence of ghosts. Whether ghosts take the guise of human beings on the stage, or are simply represented by voices, or lighting effects, they certainly play a pivotal role in the performance.

In *House of Sacred Cows*, the ghosts of Anand's parents regularly invade the reality of the play. As the stage directions indicate, Amma and Appa are "*lit for an eerie effect and may be at ceiling level. Their feet should not be visible*" (H 17). In addition, their appearance is signaled by traditional Tamil film music, a vocal clue that also underscores these ghosts' connection with traditional Indian culture. Interestingly, even if their clothes are partly ruined from the fire accident, the playwright carefully details the ways in which Anand's parents are dressed: Amma, on the one hand, "wears a six yard sari, wrapped as a Tamil Brahmin woman, and a huge red bindi (a dot on the forehead that proves she does not consider herself a widow)" (H 17). Appa, on the other hand, "wears a dhoti (a cotton, sheet-like garment wrapped around the waist) and a polyester suit" (H 17).

These descriptions, included in the “Characters” section, constitute another visual clue that clearly links these spirits to Indian cultural memory.

In *Kokoro*, Fuyo’s spirit from the Netherworlds appears at crucial moments in the play, often accompanied by ocean sounds. The play’s prologue immediately reveals the spiritual presence of Fuyo. Emerging as a shadow lit behind the scrim, “*Fuyo enters. A spirit, the back of her kimono trails behind her in shredded strands. Her face is snowy white; her hair is wild, long, grey-streaked. She glides beneath a gossamer shroud. The lights on her are shadowy while the lights on Yasako are a bit brighter*” (K 90).⁸ Fuyo wears a kimono reminiscent of the traditional dress of Anand’s dead parents.

Significantly, this opening scene dramatizes Yasako’s departure from Japan to the U.S.A. As she departs, “Yasako removes her kimono” (K 90) and gives it to Fuyo, in addition to the silky American flag. Yasako’s re-assuring words – “Do not fear for my child in America, Mother. Her soul is tied with mine. She will never walk alone” (K 90) – underscore the profound bond between mother and child. In this sense, from these plays’ onset, the playwrights imagine ghostly apparitions as bearers of cultural and historical legacy.

Even though *House of Sacred Cows* and *Kokoro* are anchored in a different national context – Western Canada and San Diego, USA, respectively – both plays portray individuals torn between multiple cultures, ancestral traditions and modernity. These plays’ main protagonists recently immigrated to North America, either to study (Anand), or to find better working opportunities (Hiro and Yasako). The difficulties they face – alienation and uprootedness – are reminiscent of the throes associated with the immigrant experience in general. Interestingly, in *House of Sacred Cows* and *Kokoro*, the presence of ghosts – Amma/Appa and Fuyo – emphasizes the characters’ displacement. Representing the dangers and anxieties that modernity banishes, these spirits suggest a form of trauma deeply linked to cultural memory.

⁸ All my quotations are borrowed from Velina Hasu Houston’s *Kokoro* (*True Heart*) published in *But Still, Like Air, I’ll Rise*. Hereafter cited as K with page references given parenthetically in the text.

In their essay, "Literature and the Production of Cultural Memory," Erll and Rigney explain that "cultural memory" has emerged as a useful "umbrella term" to describe the complex ways in which societies remember their past through a variety of media (2006: 111). Stories, both oral and written, images, museums, and monuments all work together in creating and sustaining "sites of memory" (ib. 123). Interestingly, as Leo Spitzer argues in *Acts of Cultural Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, "Cultural memorization constitutes an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and re-inscribed even as it continues to shape the future" (1999: vii). Neither remnant, document, nor relic, the "memorial presence of the past" Spitzer claims, ranges "from conscious recall to unreflected re-emergence, from nostalgic longing for what is lost to polemical use of the past to reshape the present" (ib. vii). As Spitzer further argues, "cultural recall is not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer but something that you actually *perform* [...]" (ib. vii; emphasis mine). Thus, in this context of dramatic performances, ghosts enacting cultural memory paradoxically embody absence and presence onstage. They serve as reminders of past forgotten traditions as much as they reshape the present by recalling these ancestral values in the present.

In this regard, the notion of home/land acquires a special significance in each of the plays under discussion. A cherished theme in postcolonial literature, this intricate concept proves subject to constant redefinition. Indeed, home/land is closely tied to identity formation. Settling in a new country, whether to study or to work, inevitably raises the questions of who you are and where you are from. In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson strikingly explains that our feelings of belonging to an "imagined community" of a specific nation arose only with migration and the advent of patriotism and colonialism in general (2006: 6–7, 12, 22, 141–145). Indeed, one never feels more Japanese, American, or Canadian, as when one travels abroad. Consequently, encounters with foreign customs challenge our own cultural beliefs as these are set in parallel or contrasted with new systems of reference. Clearly, in *House of Sacred Cows* and *Kokoro*, the

ghostly apparitions serve as link to lost homelands, and, as such, they enable forgotten cultural memory to be resurrected in the present.

As the curtain rises in *House of Sacred Cows*, Leaf, a co-op resident in her late 20s, appears on the stage in the middle of a phone conversation. Leaf's first sentence – also the play's first line of dialogue – “No, Father, I cannot move back *home*!” (H 21 my emphasis) proves highly symbolic of the play's overall problematic. Indeed, the notions of home and roots are central to all the co-op's residents. In addition, Leaf's statement also subtly announces another crucial issue at the heart of the play: the divide between parents and children, two generations caught in the dilemma of progress. Anand, in particular, must face the pressure of his parents. They urge him to finish his studies and come back *home* to release them from their responsibilities. As long as Anand has not found husbands for his sisters and is himself not married, his parents cannot “go to the next life” (H 25). Therefore, Amma and Appa's first appearance is to remind their son of his responsibilities.

While Viswanathan introduces a departure from the realistic world of the play through Tamil music and blue lighting, Houston resorts to the symbolic sound of ocean waves. Significantly, the stage directions read: “YASAKO *enters as lights fade in low, whirling, shaping a world around her. There is a scrim as backdrop, and ocean waves dress the floor*” (K 90). The important role of the sea in connection to Japanese cultural memory comes to light in Yasako's explanation to her daughter: “In Japan, you grandmother and I lived by the inland sea. But now there is Coronado and the big Pacific Ocean. Papa found this nice apartment so I can hear the waves. I close my eyes and pretend it is the seashore of Japan” (K 90). Houston's *Kokoro* attributes a deeply symbolic meaning to the Pacific Ocean. Indeed, on several occasions, the play depicts Yasako walking on the San Diego beach contemplating the “big Pacific Ocean” (K 91) that separates and connects her family to her homeland.

As Zamora argues, an investigation of the nature of literary ghosts offers insights into “the authors' metaphysics, politics, and poetics” (497). While some ghosts embody “transcendental truths, as visible or audible signs of Spirit,” others “carry the burden of

tradition and collective memory” (497). Therefore, as Zamora continues, literary ghosts in their many guises, are deeply metaphoric: “They mirror, complement, recover, supplant, cancel, complete” (497). They dissent from “psychological assumptions about autonomous consciousness and self-constituted identity and pose instead a model of the self that is collective: subjectivity is not singular but several, not merely individual and existential but mythic, cumulative, participatory” (Zamora 498). Interestingly, each of the plays discussed in this section ties the action and characters to the spiritual world of ancestral legends. As such, the protagonists’ stories echo with a deeper meaning: their experiences become emblematic of others and acquire a universal aura.

House of Sacred Cows opens “OUT OF TIME” (H 21), with dimming house lights during a Ganapathi invocation – “a prayer to the elephant-headed god of new undertaking” (H 20). According to Indian mythology, the elephant-headed God, Lord Ganesha, is invoked to remove obstacles in people’s life. This opening scene, along with later morning sun salutations, defines Anand’s identity not only as Indian, but more specifically Hindu. Consequently, it immediately ties Anand to the mythic world of Indian Gods and legends. In addition, throughout the play, Anand also constitutes a mirror image of Viswanathan herself as he constantly writes about the Mahabharata in his notebook. As the playwright’s introductory notes tell us, the Mahabharata is an ancient Sanskrit epic poem, a story which contains many stories (H 19). As a writer, she became familiar with the characters and philosophy through comic book versions of the heroic and puzzling exploits of the Pandavas (H 19). Interestingly, Anand not only writes about Arjuna, the great warrior in “each and every man” that awaits God’s consent to fulfill his destiny. Anand and January also later impersonate the mythic Yudisthra/Draupadi couple, as they meet in an ethereal forest, an episode that clearly that contains metatheatrical resonance. This performance within the performance is lit in blue light, which signals a departure from the realist world of the play. During this conversation, January/Draupadi attempts to convince Anand/Yudisthra to help his sister, Lakshmi, to escape from an arranged

marriage. As Lakshmi's letters make clear, her brother's consent could indeed allow her to marry the man of her choice.

In a similar mode, Houston's *Kokoko* opens with Yasako's narration of the Japanese legend of Amaterasu:

A tiny rock is cast out to sea by the great Sun Goddess Amaterasu and it grows into an island, strong and unwavering, beautiful and bright. I am a root in this soil. I grow best here, all blossoms, all fruits, always. [beat] But, one day, the gardener comes and I am transplanted. The winds, the rain, the gnawing forces of erosion transform the blossoms, scattering them into the river of time (K 90).

Yasuko's legend is deeply metaphoric and closely connected to her mother's spirit, Fuyo. Through an extended nature metaphor – comprising plants rooted in the soil equated with the country's Native inhabitants, a gardener compared to fate, the predicament of immigrants likened to the seeds scattered through the wind – Yasuko expresses her attachment to Japan, its traditions and history. To pursue the metaphor further, as a Native of Japan, Yasuko embodies a kind of plant that cannot adapt to the dramatically different climate of South California. There, she cannot grow and blossom. These symbolic associations inevitably announce the tragic ending of the play.

In the first scene of Act I, Yasuko recounts another legend which also introduces the audience to the importance of the soul in Japanese culture: "Did you know there is a world beneath the sea? [...] The mermaids have serious business: they guide lost souls to the next world" (K 91). As Yasuko explains, "a soul is ... everything a person feels and dreams, an essence that cannot be touched unless you use your heart, your true heart. Kokoro. Mind, heart, spirit" (K 92). This poetic explanation of the play's title underscores the unbreakable connection between mother and daughter: "You have a soul too, Kuniko. A seven-year-old soul that has been around the universe many times. And it will never be lost because I will find you easily wherever there are Japanese peaches" (K 92). This umbilical cord between Yasuko and Kuniko constitutes a reflection of

Yasako's own sacred bond with her mother. Such a connection, it appears, cannot be destroyed by distance or death.

Significantly, Houston's play takes place on "a hot summer day" (K 91) during the O-bon festival. As Yasako explains to her daughter, during this Japanese summer festival, "we will dance under the lanterns and the moon, and welcome back my mother's spirit" (K 93). At that moment, as if magically, "*Fuyo appears upstage, moving gracefully in O-bon odori (festival dance). O-bon paper lanterns gleam from behind the scrim*" (K 93). This festival is meant to express gratitude to dead ancestors. It comprises *obon dori*, a religious folk dance that comforts the spirits of the dead. Typically, people gather around a wooden platform at a temple or shrine decorated with lanterns and dance to the accompaniment of traditional drum and flute music.

In addition to legends and festivals, Viswanathan and Houston tackle sensitive issues with regard to female rights. Both plays subtly question and undermine the uncritical acceptance of one's cultural memory. For instance, the character of January in *House of Sacred Cows* makes a strong case against arranged marriage. At first, Anand succumbs to the pressure of ancestral traditions – represented in the form of his parents' spirit – and cannot bring himself to prevent his sister's arranged marriage. Even after the climactic episode in which the Anand/January couple transforms into the mythic Mahabharata figures of Yudishtra/Draupadi, a desperate January almost renounces to defeat Anand's fatalism. In the end, however, the accidental death of their Uncle saves Lakshmi from her Uncle's arrangements. In the last confrontation with his deceased parents, Anand finally stands up to them to support Lakshmi's choice. Moreover, he resists his parents' wish to marry him to "the wife [they] choose" (H 87) by announcing his decision to take January as his wife. While Amma melodramatically claims "we are set adrift to wander in darkness, alone" (H 88), Anand forcefully retorts: "Amma! Don't talk that way!! We are still your children. We still love you. This family is not falling apart" (H 88). Therefore, ultimately, integrating one's cultural memory also means that we must adapt because, as January claims, "we progress" and evolve.

The play ends as it began: “OUT OF TIME: *January and Anand wearing crowns, appear in a chariot, with bows and arrows*” (H 90). In a celebration of the newly formed couples – Anand/January’s and Laskhmi’s – , the play’s final scene clearly rewards hybridity. Anand asserts that India has tremendously changed as a modern democracy: “two communities who would not have let their shadows touch in the last generation, all were gathered under one canopy” (H 90) at his sister’s wedding. Therefore, the play suggests, a balanced harmony between Eastern and Western values may hold the promise of reconciliation between ancestral traditions and modernity. “*Illuminating January and Anand in a supernatural shower of light*” (H 91), the chariot flies away, leaving the audience to ponder on Viswanathan’s celebration of hybridity in Anand’s final assertion: “the West holds our hope but the East holds our inspiration” (H 90).

In a similar mode, *Kokoro* initially portrays Yasako as a submissive and obedient wife who lovingly performs her daily tasks as a housewife. Nonetheless, one night, she meets Shizuko Mizoguchi, Hiro’s mistress. Unlike Yasako, Shizuko survived America. She considers herself “a pioneer: she “was naturalized [and] married to an American before” (K 101). As in her previous play, *Tea*, Houston portrays diverse female characters who display multiple facets of the female (immigrant) experience while subverting stereotypes of Japanese womanhood.⁹ Being a survivor/ “Godzilla” type (K 100,

⁹ Set in Junction City, *Tea* draws from the playwright’s childhood memories as well as from interviews of over 200 hundred war brides living in this small community. As such, the play focuses on the lives of five Japanese women who lived in Junction City while their American husbands, all servicemen, are stationed at Fort Riley. Houston not only documents the lives of women she was well-acquainted with in her youth. She also pays tribute to the strength and courage of these women who had to deal with disapproval from both their Japanese families and their new American neighbors. In this tragic play, one of the women commits suicide after having killed her husband. The other four gather at her home to clean house and drink tea together. As Shimakawa states in her article, Houston invokes “abject stereotypes” in the portrayal of these five women in order to “reappropriate those positions and to focus on these women in terms of their relations to one another, rather than their differences from ‘normal’

121), Shizuko allows Hiro to concretize his forbidden fantasies about American's way of life: "eat cheeseburgers and strawberry ice cream in bed and let him wear his shoes in the house" (K 101). On the other hand, Shizuko's feminist lessons prove crucial for Yasako's emancipation. She teaches Yasako: "No it isn't okay. Japanese women gotta learn that. When it isn't okay, don't say it is" (K 99). Besides, Shizuko adds, "you could use a little lipstick. No offense, but you look like you don't have a mouth. And a woman needs it to speak her mind" (K 100). In this sense, the protagonist of Shizuko also forces Yasako to reconsider her submissive attitude towards life in general.

Further, Angela Rossetti, Yasako's attorney, represents a Euro-American woman – probably from Italian ancestry, as her name suggests. In the play's second Act, the heated debates between Angela and Yasako taking place in the prison cell illuminate the cultural context of Yasako. Upon reading Shizuko's letter in which the latter announced her pregnancy with Hiro's child, Yasako decides to return to Japan with Kinuko in order to avoid disgrace. Yasako embarks on an imaginary vessel through the Pacific Ocean. As they are about to drown, tourists from the nearby hotel run to rescue them. Unfortunately, Kuniko dies while Yasako is rescued and put in jail. While Houston's *Kokoro* clearly empathizes with Yasako's situation, the play also questions Japanese cultural beliefs. Angela passionately argues: "Yasako, you say the universe is out of balance because you daughter's spirit is fragmented without you. I say this is the only universe we've got. [...] I believe too much in freedom. I believe that people have to live and let live, especially in America" (K 123). Houston shows the difficulty of understanding someone's situation in a specific cultural context. In the end, Angela seems to better grasp Yasako's motives and suggests her to plead "no contest" (K 126).

American women" (1995: 377). As Shimakawa argues, "even as Houston's play seems to validate these stereotypes, it undermines them" (ib. 378): the play indeed points out the ways in which "those identities are infinitely more complex and internally contradictory" (ib. 379). For a detailed discussion of Houston's *Tea*, see Karen Shimakawa's article, "Swallowing the Tempest: Asian American Women on Stage," published in *Theatre Journal*.

Furthermore, Evelyn Lauderdale, Yasako's faithful friend and helpful neighbor, not only takes care of Kuniko or teaches Yasako how to take the bus. She also subverts this role by revealing her mixed ancestry: half American, half Japanese. Therefore, as Hiro argues, Miss Lauderdale "is Japanese and American. She can understand both sides of this" (K 120). While Hiro's claim may not necessarily be grounded – Evelyn herself confesses: "I understand, but then I don't understand" (K 116) – it is true that Evelyn's multi-ethnic identity gives her a privileged insight into Yasako's delicate situation. At the end of Act II, Evelyn provides Yasako with the deadly tea leaves in case she wishes to join Kuniko's soul in the Netherworld.

Finally, the fifth female protagonist, Fuyo, embodies Japanese cultural memory: she wears the traditional kimono, bows, and only speaks Japanese. Her spectral presence on stage constitutes a visual reminder of Yasako's profound in-betweenness, torn apart as she feels between Eastern and Western worlds. Interestingly, however, as in *House of Sacred Cows*, in *Kokoro*, the main protagonist must renegotiate ancestral beliefs in order to progress. Like Anand, who finally challenges his parents to accept January as his spouse, Yasako resists Fuyo's pressure to drink the deadly tea. In a moving moment of illumination, she hears the wishes of Kuniko's spirit: "Where is Papa? Make him walk on the beach with you [...] Come on, Mommy, you can do it" (K 128). Yasako ponders "[w]hether to die to live, or live in death" (K 128). Finally, she decides to contemplate life over death: "*She bows to her mother,*" and asks her "not [to] linger here. Go. Please. Your fate is blessed; mine is cursed. Kuniko needs you" (K 128). Like Viswanathan's *House of Sacred Cows* then, Houston's *Kokoro* positively suggests that, while acculturation may require sacrifice and adjustment, cultural memory will continue to re-configure our ever evolving identities.

The carriers of cultural memory, the spirits of Amma and Appa in *House of Sacred Cows* and the ghost of Fuyo in *Kokoro* do not merely "bring absence into presence," they also "foreground magical realism's most basic concern – the nature and limits of the knowable [...]" (Zamora 1995: 497–98). Therefore, as Zamora argues, their presence, "is inherently oppositional because they represent an

assault on the scientific and materialist assumptions of Western modernity: that reality is knowable, predictable, controllable” (ib. 498). In other words, their spiritual presence constitutes “agents of aesthetic effect” by offering “relief from the constraints of reason” (Zamora ib. 497). They point to the “fundamental magic realist sense that reality always exceeds our capacities to describe or understand or prove” (Zamora ib. 497). Thus, Zamora argues, these “magical realist apparitions” unsettle modernity’s basis in progressive, linear history, while engaging “this excessive reality.” Consequently, from a formal perspective, Viswanathan and Houston clearly transgress the limits of dramatic realism and demand that we challenge our stereotypical ideas as well as our vision of reality. In their provocative hybridized playwriting, they explore what the challenging concept of “cultural memory” may mean for different people in various cultural and national contexts.

In *House of Sacred Cows*, as Marc Maufort argues, Viswanathan resorts to “mythic magic realism” in order “to make the sacred and the ordinary merge” (2003: 119). Indeed, as Maufort continues, “[b]lurring fact and fiction along magic realist lines” (ib. 117), blending Indian myths with Western metafictional overtones (ib. 118), the play “devises an expressive and innovative stage idiom hybridizing the paradigms of traditional Western naturalism” (ib. 120).¹⁰ From a formal perspective, *House of Sacred Cows* indeed displays a highly fragmented structure. While broadly divided into Act One and Act Two, the play then constitutes an assemblage of small vignettes entitled “DAY” or “NIGHT” taking place in the realistic world of the play or “OUT OF TIME.” This shifting between day and night, reality-as-fiction and reality-as-legend, creates a sense of dislocation that is emphasized by the spectral apparitions within the realistic construct of the performance. Besides, the constant blending of these multiple realities also offers an interpenetration of Western and Eastern world visions, reforming a new cultural memory, enriched by both traditions.

¹⁰ For an in-depth analysis of magic realist elements in *House of Sacred Cows*, the reader should turn to Marc Maufort’s section on Padma Viswanathan in *Transgressive Itineraries*, pp.116–120.

While *Kokoro*'s overall structure is clearly divided into acts and scenes, the script incorporates a hybrid mixture of songs – in English and Japanese – as well as poems. In a metadramatic stance, Yasako time and again writes in her journal: “[*creating a poem*]: The sea is... the sea is a bridge of light, leading back into the warmth of honor, away from its scant reflections in this life, the mere images, those masks of paint and clay” (K 107). Houston's “bridge of light” formed on the ocean at twilight re-inforces the play's theme of in-betweenness. Hybridizing genres, Houston subverts traditional dramatic realism and endows the world of *Kokoro* with legends and the presence of spirits.

By their very nature, “ghosts are liminal, metamorphic, intermediary: they exist in/between/on modernity's boundaries of physical and spiritual, magical and real, and challenge the lines of demarcation” (Zamora 1995: 498). Through theater, Viswanathan and Houston imagine an encounter between the world of the living and that of the dead. As audience members, we must consciously suspend our disbelief. Consequently, we must be willing to engage in a dialogue with each body seen on the stage, alive or dead. This enables impossible encounters to exist. Such imaginings conjures the “bridge of light” from Yasako's poem.¹¹ It opens up the dream of reconciliation between past and present, one or several cultural memories, East and West.

Theater and history entertain an intriguing and complex relationship. As a field wherein dominant and oppositional discourses meet, theater thus proves a particularly interesting site of constant historical (re)citation of cultural crises within multicultural societies. Re-imagining “alternative” individual and collective histories, resurrecting ghosts in the performance of the present, the playwrights discussed re-imagine new experiences of the past that complement

¹¹ In this regard, also see the video production, “Do 2 halves really make a whole?” (1993), directed by Martha Chono-Helsley and Joe Leonardi in collaboration with Dan Kwong and Brenda Kong Aoki. In it, Velina Hasu Houston reads from one of her poems entitled “Green Tea Girl in Pekoe Orange Country” in which she pleads for more tolerance and understanding of multi-racial identity.

and expand the literary histories of the Canadian and American nation at large.

In this sense, theater indeed holds “a mirror up to nature,” in Hamlet’s phrase, as the social and historical contexts critically affect theatrical performances. Although Rachel Crothers asserts “[t]he stage reflects life, it doesn’t invent it” (1967: 133), I wish to argue that in fact theater similarly impacts cultural, social and political struggles. Not merely a reflector of life, theater also raises awareness and triggers change. In a perpetual process of interrogation and negotiation, multi-ethnic North American plays are transforming the terminological limits of North American drama. As they engage us in a conversation about ethnic and minority rights, institutionalized racism and discrimination, old myths and ancient traditions, these plays reconfigure Canadian and American literary histories. Therefore, I contend that contemporary multi-ethnic North American drama not only reflects life, it also invents it.

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